

## **“Living With Zapatistas”**

**by Elliot Manches**

Swinging from the back of a pick-up truck, we wound through dusty parched hills, from cool highlands to the burning woodland region of Chiapas, the poorest state of Mexico, and home to the Zapatistas - a political partisan group of indigenous Mexicans.

When we reached the end of the road, the setting sun was already streaking the sky pink and a horseman led us on foot to the village of La Union.

A German girl and I had come for two weeks as human rights observers to a community of Zapatistas, a group that bases its ideology on that of Emiliano Zapata, an early 20<sup>th</sup> century Mexican revolutionary.

Gaining international interest since their 1994 uprising, they have as their spokesperson the enigmatic pipe-smoking, masked Subcomandante Marcos. Rumoured to be a Ladino professor of philosophy, he is now based somewhere in the Lacandon jungle with the EZLN - the Zapatista National Liberation Army.

They have been demanding full civil rights for Mexico's 12 million indigenous inhabitants, access to healthcare, education, and a return of the resource-rich lands of which they have been increasingly deprived.

Met with military intimidation and frequent brutality, their uprising remarkably became more passive, adopting instead all forms of media as their weapon, and the eyes of the world as their shield. Their requests were answered by seemingly favourable accords, which the authorities signed but then refused to turn into law.

In the meantime, the government has diminished its direct interventionalist tactics, whilst playing off rival indigenous political groups, particularly the government-funded PRI and its sometimes bloody paramilitary, against the Zapatistas.

The first person we met was Enrique, a stocky Ladino with a soft square face and pinched-up nose. Over his wavy black locks he wore a wide-brimmed flattop hat.

He was one of twelve children, raised by their mother in Mexico City. Having evaded military conscription, he has spent the last five years working, without pay, as the only teacher to the Zapatista children in La Union. They were evicted from the other school following a dispute with the neighbouring political group.

But despite obvious divides within the village - separate schools, churches and effectively separate shops (one Zapatista owned, one PRI), there was no sign of conflict or even a single problematic incident.

Enrique explained that they had been living peacefully, without trouble from within or from the government, for some time. He believed that observers are now needed more in other less fashionable places, such as villages in the state of Oaxaca, which lie over commercially desirable untapped natural resources, and where violent Human Rights violations have become a daily occurrence. Nevertheless, we stayed in La Union - happy to observe, whether as a deterrent for trouble or not.

The next person we met was Manuel, the unofficial head of the Zapatista families. Perhaps in his forties, with a tanned round face and a solid build, he had an air of solemn authority, and the moustache to match--a horizontal black monolith striped across his top lip. After shaking our hands gently, as is the custom, Manuel invited us to sit beside him on a bench overlooking the river, and never uttered another word.

About forty years ago, many poorly paid indigenous Mexicans began to escape the oppressive conditions of the farms where they worked, to found their own villages with fruit trees and livestock, where they could cultivate their own crops. Some settled along the banks of a narrow, shallow river in La Selva (the forest). This is where La Union lies.

An area of maybe half a square mile, spanning both sides of the river, and surrounded by woodland and crop-fields grown on deforested patches, La Union is dotted with wooden shacks and their glinting corrugated tin-roofs. A few buildings are painted blue or red, and several bear the iconic portraits of historical revolutionaries.

There is Zapata, staring fiercely with his long curling whiskers, wide sombrero, trademark red-and-yellow neckerchief, blue tuxedo and draped gun-belts. Then Marcos, peering seriously through his black balaclava, pipe hanging but mouth hidden, round military cap on his head, and sporting the adopted neckerchief. And Che, as ever, silhouetted against a red background marking his idealised past, staring intensely into the future that he never really lived to see.

The majority of the villagers were under thirty years old, though some had elderly relatives living nearby. Most families had at least four children with more on the way.

The mothers kept the house and kitchen and did the washing in the river, whilst their daughters looked after the babies. Work began at five in the morning, with the grinding of maize to make tortillas, and cooking black beans on the wood stove--there being no electricity.

The men would normally work the fields, also from five in the morning, or go to markets to sell livestock or arable products. But because it was the dry season during my stay, they had little to do. In the night though, areas of woodland--already the least fertile in Chiapas - were burned to make space for the next crops, sparking luminous ridges across a black horizon.

Most families had a fruit tree or two, typically of mangos, bananas, plantains or lemons; and also some chickens or pigs. Each owned a horse, which was used to get from town to town - there being no road from the village.

The men and boys washed these handsome horses, with themselves, in the refreshingly icy river, occasionally joined by their hairy grunting pigs.

The dizzy chickens never bothered with personal hygiene, spending their days blindly buck-bucking around, followed by troops of tall chirping chicks. As for the mangy, flea-ridden dogs, when not sneaking pitifully about with their tails between their old-man's legs searching for grub, they were randomly kicked, pelted and whacked by the young lads.

Toward dusk, various invisible insects began to warble. By nightfall, they had upped their pitch into a vibrant cacophony of clicking, underscored by a metallic tambourine-like rattle, echoing throughout the valley. During the day, around the village we would catch the odd glimpse of a rare bird or the brief flutter of a colourful butterfly. Apparently there were salamanders in the undergrowth, but alas, I never saw one.

Our days were spent reading, cooking, eating and bathing - broken only by two weddings, and a confirmation performed by an eminent Mexican archbishop.

The weddings in the neighbouring villages were solemn affairs. For three stuffy hours each time, a large Catholic church-hut was crammed with men on one side and women on the other. The pastor's softly spoken sermons were occasionally broken by the strumming and deep harmonies of a band of mariachis.

Afterward, several hundred people waited quietly for their turn at one of the dinner tables, receiving the rare luxury of a bowl of meat and a garish bottle of super-sweet pop. With alcoholism afflicting so many indigenous communities, the Zapatistas forbid it. After-meal mints took the form of menthol cigarettes, which were puffed in the shade.

Meanwhile, run from a generator, four enormous speakers belted out the synthesised two-beat tinny tinkering of the latest 'Musica Romantica', courtesy of a hired singer and his electric keyboard. In the evening, everybody returned to dance in pairs. Tense feet shuffled in small circles, heads with serious faces bobbed from side to side, and shoulders jerked abruptly.

The second wedding coincided with our last day. We spent the night at the neighbouring village, returning the following afternoon to the colourful, colonial city of San Cristobal De Las Casas. In that tourist hub, the shops sell Subcommandante Marcos t-shirts; homeless girls sell pencil-top Marcos dolls; and the graffiti reads:

Todos Somos Marcos - We Are All Marcos.

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