Introduction

BY MICHAEL GORKIN

For the second time in three years I find myself writing a book about women. I have asked myself repeatedly (as psychologists are wont to do) why my work has taken this particular direction. And I am now convinced that the two main reasons are the two individuals I name in the dedication to this book—my daughters, Talya and Maya. In short, the process of becoming and being a father to two girls seems to have moved me to the point where women's lives and writing about women have become an absorbing interest. Call it "feminism," I guess; and while I absolve them of any blame for the opinions expressed here, I consider Talya and Maya basically and blessedly responsible for the fact that I am involved in writing this book at all.

Why, then, write about Salvadoran women? The answer goes back to a serendipitous trip I made shortly after finishing the book on Palestinian women.[1] In the spring of 1996 I was invited to give some lectures to the staff of the Student Counseling Services of Universidad Doctor José Matías Delgado in El Salvador. Never having been to El Salvador, I was

curious and decided to go. In the obscure and magical way these things sometimes happen, I felt drawn to the country. By the time I left three weeks later, I already had in mind the possibility of doing a book about Salvadoran women and of collaborating with several women, colleagues I'd met on the counseling staff.

For me, part of the appeal of doing such a book was that El Salvador in some ways resembled the society and country about which I had just written—Palestine. Here too, I discovered, male dominance (*machismo*) was not only a pervasive pattern but was undergoing a serious challenge from increasing numbers of women. Moreover, as in Palestine, there had been a recent upheaval—the civil war that lasted from 1980 to 1992. To what extent, I wondered, had this war affected the role and perception of women in Salvadoran society?

Alongside the similarities, one marked difference between the two countries immediately struck me: the significance of social class. In Palestine the common struggle against Israel mutes class differences, but in El Salvador these differences are sharp and obvious. I began wondering how much solidarity—or if not solidarity, then a feeling of similarity—these class barriers allow Salvadoran women to experience.

Apart from these intriguing comparisons and contrasts between Palestinian and Salvadoran society, there was the challenge of once again trying to write a book *on* women, and *with* women (on some of the difficulties that face a man who wishes to do this kind of work, see my comments below). And the opportunity to gather and convey women's life stories in a meaningful way—despite the obstacles, both personal and technical—was one I found irresistible.

My next step was to contact possible coauthor(s). I had no interest in trying to do the book alone. I spoke enough Spanish *para defenderme* (to defend myself—to get along, in other words) and to conduct interviews but lacked a deeper understanding of the language and its subtleties. Even more crucial, as a man I could not alone meet or interview the majority of the women in the study. Hence, I turned to Marta Pineda and Gloria Leal, both psychologists, and asked if they would be

willing to coauthor the book with me. Neither had been involved in gathering oral narratives, but with a mixture of enthusiasm and hesitation, they agreed. Their experience as psychologists made it likely that both might be skillful interviewers—and so they were, even beyond all our expectations.

As the title of this book suggests, we decided to write about families. Specifically, we settled on three families, and our subjects are a trio of grandmother-mother-granddaughter from each family. In writing about Palestinian mother-daughter pairs I took a similar approach. This time, I thought the addition of another generation might enhance the collective portrait of the families and the society. No doubt, part of my—and my colleagues'—inclination to choose families as our focus reflects the fact that we are psychologists. Thus, the interplay of family members has a special attraction for us. But beyond that, the focus on multigenerational families allows us to see how changes occur over time in each family and perhaps, by implication, in the society at large. Moreover, as oral historians are well aware, there is a subjective element to all storytelling. The focus on families, with each member bringing her own slant on one event or another, has the advantage of underscoring this subjectivity. Because I have worked in Arab and Latin cultures, I am now inclined to find a more poignant "reality" precisely in this so-called subjectivity.

For various reasons, then, the three of us were drawn to focus on families as our subjects. The question was, *which* families? We picked social class as the most significant criterion. More than any other factor except gender, social class differentiates among individuals. To be sure, these social classes are not equally represented in Salvadoran society. About 65 to 70 percent of Salvadorans belong to the lower class, with the middle class making up 20 to 25 percent, and the upper class 5 to 10 percent.[2] Yet despite the disproportionate percentages, this criterion provides a wide and varied picture of Salvadoran women's experiences and, by extension, a sense of Salvadoran society as a whole.

