

# Introduction

When people ask me where I am from, instead of saying simply, “I am from Poland,” I sometimes give them my “narrative” answer. “It’s a long story,” I begin. . . . Being characters who often feel lost amid various narratives written for us by law, literature, politics, and history, we resort to telling stories when asked where we are from because no simple answer is possible.

Magdalena J. Zaborowska,  
*How We Found America*

One afternoon, when I was in my office, I received a telephone call from an assistant to an HBO producer who was interested in making a film based on the life of an immigrant. Because of my work in immigrant communities, this person thought that I might have a story for them. He emphasized that they wanted a “success” story, which caused me to pause, since I was not quite sure what he meant by this. As the assistant explained that they were looking for a person whose life had significantly improved as a result of immigration, the images of several faces ran in quick succession through my mind. I disregarded most of them because in each case “improvement” could not be taken as an unqualified outcome of migration. Then I zeroed in on Marcela Q., whose life, in her view, had indeed been dramatically bettered. When the assistant asked me if this immigrant was already a permanent resident, I said no. When he inquired if this person had a stable, well-paid job, I again said no; and when he asked if this person already owned a home in the United States, once again my answer was no.

Marcela Q.’s achievements in the United States obviously did not fit conventional notions of immigrant “success” — even though she had learned to read and write in Spanish, gained knowledge of her own country’s history, been able to send small sums of money to her family in El Salvador more or less regularly, encouraged her daughter to

attend college, and begun making plans to write a book based on her own story. For Marcela, a former street vendor in El Salvador, life has been radically transformed by her migration to the United States. In her words, “I feel as if I have opened up a window that I didn’t even know was there.” Marcela cherishes her newly acquired knowledge and everything that comes with it. Although she is aware that her opportunities in the United States are highly constrained and that she faces many obstacles to her long-term goals, she is content that she has been able to “survive and continue to fight” in spite of the unsettling times during which she (like the rest of the informants in this study) arrived in the United States. She is particularly proud, though at times angry, that she has carried on in San Francisco without much help from her family — or from anyone else for that matter.

The aim of this book is to understand the inner workings of informal social networks among Salvadoran immigrants and, in the process, to identify potential reasons for their instability.<sup>1</sup> By social networks I mean the web of family, friends, neighbors, and so on, who can provide material, financial, informational, and emotional assistance on a regular basis (based on my observations and my informants’ perceptions). From my conversations with Salvadoran immigrants, it seems that network instability is closely linked to the structure of opportunities that they encounter on arrival. I demonstrate how structural constraints condition the resources these immigrants have available to help family and friends who are in need. This angle, however, does not disregard the centrality of human agency, as macrostructural forces do delimit human action but cannot determine it entirely. Thus, throughout this study, individuals will be treated as active human beings, not as victims or as robots responding mechanically to larger forces. Their actions, aspirations, and frustrations, however, will be situated within the broader context over which they have little, if any, control. The individuals’ stories, though at times unsettling, are not meant to sound an alarm about the state of social institutions among these immigrants. The accounts are testimony, however, to the conditions under which impoverished immigrants live, to the potential deleterious effects of poverty on their informal sources of assistance, and to their remarkable capacity to survive, even when they have very little, if anything, going for them.

