

Captions:

THE OTHER WAR

A photographic essay by
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Extracts from « L'AUTRE GUERRE »

by Miquel Dewever-Plana published by *Le bec en l'air*.



Photo 01 - « When the police came to question me, I told them that I knew nothing, that I didn't know who had shot my father. In reality, I know full well who it was. But giving their name is no use. Keeping quiet protects my family. And I didn't want to make more problems for myself. We say that fish die by the mouth, and I don't want to die for a few loose words. » **Ofelia P.** 20 years old.



Photo 02 - « (...) The day that they shot my fifteen-year-old little sister, I went mad like a tigress in a cage. She wasn't involved in anything, but because she lives in an area controlled by a gang, her life was worth nothing. I tried to find out who had attacked her and I turned to hired killers for help (...) We went there at night, and, hidden in a car with dark windows, we shot them. The first one fell on the steps of a bar, and the second collapsed on the footpath. We called the police to tell them that the job was done and to ask them for a half-hour to get away (...) finally, we have become like the *mareros* (*gang members*), or worse, because we think we can act on the edge of the law, whereas we're only a band of assassins, like them. » **Alejandra L.** 29 years old, social worker.



Photo 03 - « The violence is a monster with a thousand heads: if you cut one off, two grow back. When you kill a *pandillero* (gang member), but you leave his two sons behind, their only dream is to take his place. I get the feeling that the organisations that try to rehabilitate these young people are only shouting in the desert. Their voice is lost in the wind, no-one hears them. As the Uruguayan journalist and writer, Eduardo Galeano, puts it so well : « you can condemn a criminal but not the machine that makes him ». And this machine is the one which has created the armed conflict, the one which creates social injustice which leads to violence in people's homes, pushing more and more young people onto the street. A street which leads to either the prison or the cemetery. » **Verónica J.** 32 years old, social worker.



Photo 04 -

« In the animal kingdom, the female always seeks out the dominant male, the one who is ready to face anything to seduce her. The shantytowns are also part of the animal kingdom, a dangerous jungle, a sort of no man's land with neither law nor justice, where girls seek out the dominant male. It doesn't matter if he is cruel, as long as they feel safe and protected by him. The young men are aware of their sex appeal which attracts girls from their own neighbourhoods and sometimes even private university-educated girls who go to the prisons to meet up with the *pandilleros*. To be in a prison cell with a wild-mannered assassin, tattooed from head to toe, is to have a brush with danger, to break moral codes and to do what is forbidden. And what is forbidden is erotic. » **Fabiola P.** 36 years old, psychologist.



Photo 05 -

« Being in prison is like going to the market. You can get what you want, or more : drugs, portable phones, domestic appliances, arms and even prostitutes if that's what you're after. If you're wealthy, the wardens allow everything, and deliver your order with a smile. I've just asked for some crack and in five minutes he had found some. Two lumps for 40 quetzals. And it's no more expensive than anywhere else. They may have a uniform with the Guatemalan flag on the chest, but from the director right down to the lowliest warden, they're all bandits. No matter whichever side of the bars you stand, no-one here can claim to have a clear conscience. » **Juan Carlos P.** 21 years old, gang member.



Photo 06 -

« Answer me my son, tell me it's not true, that you're not dead. Answer me son, come on, answer.... You know that you were born here, in this very hospital? But who could have told me that I would find you here, one day, dead? My God, why did I give you life only for you to lose it at fifteen? But I swear to you, my love, that your brothers will avenge you, and those who killed you will pay for what they have done.... And in the same way. » **Guillermina F.** 48 years old. Her son, Santos C., 15 years old, died on arrival at the hospital, victim of a tit-for-tat killing between rival gangs.



Photo 07 -

« (...) My mother never loved me... She never took me in her arms, never kissed me. However, daily beatings were routine. (...) At the age of 12, I took a bus and left my village to look for work in town. I was a servant at a lady's house. She took care of me well. She taught me to love life, to be happy. Before that, I didn't know what a smile was. (...) The father of my children was 19, and I was 15. I thought I was in love... but I ended up realising that love was something else. I went to live with him, and that's how I met his mother. One day she brought me to a place where men go to drink. Once inside, she told me : Go over to that old guy over there, he's give us 500 quetzals. I didn't dare refuse. And so my own mother-in-law started selling me to men. She became my pimp, with my husband's blessing... » **Estela A.** 33 years old, prostitute.



Photo 08 -

« *El Chino* (*The Chink*, nickname given to anyone with slanted eyes) was wanted for five killings. When he went to prison, his mother and girlfriend started racketeering on his behalf and on behalf of his fellow prisoners. Three months after his arrest, the two were killed. The girl was sixteen and heavily pregnant. It is sad because the baby never harmed anyone. But what future would he have had anyway if he had been born into a world of total anarchy like ours? » **Rosa N.** 44 years old, judge.



Photo 09 -

« (...) I did lots of bad things to get more money, things that haunt me still, but I didn't see things that way at the time. The only thing that had any life for me was the money that I was given to take people's lives away. It is terrible that a society like ours that preaches for the love our one's neighbour; could ever create *pandilleros* and hired killers like us, and transform us into immoral monsters with no principles, worshipping only the omnipotent god of money. The only thing that money does for you is to rot your soul. (...) » **Carlos S.** 25 years old, hired killer.