In choosing the three families, we felt that the women would be most open if they were talking to interviewers who were strangers to them.

Thus, in all three cases we made contact through intermediaries. With the upper-class family, one of our colleagues at the Student Counseling Services knew the mother; with the middle-class family a friend of Marta's introduced us to the granddaughter; and with the lower-class family a colleague of Gloria's cousin led us to all three women in the family.

To our surprise, the easiest family to locate and to begin interviewing was the upper-class family: la familia Nuñez.[3] The conventional wisdom in oral history predicts that interviewers (who, as a rule, are middle class) will find it easier to gain access and to interview "across" or "down"—middle-class and lower-class individuals[4]—rather than "up." But it didn't fit our experience. La familia Nuñez was the first and only upper-class family we met, and all parties immediately agreed to work together. Perhaps the fact that we three are psychologists and I am a U.S. citizen gave our project a measure of social status in their eyes. In any case, the family members invited us to visit them and to attend several fiestas at their sugarcane plantation. Niña Cecilia de Nuñez, the grandmother, still has a hand in managing this plantation, since her husband no longer chooses to do so. The 75-*manzana* plantation (some 128 acres) is only one of Niña Cecilia's assets. She and her husband have considerable sums in bank accounts—enough to enable them to enjoy the plush style of El Salvador's upper class. Her daughter, Monica, also partakes of the upper-class privileges and prerogatives. Married to a man who owns 50 manzanas of coffee land and is a partner in a lucrative business, Monica lives in one of the capital's exclusive neighborhoods. She considers herself simply "a housewife" and comes across as an unpretentious, down-to-earth individual. Her only child, Paulina, is currently finishing high school in one of El Salvador's most prestigious private schools. At the moment, Paulina thinks she'd like eventually to take over the reins from her father; or if not that, she says, "at least to do something important with my life—*not* be a housewife like my mother!"

The second family appearing in the book, la familia García, resides at the opposite end of the social spectrum. They are *campesinas* (peasant women) who, as it happens, all fought or collaborated with the guerrillas in El Salvador's civil war. Currently they all live in a new community

35 kilometers (21 miles) from the capital and with varying degrees of success are rebuilding their lives after the war. A community organizer who works with their settlement gave us access to them. Before meeting them, we had talked with two or three other lower-class families, both rural and urban. But none of the others, we sensed, were willing to open up to strangers, especially not about their political views. La familia García, on the contrary, showed little hesitation in discussing politics or any other subject. And thus we decided that Niña Dolores García, her daughter Lupe, and granddaughter María were a family who could provide a rich portrait—though not the only possible portrait—of lower-class family life in El Salvador.

The book's third trio comes from a middle-class family, la familia Rivas. Theirs was the most difficult family for us to locate and choose. And here we surprised ourselves. Since both Gloria and Marta come from the Salvadoran middle class, we all expected it to be easiest to find a middle-class family to interview. To some degree our difficulties must reflect chance. Several times we found two members of a family we would have liked to work with, but the third—usually, the grandmother—was unavailable. Apart from this, I think it was perhaps because Marta, Gloria, and I are from this class that we were somewhat quick to dismiss possible subjects on the basis that their stories seemed too familiar. And thus the family we chose is unusual in some respects: above all, in the fact that both the mother, Dulce, and the granddaughter, Sara, are socially committed individuals. One is a teacher who works in a poor neighborhood, and the other a university student with plans to "make a contribution" to her community. In contrast, the grandmother, Niña Julia Rivas, is a quietly apolitical individual. Her father, a middle-class farmer, did not support Niña Julia's mother and the five children. Niña Julia wound up working as a maid for much of her life, until her daughters managed to extricate her from this position and make it possible for her now to have some of the comforts of middle-class life. This struggle, which *is* typical of middle-class families in El Salvador, is what caught our attention and convinced us that la familia Rivas would be the trio to interview.

Whether it was in the grand salon of la familia Nuñez or the cramped dining room of la familia Rivas or the porch of one of la familia García, we used the same procedure in interviewing the women from all three families. We always brought along two tape recorders (in case one failed) and conducted each session in Spanish. To enable the women to speak most freely, we interviewed them separately and discouraged intrusions, though—especially with the *campesina* family—at times some of the children lingered nearby to observe the strange goings-on.