Marcela Q., a very smart and vivacious young woman who was

forced to drop out of first grade to help her family, left El Salvador weeks before turning twenty-one; she was two months pregnant, and her husband, a government soldier, had apparently been killed in combat. Although she never saw his body, she assumed that he had been killed when they lost contact with each other after an ambush by guerrilla forces. Marcela's business, selling petty merchandise at a bus depot in the city where she was born in central El Salvador, had all but collapsed. She had tried to engage in other activities, mainly selling other items. For instance, on days when she had not made a cent and needed to buy food for her children, she would get a watermelon on credit from a fruit vendor friend, cut it up, and sell it by the piece at the same bus depot, which would bring in at least what she needed to repay the vendor friend and buy dinner. But she, and her children, simply could not subsist on such an inadequate income. So she left for the United States with only 50 *colones* (approximately U.S. \$6) that she had borrowed from a friend. She left her older child with her mother and her youngest with her mother-in-law; neither grandmother would have been able to afford to support both children, even temporarily. Marcela made use of an intricate network of "friends of friends" to make the arduous two-month journey through Mexico (she crossed Guatemala quickly and relatively easily), during which she walked at least one-third of the way. After two unsuccessful attempts to cross the border into the United States, she finally entered with a group of Salvadorans she met on the U.S. side just across the border who were headed to Los Angeles. She refused to stay in Los Angeles though, because in her words, "How could I stay there? It's so difficult to come here; I wanted to get inside the United States as much as possible. Los Angeles still seemed too close to the border." But a more powerful reason was that she had cousins in San Francisco.

Hoping that her cousins would let her stay with them, Marcela found someone to take her from Los Angeles to San Francisco by car. But when she arrived, they refused to help her. "Do you know what it feels to be dropped off at 24th and Mission when you don't know anyone in this city and you don't understand the language? Well, that's what my cousins did to me. And they knew I was pregnant. But maybe they thought I'd ask them for too much. Whenever I talk with people I don't even mention that I have family here." About one and a half years later, when Marcela had her daughter Claudia baptized, things

had changed radically. By then, not only were the cousins and Marcela on speaking terms, but Marcela finally seemed to have found the family support she had been seeking. Marcela even asked Sonia, one of her cousins, and me to be Claudia's godmothers, an honor that we both accepted gladly. Sonia organized a small party to celebrate the event, during which she took the opportunity to thank me "on behalf of the family" for helping Marcela in the past, when she was in desperate need. To my surprise, however, about one year later Marcela and her cousins had a major falling-out occasioned by gossip they were allegedly spreading about Marcela's ambivalent marital status and her reputation. This time Marcela was sure she would never contact them again and even took steps to erase Sonia's name from Claudia's baptismal certificate, so as to formalize the discord.

Marcela was disheartened that her cousins had let her down, and although she has since received help from friends and acquaintances, she emphasized the temporary, almost ephemeral nature of this assistance. Help from family and friends seems to come sporadically, conditionally, and unevenly; consequently, newcomers like Marcela do not benefit much from having family or friends at the point of arrival.

My objective is to portray informal networks among Salvadoran immigrants as reflecting dynamic processes, for these networks do not exist in a social vacuum; they are simultaneously affected by the context that immigrants encounter and by the social positions of the individuals involved. It is not my aim to quantify help among Salvadorans—how many received and did not receive help—or to generalize from my observations to other groups. I seek to understand how immigrants go about giving and receiving help from others in their everyday lives, so as to uncover factors that may foster or hinder such exchanges. Rather than focus on these social ties as structures, I intend to shed light on the *processes* that lie at the core of informal networks.<sup>2</sup> The overwhelming majority of this study's participants obtained help from their relatives, sometimes from friends too, to leave El Salvador, even though those who provided help often did so with great difficulties. However, on arrival, many soon found themselves with little or no assistance from those on whom they had expected to rely. Without forcing these immigrants' experiences into a dichotomy whereby ties back home seem supportive but become weak in the United States (as we will see in chapters 2 and 5, it is not

the case here), I argue that the structural conditions that they face in the new context have profoundly affected the nature of their social ties.

It may be argued that simply moving to a country with a more individualistic cultural ideology, where individuals presumably pull themselves up by their own bootstraps, may influence the weakening of informal networks among some immigrants.<sup>3</sup> Although culture and ideology are central in delimiting human action (as we will see later in this book when I turn to the effects of gender and generation), there are a few points that preclude my adopting an explanation based mostly or solely on culture, normative factors, and/or ideology. First, while my informants mentioned that their friends or family members have learned, or would like to incorporate in their behavior, U.S. cultural practices (this happens particularly with regard to relatively more egalitarian gender relations in the United States), they never brought up such instances in relation to informal exchanges. When they stated that “people change” (as we will see in chapter 5), they attributed the transformation to the new challenges of life in the United States imposed by the material difficulties of their existence. In the qualitative tradition, the framework that I have adopted here was generated from my observations and my informants’ own explanations. And, in their own vernacular, they did relate the creation, transformation, and weakening of networks to the material and physical conditions in which they lived, which are shaped by the broader politicoeconomic context.