Photo 10 -

« Curiously, the *mareros* who have the most tattoos are the most unstable. They are the ones who hide their weaknesses the most, the ones who have the least self-esteem. Covering your body and face with tattoos changes your identity and hides the person you don't want to be, forever effacing the memory of the child who had neither the courage nor the strength to protect his mother, or who wasn't able to defend himself from abuse that he will never talk about for fear of being humiliated or ostracized.... Thanks to the tattoos, they can create another identity which inspires fear and give them the impression of being strong and respected. They use their bodies – the only thing they own – as an open book on which they write the story of their lives, their sorrows and their joys. When they come to tattoo their face, it is a form of social suicide, and probably an unconscious way of making their parents and society at large ashamed of having pushed them into becoming *pandilleros*. » **Felipe P.** 32 years old, psychologist.



Photo 11 -

« The first time they raped me, I was eleven years old. And for almost five years, four local *mareros* abused me whenever they felt like it. (...) I find it horribly unfair to have suffered so much, with no-one being punished for it. How many more kids will have to suffer sexual abuse? How many will have to give birth to children conceived through rape? How many children will grow up without their mothers' love because they were unwanted? We no longer have the right to stay quiet because if it isn't me, it will be other girls who will, over and over again, be reduced to silence and traumatised for life. If we continue to accept this situation, we will never be able to finish with this violence that is unleashed against us women. » **Noemi M.** 17 years old, student.



Photo 12 - « I wanted to die when I was 11. I wished that I would be killed to no longer be in this world. (...) I didn't want to know any more. I went from tears to anger, from anger to tears. I spent all day fighting with my brothers, I was always criticising my mother and was angry all the time. At school, I didn't feel like the other boys. I felt that they were better than I, that they were more manly than I, and so I became aggressive and violent. I couldn't stop asking myself why he hadn't done that with a woman instead ? Why did he choose me? In fact, I was really scared that I wasn't a real man. (...) » **Misael H.** 12 years old, schoolchild.



Photo 13 - « All I remember is his face, the gun he pulled out and the burning sensation for the first shot, when the bullet passed through my body. I lost consciousness and the flowers that I had been holding to place on my daughter's grave went flying. From far away I heard that he was still firing, shouting that I had been trying to rob the bus driver. I could barely feel the kicks from the other passengers and I could hear them shouting "*Kill him ! Kill him ! One scumbag less !*" My eyes closed and I felt death passing nearby. At that moment I saw the image of my daughter and my mother. I wanted to ask them forgiveness for all the suffering and shame that they had endured because of me. I had left the gang five years beforehand. And in five years I have still not been able to forgive myself for all the harm that I've done. That's why I don't hold anything against the guy who shot me, because it is maybe because of me that he is still mourning a love one. » **Eddy L.** 25 years old, ex-gang member.



Photo 14 - « I was in the bus, on the way to college, when two young guys stood up shouting "this is a hold-up!" Some women started to cry and I just said to myself "not again..." The man who was sitting beside me, a man in a suit and tie, stood up, pulled out a gun, and the shooting started, I was hit by a stray bullet that went through my lung and came out my back. So here I am back in hospital where I had to have an operation. I was here a short while ago for the very same thing. Going down to the local shop, I found myself caught up in a stand-off between rival gangs. And there another stray bullet went through my intestine. For the people who live in these neighbourhoods, that's the harsh reality of life! But all the same I thank God that I'm still alive! » **Santos T.** 17 years old, student.



Photo 15 - « Here we say that it was your mother who gives you life, but you are ready to give your life for your *mara*. But now that I have a kid, I'm not sure that I want to die for my *mara*... I prefer to live for my son » **Manuel J.** 22 years old, gang member, injured by gunfire while he was picking up an extortion payment.



Photo 16 - « Many of them turn to God as their only exit route when they want to leave the *pandilla* (the gang). They learn verses from the Bible and use them as a shield to protect themselves once they leave the gang. They join sects *made in the USA* and shout, cry, and humiliate themselves before God... but especially before their neighbourhood, so that everyone realises that they are going through a “rebirth”. They are well aware that in this hypocritical and superficial society, they just need to know how to promote themselves. So they sing God's praises, dedicate themselves body and soul to his service and thus imagine that all their sins are pardoned. It's too easy! Don't you think so? To fear only divine justice and to think that it is the only jurisdiction before which you can be saved or condemned. And what about human justice in all that? In reality, going regularly to church or to an evangelical meeting is no proof of having Christian values. If it was Guatemala would be one of the most peaceful places on earth – and it is quite the opposite. » **Felipe P.** 32 years old, psychologist.