An interview usually lasted about one hour, with an additional half-hour or so of (untaped) socializing before and after. We had between six and nine interviews with each woman. With la familia Nuñez, the sessions were recorded from September 1996 to December 1997; with la familia García, from April 1997 to April 1998; and with la familia Rivas, from October 1997 to June 1998.

While at times all three of us would interview together, we generally went in pairs, an arrangement that we felt worked best. And in two cases Marta did much of the interviewing alone, since it became apparent that she had developed a special rapport with these women. In brief, we decided to be flexible about who interviewed whom; our procedure may be open to criticism on certain technical grounds, but we intuitively felt it would lead to greater openness from our subjects.

In this regard, I would like to make a few observations about how my participation added to, or detracted from, our subjects' willingness to speak openly about themselves. To the simple and blunt question, Can a man interview women as successfully as a woman can? I now reluctantly say, No, he cannot. Before I began to gather oral narratives from women, my clinical experience in working with women and my personal friendships with women persuaded me that women felt comfortable enough to talk freely with me. But the experience of these two books has made me see that a man is at a distinct disadvantage in interviewing women. Even when social conventions allow him access to them, women almost invariably talk less freely, *and* differently, to him than they do with female interviewers. And, I think, two related factors help explain the difference. First, as Gluck and Patai

suggest, female interviewers generally take care to set up an atmosphere of rapport with their subjects whereas male interviewers, in their goal-orientedness, are more likely to hunt for information and neglect this vital element of rapport (sadly, their comment fits my interviewing style versus my collaborators' in all three cases).[5] Second, women have a prejudice—or maybe the word is "awareness"—that another woman will understand and appreciate what they relate of their lives far better than a man will, because he is less likely to be interested in their experience. And as a consequence, when a man attempts to interview women, the stories he hears are generally less full, less free, and ultimately less fascinating.

I first stumbled across this realization while doing the book on Palestinian women with Rafiqa Othman. With one of the three mother-daughter pairs, the mother (out of respect for her deceased husband) was unwilling to sit with me, a man. Rafiqa had to do the interviewing alone. She was a much less experienced interviewer than I was, but the material she received from this woman and her daughter was more frank and elaborate than most of what we had gathered together.

Having noticed this fact, I decided for the present book on Salvadoran women that it might be wise for Marta and Gloria to do some of the interviewing without me. They protested at first but then—with some eagerness—agreed to try it out. And once again, most often the interviews they gathered together were fuller and richer in detail than the material we gathered when I was present. The most notable exceptions (and thank goodness, there *were* some) came in a few of our sessions with the *campesinas* and the middle-class social activist. Here, the fact that my political sympathies are more leftist and those of both Marta and Gloria are more rightist led to a certain irony: a gringo got information about the political involvements and beliefs of these leftist women that Marta and Gloria might have missed. And in a few other areas, too, my personal interests led to some elaboration of material that, perhaps, would have gone unspoken. Yet overall I must admit that the intimate details and elaborate descriptions in this book primarily reflect the fact that Marta and Gloria were there and, often enough, without

me. And because of their joint interviewing, the stories of these women's lives emerge clearly and, I think, compellingly.

To help the reader understand and follow the women's narratives, we append a short historical chronology of El Salvador's history to the book. Beyond that, I think it is worth sketching in here, however briefly, some of the features of the main upheaval in the country's recent history—namely, the civil war that took place between 1980 and 1992. Like almost everyone else in El Salvador, all nine women in the book were profoundly affected by this war. It enters all their life stories. Each woman has her own perspective on the war's causes and outcome, and I prefer to let the readers form their judgments from the stories themselves. Here, I wish only to indicate some of the principal aspects of this national upheaval.

The combatants in the twelve-year war were almost entirely Salvadorans: the government's armed forces, the Fuerza Armada, on one side; and the guerrillas, the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN), on the other side.[6] Yet the war also had a significant international dimension, and forces from the outside promoted and abetted one side or the other. Fearing the prospect of another leftist Sandinista-type victory such as had just occurred in Nicaragua (1979), the United States contributed vast sums of money and matériel, as well as technical advisors, to the government's forces.[7] And attempting to promote just such a revolution, Nicaragua and Cuba sent large quantities of arms and some volunteers to the Salvadoran guerrillas.