Second, even if the immigrants have learned and internalized an individualistic ideology—or the idea of its existence—in a way that may affect their everyday lives (and did not discuss it in our conversations), they still did not seem to adopt blindly a new set of cultural and ideological norms that guide informal exchanges. In fact, it became clear to me that it was often tremendously painful for them to have to decide whom and how much to help; given their great material scarcity, they simply could not fulfill their close ones’ expectations of assistance. Also, if cultural or ideological factors made a similar impact on these immigrants’ networks as do structural forces, we should expect weaker networks among the immigrants who are more familiar, or who have had more contact, with non-Salvadorans or non-Latino groups, since this supposedly would expose them to more individual-

oriented ideologies and behaviors. As this study demonstrates, this is not the case, for it is the networks of the more marginalized socioeconomically (who happen to be those with less contact with non-Salvadorans or non-Latinos) that buckle under pressure.

### Salvadoran Migration to the United States

According to the 1990 U.S. Census, there were 565,081 Salvadorans in the United States (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1993). The Current Population Survey of March 1997 estimates that there are 607,000 Salvadorans on U.S. soil (Ulloa 1998, 75), but independent estimates place that figure at or above one million (Montes 1987b; Montes and García Vasquez 1988; Ulloa 1998).<sup>4</sup>

During the approximately twelve-year Salvadoran civil war, the Salvadoran population in the United States more than quintupled, from 94,447 in 1980 to 565,081 in 1990 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1980, 1993). As El Salvador's population is estimated at about six million, it is possible that up to 10 percent of the country's population may now reside in the United States, constituting one of the fastest-growing groups of Latinos in the United States (Leslie and Leitch 1989). But despite this rapid increase, relatively little is known about important social aspects of these immigrants' experience.

The political crisis that began in El Salvador in the late 1970s (along with the upsurge of Salvadoran immigration to the United States during the civil war and to a large extent the internationalization of the Salvadoran conflict) attracted scholarly interest in Salvadoran migration beyond the Central American region, mainly to the United States. The discrepancy between the conditions of war and violence that many Salvadorans left in their homeland and their official reception as economic migrants by the U.S. government shaped the questions in early studies of Salvadoran migration. Thus scholars of Central American migration in general, and of the Salvadoran case in particular, focused on the root causes of these flows and the political forces that shaped them. Researchers concentrated on resolving the apparent paradox of whether this migration was economic (see Jones 1989) or political (see Stanley 1987), or, in fact, a combination of the two (see Hamilton and Chinchilla 1991; Menjívar 1993). Others argued that the political conflict had little, if anything, to do with the surge in

these population movements (see Lindstrom 1996). During this period scholars were also concerned with the mental health of this immigrant group; thus several studies focused on the sociopsychological stress involved in the migration and the effect of war trauma on these immigrants' lives (see Aron et al. 1991; Guarnaccia and Farias 1988; Kury 1987; Leslie 1992, 1993; Petuchowski 1988; Ward 1987).

As the presence of Central Americans in the United States became more noticeable, their demographic profile and other socioeconomic aspects were explored, which called attention to the increasing heterogeneity of the Latino immigrant population in the United States (see Rodríguez 1987). Some studies observed that the demographic profile of these Latino immigrants, particularly of Salvadorans before and during the civil war in their home country, differed significantly over time and characterized later arrivals as refugees (see Dorrington, Zambrana, and Sabagh 1991). As more Central Americans arrived in the United States, researchers became concerned with estimating the size of their migration, its potential to increase, and what all this meant in terms of eligibility for benefits (see Ruggles and Fix 1985; Ruggles, Fix, and Thomas 1985).

