

12-20-1989

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Deborah Tyroler

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Recommended Citation

Tyroler, Deborah. "El Salvador: Witness To Murder Of Jesuit Priests Says She Recanted Due To Fright & Pressure." (1989).
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El Salvador: Witness To Murder Of Jesuit Priests Says She Recanted Due To Fright & Pressure

by Deborah Tyroler

Category/Department: General

Published: Wednesday, December 20, 1989

During a four-hour interview held in Washington and arranged by the Jesuits, Lucia Barrera de Cerna and her husband, Jorge Cerna, told reporters recently that they were so frightened and pressured during an intense interrogation in Miami by two FBI agents and a Salvadoran colonel that they retracted their testimony. The two Salvadorans said instead that neither of them had seen anything on the evening of Nov. 16 when the murders took place. After they changed their testimony, said the couple, they were each given three lie-detector tests based on their altered testimony. They failed these tests. On Dec. 10 in San Salvador, Archbishop Arturo Rivera y Damas accused the US of subjecting Barrera de Cerna to brainwashing, threats and "psychological torment." On the same day, President Alfredo Cristiani asserted that she had failed six lie detector tests. US Jesuits and the Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights say the Cernas were mistreated. In a report based on three days of interviews with the couple, the Lawyers' Committee concluded that they were "forthcoming and credible witnesses" to the events they reported in El Salvador and to the treatment they received after arriving in the US. The report said investigators "treated an obviously frightened and traumatized woman more like a criminal suspect than a potential cooperating witness with useful information." The Rev. Paul S. Tipton, president of the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities, who has taken responsibility for the Cerna family, accused the interrogators of "manipulating" Barrera de Cerna, adding that she was subjected to intense interrogation "apparently to confuse her." In a Dec. 10 letter to Secretary of State James A. Baker 3d, Father Tipton accused the US Ambassador in El Salvador, William Walker, and other members of his staff of telling reporters and others that Mrs. Cerna's testimony had no value and that an official of the archdiocese's human rights organization had instructed her to fabricate her testimony. Among the investigators was Lt. Col. Manuel Antonio Rivas Majia, head of El Salvador's US-financed Special Investigative Unit, who was introduced to the Cernas as "doctor." Barrera de Cerna said that it was only when she heard him referred to as "colonel" did she realize he was a member of the Salvadoran military. Cerna said that the colonel addressed him in the familiar form of Spanish, which is used only for close family or friends or when speaking harshly or with contempt. The couple said they were asked repeatedly to identify who prodded them to "say these lies," and that one investigator asked Cerna how much the priests had paid him. Cerna said he was also asked whether he was sure his wife earned her living for the Jesuits as a housemaid. When the investigator asked her whether she was a spy for the Jesuits, and whether one of the Jesuits was a guerrilla, Berrera de Cerna said she started to cry and then decided to retract her testimony and say that she had seen nothing. "I felt terrible, terrible, when I changed my version, but I changed it out of fear," said Berrera de Cerna, who suffers from hypertension. She said that after investigators badgered her to reveal who had told her to say these things, she lied and said that a woman who headed the human rights office of the Archbishop had done so. "In my heart I felt that if they hadn't pressured me I wouldn't have lied," she said. "The woman is a very good person but I thought she works with the Archbishop and can defend herself." It was then that the investigators got even more angry and asked her to submit to a lie detector test, Mrs. Cerna said. In three tests, she said,

she told investigators she saw nothing and in the three tests she failed. At one point, Cerna said an FBI agent told him: "What you say here will decide whether you can stay here or go back to El Salvador." Cerna said that he also changed his original testimony and that in three separate lie detector tests said that neither he nor his wife had seen anything that night. The Cernas have been granted humanitarian parole status in the US and one-year work permits. The couple and their four-year-old daughter were staying in a cottage near the main headquarters of the Jesuit compound in San Salvador to escape gunfire in their neighborhood on the night of Nov. 16. The couple said they were awakened at about 1 a.m. by the sound of shooting. Berrera de Cerna went to a window in an adjacent room, where she said she saw five men carrying rifles and wearing caps with visors. In the moonlight, she said she clearly saw soldiers' camouflage uniforms on two of the men. Her husband, meanwhile, who said he was standing at a window in the other room, said he saw seven or eight men wearing what he described as "dark soldiers' uniforms," with wide suspenders and belts. "I believed at that moment that they were soldiers of the army...because the whole area we were in was controlled by the army and because no private citizen could walk around with the curfew and the patrols." (Basic data from New York Times, 12/18/89)

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