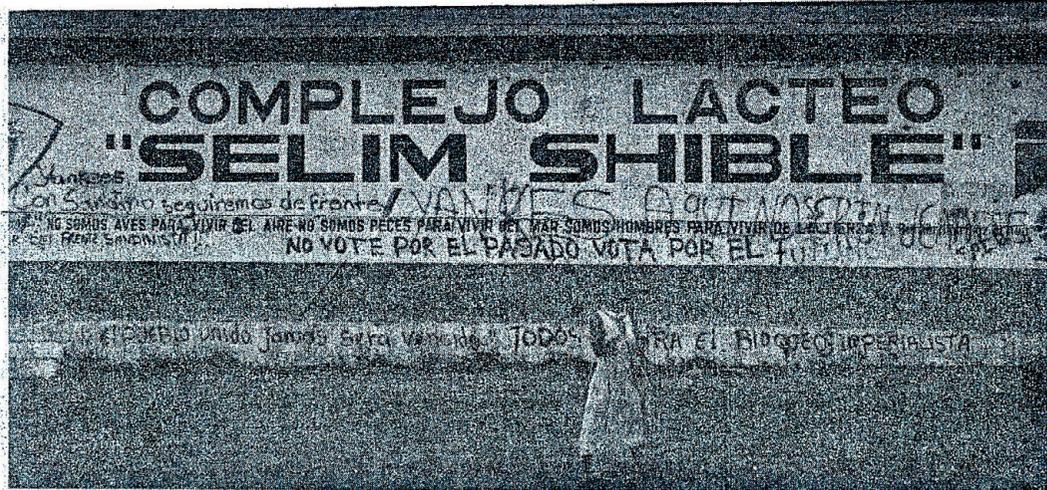


# NICARAGUA: Front Line Report

by Ellen Gavin



## A Country at War

Nicaragua is a country of immense beauty — rolling green hills, volcanic lakes and winding dirt roads climbing to blue-green skies. As you land at the Sandino Airport the contradiction facing Nicaragua becomes visual: above the giant letters of the FSLN (the Sandinista Liberation Front) are emblazoned on a broad expanse of green mountain and on the ground below lays a cemetery of helicopters and transport vehicles useless without American parts.

The reality is that even though Nicaragua has waged a successful revolution under the unifying banner of the FSLN, the deadly stranglehold of the Reagan Administration is crippling this new nation in its infancy.

The second day after our arrival we were taken to a poor barrio in the northeast section of Managua, Selim Shible, named after the barrio's first revolutionary hero, a young fighter of Palestinian origin. Some of us spent two weeks, others a month, living with Nicaraguan families and working to construct a community center in the barrio.

From the hen's crow at dawn until late-night conversations on a front yard stoop, each of us learned in a very personalized way the daily toll of the U.S. aggression against Nicaragua and her people. Many families had lost one or two members during the revolution, or more recently at the hands of the contra.

Each person can recount vivid details of murder, torture and mutilation of friends and family by the Guardia (Somoza's National Guard) and the contra. We found ourselves crying with Nicaraguans at all times of the day and night.

The contra war is much more extensive than what has been reported in the larger U.S. press; it is not a series of small border

skirmishes lunded on a minimal level through the CIA. It is a military assault of major proportions, one which is draining the unsteady Nicaraguan economy and forcing it to mobilize and risk its greatest asset: the youth.

The increased attacks have forced the leadership to acknowledge that Nicaragua is, in fact, operating with a "wartime economy", and that the ambitious post-revolutionary social programs must be cut back to support defense spending.

From our life in Selim Shible we would see that the war and the impending U.S. boycott would have a drastic effect on the poorest of the poor. The structures in our barrio ranged from simple shacks with dirt floors and leaking roofs to larger more solid homes with tiled floors and indoor plumbing.

Building materials are impossible to obtain. While foodstuffs were distributed through a decentralized coupon system that insured no one went hungry, there were many scarcities. Daily supplies like soap, toothpaste, lightbulbs, and toilet paper were unavailable or exorbitant.

Nicaraguan mothers fear that these children will not have milk, because with out the petrochemicals from the U.S., there will be no plastic milk containers. Critical medical supplies will be unavailable: parts for medical equipment made in the U.S. and medications for diabetes, heart conditions and terminal illnesses. While medical supplies are exempted from the boycott, the flow of medicine and health supplies comes mainly through the low-budget solidarity organizations working in the U.S.