During the early years knowledge about Central American migration to the United States was disseminated in the voluminous literature on the Sanctuary movement. This literature conveyed heart-breaking accounts of the travails of refugees in their home countries, during the journey, and on arrival in the United States. It also focused, however, on the development of the Sanctuary movement, on the opposition between U.S. law and the humanitarian character of the movement, and on the lives of the movement's founders (see Bau 1985; Coutin 1993; Golden and McConnell 1986).

The rapid increase of Central American immigrants in the United States also prompted scholars to focus on issues relating to aspects of their incorporation into life in the United States. Thus Central Americans' labor force participation became an important emphasis (see Repak 1995), as did issues of settlement, community formation and intraethnic conflict, acculturation, and adaptation (see Chávez 1991, 1994; Córdova 1987; Mahler 1995b; Rodríguez and Urrutia-Rojas 1990). To place this new migration in a larger perspective, comparisons of the Central American and Mexican cases were made (see Chávez, Flores, and López-Garza 1989; Chinchilla, Jamail, and

Rodríguez 1986; Hamilton and Chinchilla 1984; Wallace 1989). And accounts of important factors affecting the daily life of Central Americans also appeared (see Chinchilla and Hamilton 1992).

Most of these early studies did not differentiate among the various nationalities of Central American immigrants (e.g., Guatemalan, Salvadoran, and Nicaraguan). Even though Central Americans share a common history and face similar challenges, there are important social and cultural differences among them that require separate examination. For instance, many Guatemalans who have arrived in the United States in recent years are of Mayan descent and have had different experiences than their non-Mayan compatriots. This is not the case among Salvadorans, who are relatively more ethnically homogeneous. These important differences have been incorporated in a few recent studies that examine social dynamics in Mayan communities and relationships between established residents and these immigrants in Houston (see Hagan 1994; Rodríguez and Hagan 1992). Paralleling new trends in immigration research, scholars of Central American immigration have begun to examine broad issues of transnationalism (see Landolt 1997). They have also begun to focus on “hometown” associations (see Popkin 1995), the potential for “circular migration” (see Bailey and Hane 1995), and the remittances that arguably keep Central American economies — at least the Salvadoran — afloat (see Funkhouser 1992; Menjívar et al. 1998).

In spite of the growing literature on Central American, particularly Salvadoran, migration, there are important gaps that remain to be studied that would undoubtedly contribute to a better understanding and illuminate broader issues common to other groups. Among these is the effect of the context of reception on the immigrants’ social worlds, particularly on their social networks. For instance, although studies have recognized the hostile reception to Salvadoran immigrants by the U.S. government, its effects on the social dynamics within the group have only begun to be explored (see Menjívar 1994b, 1997a). The incorporation of Salvadorans into the labor market has been researched, but the impact of restricted economic opportunities on the immigrants’ social institutions has been ignored. Community building among Central Americans has been researched, but the effects of limited community resources on informal social networks that lie at the core of community formation have not. And although



research has focused on the incorporation of Central American immigrants in the United States, most studies deal with them as a homogeneous entity, without attention to social differentiation.<sup>5</sup>

This study examines the effects of the receiving context on the dynamics of informal networks, taking into account internal social differentiation such as gender and generation to present a more nuanced account of the inner workings of the immigrants' social worlds. My focus is on Salvadoran immigrants—the largest Central American immigrant group in the United States—in San Francisco, the city that has had the longest, yet least studied, history of this migration in the United States. In moving the focus away from the immigrants and what they bring with them to emphasize the structure that receives them—while at the same time examining the relationship of social position to their response to the conditions they face—this study helps to fill an important gap in the study of Salvadoran migration. By focusing on the city that has received Salvadoran immigrants for the longest time, it contributes to dispelling assumptions about immigrant cohesive ties in community building. It conveys the potent effect of both the structural conditions that immigrants face and the immigrants' social positions, even if the results go against conventional notions of immigrant network solidarity.