Photo 17 - « (...) These migrations (due mainly to the armed combat of the eighties) have irreversibly damaged the social and cultural structures of the mainly Mayan and peasant population. Those who moved to the big cities piled into settlements on waste land, which evolved gradually into dirty and chaotic districts, left for years without water, electricity, sewers, health services or schools. The state totally ignored these new settlements. Many children were born into this marginality, or grew up in it, living with no privacy, deprived of everything and especially of any sort of family life. This situation led to mistreatment and domestic violence which progressively pushed the children towards life on the street. In these outlying areas, where exclusion and misery rule, they sought to compensate for their feeling of abandon by joining with other kids who were living through the same thing. Young people without any upbringing nor schooling, rebel adolescents with no hope for the future : the perfect conditions for the formation and development of the gangs (...) » **César C.** 45 years old, social worker.



Photo 18 - « (...) I couldn't stand it anymore to hear people saying that I was the scum of Guatemala, the filth of the country, a shame for my poor mother who, because of me, had to put up with disapproving looks from people because she had a *marera* daughter. She had even bought a plot for me at the municipal cemetery because every day she expected to hear news of my death (...) Forty days after losing my baby, I quit the gang. They accepted that I leave, but beat me as a leaving present. But it was a trap. When I was leaving, two new gang members followed me (...). I just heard two shots and my boyfriend shouting : You've killed her you bastard !!! But they didn't kill me. I survived. But I lost the use of my legs....so now I'm in a wheelchair. Sometimes I ask myself why I blame God so much for being stuck in this chair. But I know that I'm paying for all the crimes that I committed (...) » **Alicia M.** 23 years old, ex-gang member.



Photo 19 - « (...) When I was 14, I sought out affection in a *pandilla* which rapidly became my own family. A family made up of lots of kids, who, like me, were looking for someone to show them some love. I started drinking, taking drugs, carrying arms, playing hard. When I joined the gang, I knew there was no going back, that I would stay with it until the end....right as far as the morgue. But at the time, I didn't care. I wanted to be on the side of the strong ones, not to be like my mother, a beaten woman, humiliated. I knew that the first rule to join the gang was to kill. To kill so that my new family would love me. So I did it. (...) » **Alicia M.** 23 years old, ex-gang member.



Photo 20 - « The fuel of the violence is the hatred that the fathers and fathers-in-law injected into the hearts of their children. The beatings that the children saw meted out to their mothers, the macho attitudes, the alcoholism, the incest, all those traumas create a huge negative effect very early on. They are angry with everyone about everything for no reason in particular. The *pandilla* is like a wonderland where they can vent their rage : you can do what you want there and you can have what no-one has ever given you. » **Felipe P.** 32 years old, psychologist.



Photo 21 - « (...) I too was born into a poor family. My father drank at home, it was violent. But for all that I didn't become a criminal. I preferred to go to university and become an officer in the army. I retired when the peace treaties were signed, and decided to go into the security business. Today I am a successful businessman with my own private security company. I would never have believed that it could be such a lucrative sector. Our progression was easy because here the police aren't credible, they are corrupt and the people don't trust them. Lots of people turn to companies like ours, most of them run by ex-servicemen like myself (...) » **Eric M.** 47 years old, small business owner.



Photo 22 -

« (...) If I had had the chance to have been born elsewhere, would I be someone different today? What life would you have had, had you been born in my place? And me in yours? Of the two of us, who would be the bad guy? I'm not trying to justify myself, because I know I'm responsible for my actions and no-one forced me to become a killer. But sometimes you understand certain things too late, and it is difficult to face up to your mistakes (...) » **Edwin R.** 25 years old, gang member.

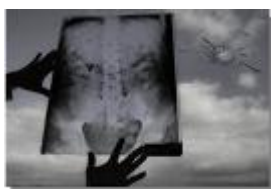


Photo 23 -

« You could say that I've been a mule twice in my life : I have a stubborn character and I've also been a drug trafficker. I knew a dealer who offered me a job as a carrier. With the 8000 dollars they give you to carry one kilo of cocaine, you don't even think of the risks. But with 80 capsules of coke in your stomach, you feel really ill, your blood pressure drops and sometimes you can't even walk. You sweat like a pig, you have difficulty breathing, you get dizzy.... And when you go through customs in London, Mexico or Madrid, you have to pretend to seem really happy to be going on holiday. (...) Every time you promise yourself that it will be the last trip, that it's finished, it's enough. But money is like drugs, so you take the next contract. And the consequences are always the same: either you die by "accident", or you go to prison. Now I've spent more time in jail than I need to realize that I never got to enjoy that money, that all it did was to pay for useless lawyers and because of me, my family is in danger. » **Otto M.** 23 years old, dealer.



Photo 24 -

« (...) For sure, a rate of impunity of 95% is not great. It is well known that impunity at that level actually increases the violence, as the criminals know that the ministry of the interior has a very limited capability. That's why, instead of fighting criminals, our impotence encourages them and violence becomes the norm. (...) As long as we don't understand that those crimes are a direct consequence of policies which ignore social injustice, we'll never find more appropriate judicial solutions. Guatemala is still a country at war, with enemy gangs killing each other for no fundamental reason. It is a war of power and money which has made many more losers than winners. And as always, the poor suffer the most, with the daily batch of killings....which we in turn file away in the back of a drawer hoping that things won't get worse. But really I'd be surprised if things got better » **Arnoldo S.** 40 years old, assistant magistrate.