Vaccines for rabies were no longer available when we were there, which created a health hazard so great that healthy dogs in our barrio were being killed to avert the danger. Last year the entire chicken population of Nicaragua perished when 5 million dollars in vaccine from the U.S. was not delivered and the money not returned.

There is no way at this point to measure the economic devastation and suffering that the embargo against Nicaragua will create. Yet the Nicaraguan response: "We will survive anything and everything that the U.S. inflicts upon us. Patria Libre O Morir!"



Outside of Casa Cio Comunal, community center in Selim Shible barrio

## All photos Margaret Thompson

## A 'Gay Scene'?

The old adage, "we are everywhere" is true. There are lesbians and gays everywhere in Nicaragua, but to talk about the "gay scene" is wishful thinking at best.

There is absolutely no organized community of Nicaraguan gay people, not a single group, newsletter, center or hotline. Consequently, making contacts with lesbians and gay men is difficult. With persistence, luck and whatever universal body language we share we met close to two dozen lesbians and gays in our month-long stay.

The picture of lesbian and gay life that emerged was across the board a "closeted" one, similar to the U.S. in the fifties before the advent of the feminist and gay liberation movements. In a country at war with the largest Superpower on earth, issues of sexual liberation and personal relations have taken an understandable back seat. In general the issue is considered a private one, which, along with issues like birth control, abortion and sexual abuse, are raised in a delicate manner.

The gay people who we met were from the poor, working and middle classes; they lived alone, with their families and with other adults (seldom with lovers); they were media workers, crafts-women, artists, doctors, librarians, architects and students; their support for the revolution ranged from daily involvement in mass organizations to outright resistance to patriotic military service.

While most gay people were "out" at least a small circle of friends and associates, most were not public about their choices. Many political activists did be their identity in political terms, but were unwilling at this time to raise it in a political context. For them, the urgency of the U.S. war against Nicaragua was the overriding concern. For others it was the fear of loss of credibility among peers and family.

Gay men from the middle class seemed to have more options to be open; yet, on the other hand, it was in the barrios and market places where one could see queens in full drag. Here, verbal harassment occurred side-by-side with tolerant acceptance. If our experience in the barrio can be seen as a barometer, typical reaction to cross-dressing and so-called "obvious" gay people was also mixed.

When Denys, a 14 year old from Selim Shible invited us to an afternoon of swimming at the state-owned recreation area where his mother had a small foodstand, we invited a couple of "baby-dykes" (not yet "out" from a local basketball team to come along. "Muchachas o muchchos?" Denys whispered under his breath. Later he casually introduced us to one of his mother's employees, a flaming queen who bustled past us with a nod of acknowledgment.

The personal issues facing Nicaraguan lesbians and gay are universal. After ten years of loving women I a series of monogamous relationships Evelyn wondered if it was realistic to rely on one person for all of her emotional needs. Rafael, a middle-class professional who had prided himself on being the one "in control" in his past relationships, was in a tormented relationship with a young "macho" who refused to acknowledge his gayness and maintained a number of heterosexual relationships to disprove it.

For Walter the question was not to even have a personal life given his commitment to his work and his lack of time and privacy. His work came first yet he wasn't content to live a closeted or asexual life. He so did not want to identify with bourgeoisie or apolitical gay people. For Marvyn, the issue was sex, pure and simple. Each night went "out fishing" with diplomats and blondes at the top of his list.

Marvyn watched us from distance until he could confirm his suspicions, left us cryptic nos and set up secret rendezvous. Living very close to the community center in Selim Shible, Marvyn became a gay tour guide of sorts, introducing us to a number of gay and lesbian Nicaraguans.

Marta, a 17-year old lesbian of Nicaraguan birth, found her commitment to the revolution and her rejection of her parents values caused her to leave home at 13 to return to Nicaragua. Marta preferred older women and people who had "feeling as well as politics". "Class consciousness" and commitment to the revolution were key issues in the discussion we engaged in about lesbian and gay liberation in Nicaragua.

For many Nicaraguans (including lesbians and gays who recall the more "festive" atmosphere for gays during the Somoza dictatorship) gayness is associated with upper-class decadence. The areas which gay men frequented were tourist areas associated with drug trafficking and prostitution, both heterosexual and gay.