### The Research Site: San Francisco

Central Americans first established a community in the Mission District of San Francisco in the 1940s (Hansen 1980). Before that, the Mission had been an Irish neighborhood. In the aftermath of the Great Earthquake and Fire that devastated the city in 1906, the newly redeveloped Mission District attracted many San Franciscans, including Latinos, but the Irish predominated and continued to do so until after World War II, when the upwardly mobile abandoned their crowded apartments for more spacious places in the foggy Sunset and Richmond districts (Kathleen Coll pers. com.). There still remain some elderly Irish residents and a few commercial establishments reminiscent of their early presence. By the late 1940s Central Americans and Mexicans started to move in, and since then the Mission has attracted Latin Americans to the city. During the mid-1970s, when the real estate boom began, property prices increased and the city and

county of San Francisco stopped requiring that city employees live there; thus many working-class and middle-class residents moved out of the Mission and out of the city altogether (Kathleen Coll pers. com.). Although rents are high, the Mission District continues to be the bastion of Latin American life in San Francisco and to attract Latin American immigrants.

The neighborhood has not remained static during the past decade, however; its demographics are clearly changing, which makes local Latino groups fearful that the Mission is losing its traditional Latin flavor (Garcia and Chung 1990). New produce markets — with signs in Chinese, English, and Vietnamese — that sell plantains, tortillas, beans, Mexican cheeses and sweet bread, and Chinese ointments are becoming commonplace. It is customary to find Asian people behind cash registers in small shops selling toys, appliances, clothing, and a host of household items to the Latin clientele. These business owners can comfortably call out prices and make small talk with customers in Spanish, but for more involved transactions a clerk, invariably of Latin American descent, is asked to assist. Other recent transformations in the Mission include the creation of the city's first distinctly lesbian community around Valencia Street and of a "new bohemia," with poets, artists, and writers bringing cafés, poetry readings, and art exhibits to the neighborhood (Garcia and Chung 1990). The gentrification of some areas of the Mission has effected important changes, as poor immigrants find it increasingly difficult to afford the already astronomically high rents. Regardless of these changes, immigrants of Latin American descent still predominate, and Spanish is widely spoken in the streets of the Mission District.

### *Salvadorans in San Francisco*

Salvadoran migration to San Francisco has roots in the commercial trade between San Francisco and Central America. Early in this century San Francisco became the chief processing center for coffee from Central America, fostering ties with the coffee-producing elite in that region. Initially these contacts were limited to coffee growers and business people traveling to and from Central America. Descendants of these early families keep records of their relatives' marriages contracted in the early 1920s, when a few Salvadorans apparently already

lived in the city (personal conversations with and genealogy compiled by Margaret Gentry). Later, Salvadorans and other Central Americans — mostly Nicaraguans — who had been recruited to work in the Panama Canal joined shipping lines that were operating there and then continued to San Francisco (Godfrey 1988). These contacts led many Salvadorans to work for the shipping lines in San Francisco, establishing the basis for the emergence of a settlement center for Salvadorans.

The maritime routes between Central America and San Francisco fueled migrations from Central America during and after World War II. Shipyards and wartime industries continued to recruit Central Americans, mainly Nicaraguans and Salvadorans. A significant number of Central Americans entered these labor-scarce industries during this period, which accounted for a significant increase of Central American migration to San Francisco during the 1940s. By 1950 Central Americans outnumbered the Mexican-born (Godfrey 1988). Don Julio A., one of my informants, was part of this migration. He told me that in those days “everyone wanted to come to work painting ships in San Francisco,” and although he went back to El Salvador, many of his friends stayed and later brought their families to the city. Don Julio eventually returned to San Francisco, where I met him.