The war ebbed and flowed until 1992, at which time the United Nations, firmly supported by the United States, was able to negotiate a peace agreement between the two sides. The settlement remains intact, seven years later. Both sides achieved some gains. The government, which represented the political right and center, remained in power. And on the whole, the upper and middle classes kept their assets. But the guerrillas also made substantial gains. The FMLN got recognition as a legal political party and the passage of a good deal of social legislation it supported, including more land reform.[8]

No matter how we evaluate the gains of the war, nobody in El Salvador overlooks the losses. By any standard, the war's cost was devastating. Some 75,000 Salvadorans (1.5 percent of the population) died; at least 400,000 people, principally poor *campesinos*, lost their homes; and at least 500,000 Salvadorans fled the country. In sum, the upheaval devastated the country. And while a renewal of the war now seems unlikely, the country is still suffering from its aftereffects—as the various stories of the women in this book so vividly underscore, no matter where they appear along the political spectrum.

Other vast changes have occurred in the lives of Salvadoran women during this century. Our focus on multigenerational families highlights some of these shifts. One is the dramatic expansion of educational opportunities for women (for men as well, but the change is less remarkable). Two generations ago education was the prerogative of the upper class, and middle-class and lower-class women now value and seek it too. We see this trend clearly in the lives of the women in our study. In the generation of the grandmothers, only one-third of Salvadoran women were literate; today, at least three-quarters are literate. Moreover, while it was almost unprecedented for women to receive a university education in the era of the grandmothers, now two of every hundred women (and three of every hundred men) attend universities.[9] As a result of this increased level of education for women, their opportunities for productive work outside their homes are better too.

In the era of the grandmothers, an upper-class woman did not work outside her home. If she received some schooling, she was not expected to pursue a career; to be a housewife and attend to her husband's and children's needs was her prescribed role. The past two generations have seriously challenged this limiting perspective, and there has been a growing influx of women at all levels of the workforce. And perhaps most promisingly, more and more women appear even at the top of the occupational structure. We note, for example, that today fourteen of the eighty-four deputies in the Salvadoran Parliament are women; in 1961 they numbered two out of fifty-six. And within the professions, this

trend is also impressive. Women still do the lion's (and lioness's) share of the housework and child-rearing. But even in this area, as the stories in this book suggest, male privileges are eroding. In short, we are witnessing a shift in women's occupational and work roles in El Salvador, and it seems to be irreversible.

In one significant realm, however, change seems to be occurring more slowly and painfully: sexual freedom. Here the ideology of *machismo* sways the minds of all Salvadorans, women included. In the era of the grandmothers, parental advice and consent were expected and accepted. Women today are substantially freer to meet and choose a marriage partner. And yet a sexual double standard prevails. At *all* social levels, women are still expected to be virgins when they marry or first enter a common-law relationship (become *ajuntada*) with the man of their choice. As some of the narratives in this book make vividly clear, the loss of virginity before marriage has a high price. And only a small number of women, usually those with higher education, are willing to defy this entrenched social norm.

In evaluating these trends in the social and personal lives of Salvadoran women, I found myself comparing them to what I had noted in Palestinian society. On the whole, the similarities are more prominent than the differences. Educational and occupational opportunities for women exist in both countries. And the area of least change in either country is that of sexual freedom for women; premarital sexual relations still carry the same stigma, if not quite the same danger, as in previous generations.

In addition, in both countries there is a burgeoning women's movement, with increasing numbers of women's organizations challenging male dominance and standards. Likewise, in both societies social upheaval (in Palestine the *intifada*, in El Salvador the civil war) provided an impetus for women's groups to gather strength.[10] Now that the heat of the war has passed in El Salvador and subsided in Palestine, the women's organizations continue to gather strength. In El Salvador, they remain small in actual membership numbers—smaller than in Palestine—but their potential impact should not be underestimated; they are, I think, the vanguard of changes that are likely to go on into the future.

