

# Los Quinchos

## WE STOPPED TO LOOK AT THE STARS

I had seen los niños de la calle in Mexico and Guatemala, countries where this kind of problem had already existed for years. In Nicaragua, instead, it hardly existed at all. The Sandinist Government had taken charge of education, health care and of giving a minimum food ration, "la canasta basica". Only few children could be seen in the streets, almost all of which were war orphans. So what struck me weren't "the children", but those three particular children. They were very small and were sleeping in a truck tire. They were no different from the other children, I didn't speak with them, nothing happened. I don't know why, but exactly those three children unchained a huge feeling of rage. Such an enormous rage that in that precise moment I decided to quit everything and to work with them. And the same anger still lasts today, because since then the situation has gotten dreadfully worse and every day the most unheard of things continue to happen.

Actually, I only managed to return in '91. For three years I had to struggle in Italy to obtain an early retirement. In the end I made it and I went back to Nicaragua. Alone, not knowing how to get organized, with no support. I started working in the most miserable barrios, such as the Dimitrof, where not even the police dare enter, and in the asentamientos, where people live in miserable huts, built with a few pieces of metal sheet put together or with black plastic sheets. People were coming from all over Nicaragua. I was seeing the most brutal sides of post-Sandinism. The order to give the owners back the land that had been confiscated and redistributed among the campesinos had already been given. This way, the large landowners who had fled to Miami were coming back and taking their land back. When the police couldn't manage to send the farmers away, the landowners would arrive with their armed gangs and force them to leave. They fled to Managua and formed the asentamientos. The first street children started to appear because of this land problem. Families would go to town and find nothing. There were very few men (all compas or contras). They had died, or ran away, or disappeared at the frontier. Taking Nicaraguan machismo in count as well, the majority of women were left on their own. They would go around the streets all day long searching for a job, leaving the children alone in these huts. Sometimes I would peek in between the wooden boards or in the holes in the plastic. The children were tied with chains for fear they might run away; some of them with no hair left, they would tear it away because of hunger and fear. "What am I going to do?" I kept asking myself. I wrote many letters, a few friends started supporting me, but of course they couldn't do much. The stronger organizations didn't know me and they had magnificent for roads, hospitals and waterworks. When I spoke to them of children they looked at me as though I were a bit crazy. In those early days I lived in a pension. "I could open a comedor" I thought, "what these children need most is food". They were underfed, some of them at five or six years old were barely able to walk because of malnourishment. What could I do? I knew I couldn't write projects, take my time: they needed help immediately. Amid these confused feelings I searched for a small house and found it in Ciudad Jardin, behind the Mercado Oriental. It was there that for the first time I became acquainted with la pega, the shoe-glue that children inhale to escape the feeling of hunger and fear. It was two children who made me discover it, Harling and Hormiga. They were six or seven years old, very small and thin. This is what happened. On my patio, on the side by the road, was a guyaba tree, a plant which gives fruits that are delicious when they are ripe. I saw them pick up the fallen fruits, already spoiled. I moved close to them and asked why they were eating them. They told me they were hungry. So, I invited them inside and gave them some bread and butter. They told me they were huelepega and lived in the Mercado Oriental, in the Chiesa del Calvario. This is how the story of Los Quinchos began, with two kids that never were part of the Project. The next day I went looking for them;

they weren't there, but there were many others among prostitutes and alcoholics. At first it was terrible, they refused any contact with adults; they had ran away from violence in their families and found just as much violence from adults in the streets. They accepted me little by little, seeing how I would stay with them and most of all because of certain specific acts, such as having stood up for them when the police beat them or, worse, pointed their guns against the children's head or in their mouth. I began speaking with the saleswomen in the market to get them to give them some food, but it began to be clear to me that at this point, to really do something I needed a house. I met father Jesùs Arguete, the basque priest of the church of santo Domingo, who lent me a house belonging to the church. It was a wreck, with no water or light, and I could only use it during the daytime, until four o' clock p.m., to feed the children. Hundreds of them arrived but I could only feed thirty or forty of them; when that many had arrived, I had to close the door. We would stay on the second floor of the house, which had huge windows with no panes. One day a pandilla (a gang) arrived and started throwing stones at us. All the little ones, frightened, threw themselves into the middle of the room. Peeking from the window I guessed who the leader was: Piri, with his sidekick, Pichete, who wore a blond Mohawk just like a Berlin punk. I went downstairs, got outside through a window and went up to Piri. "You're the leader", I said to him. He swelled with pride.

"Why are you throwing stones at us?" I asked.

"Because we're hungry"

"But I've got nothing left, come and see."

Piri snapped his fingers and all the others stopped throwing stones; he and Pichete came upstairs and I showed them the empty rice pot. "There's food here." "What?" That's how I learned the famous sentence "Aquì està la raspa". "La raspa" is the crust on the bottom of the pot, a kind of mush. Piri scraped off the entire bottom.

"I'm taking it away"

"Are you going to share it with Pichete?" "No, I'm going to share it with all the others. I'll come back every day to take la raspa"

"All right, shake my hand, a jefe's word says you won't attack us anymore"

He would come back every day, silently, and go away just like a great chief.

We had shelter there, we could go on somehow, but it was becoming more and more urgent to find a house. At a certain point, the community of father Arguete's church asked him to send us away, they said the kids had stolen the caps to their car's tanks while they were at mass. We had a meeting, I was there with all the children and we listened to them, then told them how un-Christian they seemed to us. They let us keep trying for a while, but it was obvious that we couldn't go on much longer. Besides, the children couldn't stay there after four o' clock p.m., so they would often arrive and not find me there, I was at my house. One day the police had started beating them at the Mercado, they had run away to the house and the police had hit them in there as well. I met an almost eighty-year-old Italian man who owned a pizzeria, he lend us a piece of land where we built a small house. Really tiny, but at least we could stay there to sleep too. I began to realize that the only way to get the children away from la pega and from the streets was to get them away from Managua, to let them live freely, in a real home, without neighbours complaining every day. During the Christmas holidays I went back to Italy and I went to Padre Balducci's Community in Fiesole. We had already had contact by letters. Together with a group that had formed in the meantime in Cagliari, they were the first to give me some money. When I got back, I bought half the Finca San Marcos. On February the 7th, 1993, on a radiant night, with all the kids crammed on a little jeep, we arrived at La Finca. I remember that before arriving, we stopped to look at the stars. We had five blankets the Red Cross had given us, our pots and that's it. And we're still there.

*Courtesy: Interview by Francesca  
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