Salvadoran migration to San Francisco continued to increase steadily in the 1980s; 45.7 percent of the Salvadoran-born population in San Francisco arrived between 1980 and 1990 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1993). Although Salvadorans live and work throughout San Francisco, their concentration in the Mission District has led to a proliferation of Salvadoran restaurants, businesses, and courier services in this area that cater mostly to Salvadorans. In contrast to other U.S. cities with large concentrations of immigrants from Latin America, San Francisco’s multinational Latin group does not have a substantial majority from any one country. The fastest-growing Latin American group in the city is Central Americans, who by 1990 accounted for about 35 percent of the city’s Latino population (see table 1). Whereas the Mexican population increased by 22.3 percent from 1980 to 1990, the Central American population expanded 43.6 percent, and the Salvadoran population alone grew by 45.7 percent during the same period (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1993).

In comparison to other cities with a large concentration of

TABLE 1    Census Figures for 1990 (Percentages)

	<i>Salvadorans</i>		<i>Central Americans</i>
	San Francisco (Total 17,797) <sup>a</sup>	Los Angeles (Total 253,086) <sup>a</sup>	San Francisco (Total 34,119) <sup>a</sup>
Latino population in area	18.6	7.6	35.3
Arrived 1980–90	45.0	61.1	43.6
Foreign-born	77.6	83.1	77.3

SOURCE: Census of Population and Housing, 1990 (Summary Tape File 4).  
<sup>a</sup>These are county-level figures. San Francisco’s city and county limits are the same. The number of Salvadorans and Central Americans would increase considerably if other Bay Area counties were included. For instance, there are 14,099 Salvadorans in San Mateo County. But this study was confined to San Francisco, and thus only these figures will be included.

Salvadorans, San Francisco’s Salvadoran population is numerically smaller, particularly when compared to that of Los Angeles, which has the largest concentration of Salvadorans in the United States (see table 1). According to the 1990 U.S. Census, 60 percent of the 565,081 Salvadoran-born persons in the United States live in California; of these, 75 percent are in Los Angeles County, of whom 73 percent reside in the city of Los Angeles alone. In contrast, the Salvadoran population in San Francisco — county and city — was estimated at 17,979 in 1990. Thus, even though in absolute terms the Salvadoran population in San Francisco is much smaller than in other cities, it constitutes a higher percentage of the Latino population in the city (see table 1). Importantly, in contrast to any other U.S. city, the significant presence of Salvadorans in San Francisco goes much further back than the events of the late 1970s and 1980s that propelled their massive migration to the United States. Although San Francisco does not currently receive the largest influx of Salvadoran immigrants, it has the longest continuous history of Salvadoran migration to the United States.

Access to the Setting and Data Collection

I conducted the initial research for this study as part of a larger study on survival strategies of immigrant households among five different

immigrant groups (see Smith and Tarallo 1992). Thus, from the outset, certain restrictions were placed on who might qualify for inclusion in order to avoid obvious, major sources of variation. Participants had to have recently arrived — that is, they had to be Salvadorans who had been in the United States for not more than five years — and they had to be eighteen years of age or over at the time they left their home country. I retained these initial restrictions for the duration of my study. I gained access to the study participants mainly through “local notables,” as Wayne Cornelius (1982, 385) describes the host of contacts in the community that make possible communication with undocumented immigrants.

I came into contact with twenty-two of my informants through a major language school in the Mission District. The director gave me office space and the opportunity to freely speak to students who might be willing to participate in the study. She circulated a memorandum to the instructors informing them that I was going to ask Salvadoran students to take part in what at that time was my dissertation project. The director also asked the school counselor and her staff to assist me in my endeavor. In exchange for helping me to contact potential informants, I gladly agreed to hold office hours at the language school as an “aide,” as the director suggested. The director, a Latina of South American origin, mentioned that she was particularly interested in my presence at the school because, as a Salvadoran, I could be resourceful in reaching the students. My duties were to provide students with information they requested about community resources or to direct them to the appropriate staff person at the school. I gathered information from community organizations so that I could be more efficient in helping the students. Their questions ranged from how to get around the city to how to overcome problems they faced in adapting to the new society. Undoubtedly, by helping out in this way I accumulated invaluable information regarding the daily life experiences of my informants. I conducted some interviews in my office at the school; others took place in various locations, for instance, at my informants’ homes after I had accompanied them on errands.