Yet there are also some significant differences. In Palestine the patrilineal extended family still has a far greater influence in the society as a whole and, by extension, also a greater influence on the lives of women than in El Salvador. The common practice in El Salvador of women living and raising children alone, having been abandoned by their husbands or partners, and also by the men's families, is scarcely to be found in Palestine, where such behavior would be considered an *aeb* (shame).[11] Among the women in our small sample, three of the seven who bore children were abandoned by their spouses or partners, either permanently or temporarily. And while this phenomenon is more common in poorer families—as in our sample—it is present at all levels of the society. Its social and psychological price is amply illustrated in some of the women's life stories (see also our Afterwords).

And yet in El Salvador the lack of "protection" from the patrilineal extended family seems to have led to a relatively greater aversion to male hegemony on the part of Salvadoran women than I observed in Palestine. As a consequence, Salvadoran women have sought and achieved a greater measure of individual freedom. From a psychological perspective, it seems to me that Salvadoran women define themselves more in terms of "I" than do Palestinian women. For the latter, more often the sense of self is entwined in the group self of the extended family, that is, a "we-self."[12] Palestinian women almost always have to negotiate their freedom with an eye toward male censure. (Indeed, it was far harder to find women subjects to interview in Palestine than in El Salvador, and Salvadoran women seem to feel freer to express their feelings and views, to disclose their loves and even lusts.) With the relative absence of control from the patrilineal extended family, women in El Salvador are more able to navigate their own destinies than are women in Palestine. And I would speculate that the prospects are better in El Salvador than in Palestine for a continued expansion of such individual freedom for women.

Before turning to the stories of the nine women in this book, I would like to comment on a couple of other matters that are of concern to

those who gather and present oral narratives. We ask ourselves, as indeed we must, how accurately the material we present in written form does in fact reflect the lives of the people we met. Furthermore, as we ask ourselves this question we cannot and must not avoid asking whether the work we are doing, the transmitting of these accounts, is a worthwhile *and* ethical process. Much has been written about both these issues.

Let me start with the issue of whether the narratives here, as I have edited them, can be said to reflect the lives of our subjects. Certainly these written products are the result and reflection of both the interviewee and interviewer; and—as practitioners of oral history remind us—their very wording also anticipates the potential audience, the reader(s), for whom the narratives are intended.[13] To me, this view is correct. Hence, what the reader will find here is *a* version—not *the* version—of each of the nine women's lives. With another public in mind than the North American, another interviewer would undoubtedly write a different work.

Inasmuch as the narratives are the product of a dialogue, some researchers argue that one should present the narratives in dialogic form.[14] I, however, rejected this suggestion because my impression is that the dialogic presentation is less readable, that is, narratively less interesting, than a monologic presentation of material. But I try to indicate within the flow of the text some of the moments when we were asking direct questions and keep many comments that the interviewees addressed to us about the interviewing process. Thus, I hope readers will experience an intimate conversation they are invited to overhear. That, and not a monologue uttered in a megaphonelike manner to an anonymous audience, has been my aim in technically editing the material.

Whether in dialogic or monologic form, the material brings up technical problems that are in some ways insurmountable. We cannot avoid editing the oral material, and thereby changing to some degree precisely what was said. The repetitions, ramblings, and detours that are present in all storytelling, with educated and illiterate subjects alike, will not form a readable text. All that the editor can hope to do is shape the text

with a delicate and true hand—"true" in the sense of keeping the essential style and voice of the subject.

The task of keeping the voice of the subject is even more difficult in translation from one language to another. With the more educated subjects, translation from Spanish into English has been relatively manageable. But with the less educated women, the *campesina* family in particular, I found it impossible to retain the richness of their language, even with Marta and Gloria, who are quite fluent in English, peering over my shoulder. All three women in the *campesina* family speak a dialect distinct from that of almost all the other women—as different as an Appalachian farmer's speech from that of a New York schoolteacher. To capture this difference proved at times impossible. I believe, however, that the voices of the individual *campesina* women do come through; at least the personal manner and style of telling their stories remain. And thus, I feel that the personalities of these women are adequately reflected, even though the beauty of the dialect is often lost in translation.

Finally, I would like to comment briefly on some of the troubling ethical issues that arise when gathering and writing up oral narratives. To my mind, nobody has put this matter more forcefully than Daphne Patai in her essay "U.S. Academics and Third World Women: Is Ethical Research Possible?"[15] Basically, her argument is that the U.S. academic is in a more "powerful" and "privileged" position than a third-world subject, and she or he has more to gain in "prestige" and "economic" terms than does the subject; and consequently, an element of exploitation is unavoidable. As Patai concludes, "in an unethical world we cannot do truly ethical research."