On May 8th President Reagan initiated a boycott on Nicaragua, his latest step in an all-out political and economic attack on the small Central American nation. The following day, the Victoria Mercado Brigade, the first brigade of open lesbians and gays to participate in a work brigade to Nicaragua, left for Managua.

After nine months of organizing, fundraising and internal education, the thirteen of us, ten women and three men, eight people of color, left the San Francisco Airport unclear about whether we would be able to travel freely. We transported crates of construction equipment, medical supplies and paper goods, all of which may have been considered a violation of the newly imposed embargo.

But a new curriculum was being developed that would include issues of sexuality including gayness, and no, it is more important that a teacher be certified than be questioned about such a private matter.

Padre Uriel Molinas, a prominent spokesperson of the new Liberation Theology was one of the most supportive formal contacts that we made. Interviewed at his parish church, La Iglesia de Santa Maria de Los Angeles he spoke of the lesbian and gay movement as "a prophetic movement, of people who have the courage to openly proclaim their option to the world."

Molinas said that he knew that lesbian and gay people in the U.S. and Europe were in the forefront of the peace and liberation



Four children, AMES childcare center, Managua

While in the Somoza days paid protection insured a certain degree of tolerance, physical attacks on gays by the National Guard were a routine occurrence. In today's Nicaragua physical harassment by the military or the police is not condoned on an institutional or individual basis.

Since the revolution, some of the gay areas associated with criminality have been closed. Other areas (a nude beach for example) have been, like other exclusive areas once inaccessible to Nicaragua's poor, opened up to the general public. Still, public events and places for lesbians and gays in Nicaragua are few.

There remains an annual festival in Masaya, the *Fiesta del Toro Venado* ("deerlike bull") where gay men from all over Nicaragua come to participate in a highly-ritualized yet farcical display of cross-dressing. It is reported to be one of the few times when both straight and gay men are given permission to exhibit transvestite fantasies in the name of good fun, with applause and reverie from the hundreds of people in attendance.

There are a few cruising spots for gay men in Managua including a theatre and the ruins of the National Palace, where, among the bullet-ridden columns and hidden marble caverns, solitary men communicate with familiar signals. Hotels are available by the hour and the night for casual sexual encounters.

There are a few neighborhood bars, the most comfortable of which is called the Hermogenes, in barrio Santa Ana. An open air bar frequented mostly by men, it is presided over by a stone-butched dyke who occasionally sits in a male lap or flirts discreetly with one of the few women present.

While same-sex dancing is culturally taboo in Nicaragua, we asked, and were permitted, to dance together. The women in our group did experience harassment from some men who assumed we were "putas" (a common assumption that women in gay bars are whores and not lesbians).

On an institutional level, there has been little or no discussion of lesbian and gay issues. We raised the issue with the women's association AMLAE, the teacher's association ANDEN, members of the Church, and our local responsables from the CDS (Sandinista Defense Committees).

No one reacted with shock, or disgust, rather, the responses were polite and concerned. Yet, clearly it was not a priority issue. When, for example, we raised the issue of gay teachers' right to teach without harassment, it was difficult to grasp the urgency of the issue when so many schools were destroyed and teachers kidnapped by the contra, and it was a priority to see that each child had a notebook and a pencil to start the school year.

movements. In response to a question concerning the repression of gays in Cuba, Molinas replied, "One day the Cubans will have to answer to the world for the people they call 'anti-socials'."

In Nicaragua, we were told by Sandinistas in leadership positions, it is the influence of the Catholic Church on the people which have necessitated a sensitive approach to the issue of homosexuality. ■

As I walked home dirty from a day's work along the dirt roads of Selim Shible, a group of children would call out, "Elena, Elena! What time it is?" "Hola Sed! Quarto y media, como esta?" The children's network from one end of the barrio to the other had a game of matching names and faces of the thirteen of us from San Francisco.

When I arrived home a cold refresco would be waiting for me and Don Pablo would want to hear every detail of the day's work in my elementary Spanish and improvised sign language. At 74, with teenage memories of Sandino taking to the mountains, Don Pablo saw his daily work with us on the community center as a natural continuation of his lifelong work for the revolution. I realized at moments like this in Nicaragua, that here I have felt a self-respect as a woman and a lesbian that I have never felt.



Author (left) with Evelyn Flores Perez