I could have contacted all my informants at the language school, but I needed access to different groups to avoid, as much as possible, selectivity bias. I contacted eighteen informants through a community organization in charge of, among other programs, a weekly food dis-

tribution. After a few meetings with the director of this organization and with the person in charge of the food program, I was invited to participate in the activities that took place in a neighborhood parish every Friday. During my first visit to the distribution center, the Salvadoran woman in charge warmly introduced me to the participants. In asking for their collaboration, she appealed to our fraternal ties in the following words: "We have a compatriot with us today, a Salvadoran who needs our help with her studies; she is trying to write a book about our experiences." (From this point on my dissertation project or any papers or articles that I wrote became known simply as "the book.") This introduction was particularly significant, because in many instances throughout my fieldwork, my Salvadoran nationality quickly opened doors for me. Some of my informants were grateful that I had taken an interest in their fortunes. Others could not believe that I was "wasting time" trying to learn about Salvadorans instead of learning more about "Americans, which is more helpful if you live in the United States," as some assured me. But the overwhelming majority were pleasantly surprised that a compatriot was a "doctor" and that, although I was apparently able to mingle with Americans and had a different class origin, I was not embarrassed — and even wanted — to spend time with them. I spent many hours at the food distribution program, which served about ninety families per week. Sometimes I would go to chat with people who were there to receive food. Often I would go just to be there and to help in different ways, such as to provide transportation or to fill out various forms, including applications for the Women, Infants, and Children Nutritional Program (WIC). Also, I contacted ten other informants through Salvadorans I met in the community.

In addition to the two main locations where I contacted the majority of my informants, I spent many hours at community organizations, attending meetings to which I was invited by community workers. During this time I had the opportunity to interview and speak informally with social workers, physicians, school counselors and teachers, public notaries, a psychologist, and immigration lawyers. I approached a local priest and an evangelical pastor, who kindly shared with me observations about their Salvadoran congregations. I also conversed with longtime Salvadoran residents in San Francisco, whose views were important, even though (but also because) most of them had lit-

the contact with the newcomers. I spoke with employers of Salvadoran immigrants and with an Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) official. Also, during a trip to Mexico I had the opportunity to discuss issues about the journey from El Salvador with persons who work with Salvadorans in Mexico City and in Guadalajara.

This range of contacts provided me with crucial information regarding the lives of the Salvadorans in this study. Although I conducted a survey of 150 people and interviewed 50 informants, I spoke with many more Salvadoran newcomers during the course of this project. Furthermore, spending time at the school, at the food distribution project, at community organizations, and in the neighborhood gave me the opportunity to gain invaluable information about the quotidian lives of these people. One day, as I got off BART (the Bay Area's rapid transit system), I encountered Carolina and Ileana A., two sisters I had met at the language school. The apartment they shared with their sister and brother was only two blocks away, and they invited me home with them. There we had coffee and *quesadilla* (Salvadoran-style cheesecake) that they had prepared that day, as we went over photographs they had brought from El Salvador. As we carefully inspected the photographs, they recounted important experiences from their lives. This also gave them the opportunity to quiz me about my knowledge of Salvadoran cultural subtleties, local expressions, cuisine, and geography, and as if doubting my "authenticity," they laughed endlessly when I provided accurate and elaborate answers. There I also met the sisters' other siblings. Carolina and Ileana found this to be an appropriate opportunity to ask me about my own experiences as an immigrant and as a student in a foreign land, to comment about their future plans, and to vent their frustrations with life in the United States.

## Methods

Because of the study population's high mobility and sometimes clandestine nature, the questions I posed could not be answered using secondary data. The wisest course in trying to understand the experiences of the Salvadoran immigrants was to use interviewing as my basic approach, complementing it with extensive ethnographic observations and a survey. First, I conducted the survey among 150