In addition, I think it is true that no matter how clearly we explain to our subjects what we are doing and how we are doing it, many of them—especially the less educated—have only a partial and vague idea of how their stories, with all the self-revealing details, eventually come into the hands of strangers. We, as transmitters of these stories, have a need and even an obligation to the reader to provide narratives that are

self-revealing. At times, with *all* subjects we try to garner information that the subject herself would prefer to hide. This tension is inevitable, and I imagine for most of us it arouses a certain ethical uneasiness.

Then how can we justify doing this work? The answer for me lies in the belief that though an element of exploitation, or using the other, is inevitable, we also provide our subjects with some benefits. I am not referring to monetary gains. Although one could legitimately pay interviewees, we did not do so. It was our judgment that interviewees who chose to participate in the project would ultimately be more open, and more truly involved, if their reason for doing so was not one of material gain.

The historian Paul Thompson points to the salutary effects for the subject in participating in an oral history project.[16] He emphasizes two psychological benefits that subjects often receive from the process of recollecting their lives. First, the act of remembering, even while painful in some instances, has a cathartic effect for many interviewees. Second, the process of recounting the past to an attentive listener is a meaningful and self-enhancing experience for subjects who perhaps have never had such an experience. As a psychologist, I agree with Thompson. Patai is similarly aware of these factors, but it seems to me that she underestimates their value for the subject.

My experiences with the women I interviewed persuade me that it is primarily these psychological benefits that motivate the interviewees to talk and reveal so much about their lives. As a psychologist, I by no means attempt to do "psychotherapy" with the subjects. Yet the listening process and what happens *to me* as a listener of the stories is substantially the same as when I am doing psychotherapy with patients. By interviewing each woman several times over a long period, and meeting other members of her family as part of the project, I find that sooner or later I develop an empathic understanding of who she is. Whether her political, social, and personal predilections mesh or clash with mine, I strive—just as with patients—to see the world through her eyes. And simply expressed, I almost always come to like the person. Naturally, with some subjects this empathic understanding comes quicker than with others. But I take it as my task to strive for this understanding.

Once I feel I have substantially achieved this position with the subject, I feel I can put together a fair, *and* ethical, narrative of her life.

And then I begin writing. And then I begin hoping that out there, somewhere, are those individuals (women and men too) who will have the interest and time to listen in. And finally, I admit, I find myself wondering as I write what Maya and Talya, now eleven and five years old, will someday think when they read these stories—stories that their father has written up, in the deepest sense, for them.

NOTES

1. Michael Gorkin and Rafiqa Othman, *Three Mothers, Three Daughters—Palestinian Women's Stories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).
2. The principal criterion used here for designating social class is an economic one. In the absence of reliable data on personal income and wealth, estimates of annual household income for the lower class are $2,000 or less and for the upper class, $60,000 or more; the middle class, obviously, is between these two estimates. Those in the lower class include *campesinos* (peasant farmers) who are landless or have landholdings of less than 10 acres, unskilled and semiskilled workers, and the unemployed. The middle class includes professionals, small business owners, skilled workers, and farmers with land holdings of 10–100 acres. In the upper class are landowners of 300 acres or more, owners of large businesses, senior managers in large businesses, the upper level of government officials, and those with inherited assets. (These estimates were provided by U.S. embassy officials in El Salvador and Dr. Rafael Guido Béjar, a Salvadoran sociologist who has taught at Universidad Centroamericana and one of whose areas of expertise is the social class structure in El Salvador.)
3. To ensure the subjects' anonymity, we have changed the names of all three families as well as the first names of all family members. All other data and descriptions are, to the best of our knowledge, accurate.
4. Daphne Patai, *Brazilian Women Speak* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 4.
5. Judith Stacey, "Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?" in *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, ed. Sherna Gluck and Daphne Patai (New York: Routledge, 1991), 112.
6. In 1980 five revolutionary-military organizations formed the FMLN, and—as the text explains below—it now functions as a legal political party.
7. Between 1980 and 1992, the United States provided $4.2 billion in eco-