1999

The struggle of the mujeres to liberate Olga Talamante, a political prisoner

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**THE STRUGGLE OF THE MUJERES TO LIBERATE OLGA TALAMANTE,
A POLITICAL PRISONER**

A Thesis

Presented to

**The Faculty of the Department of History
San José State University**

**In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Masters of Arts**

by

Alicia Muñoz Cortez

August 1999

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ABSTRACT

THE STRUGGLE OF THE *MUJERES* TO LIBERATE OLGA TALAMANTE, A POLITICAL PRISONER

by Alicia Muñoz Cortez

The Chicano civil rights movement served as a launching pad for many Chicana activists including Olga Talamante. Chicana activism crossed boundaries of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, generation, and nations. Olga Talamante's activism was an influence on many individuals, male and female, to participate in a local grassroots effort that transformed into a sixteen month national campaign seeking her release as a political prisoner in Argentina from 1974 to 1976. Olga Talamante's ideals and political activism influenced her parents' activism particularly that of her mother, Refugio Talamante. Refugio Talamante rose as a central figure on the Olga Talamante Defense Committee (OTDC).

This study examines the political activism of Olga Talamante, Refugio Talamante, the Chicana and Mexicana women within the OTDC, and seeks to expand the scholarship of the political history of women.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research project is a collaborative and collective effort of many individuals. I am particularly grateful to the members of the OTDC who collected cassette tapes, letters, fliers, newspaper articles, photographs, poetry, and transcripts of speeches and interviews. A special thanks goes to Bob Barber who organized all the documents of the OTDC files along with an impressive index of the material. His talents as an archivist made my job that much easier.

I am indebted to Olga Talamante for providing access to the OTDC files, providing contacts, and for the many hours of sharing of her life stories. I was deeply honored by Refugio Talamante's openness and willingness to share letters, photos, and her stories. Both mother and daughter share lives of struggle and a love for life that fuels their activism and commitment to correct injustices.

I want to express my thanks to Ed McCaughan and Peter Baird for sharing their insights and experiences and assisting with locating the women of the OTDC. A special thanks to the activist women I had the honor and pleasure to interview who took time from their busy schedules and lives to share.

Throughout my graduate program I have relied tremendously on family networks. *A mi madre, mil gracias por todo que has hecho por mi y mi familia.* To my *compadre* Gil and *comadre* Maria, and their children Araceli and Alejandro *mil besos* for all you have done for *mijo*. To my dear friend Trish Rios-Gibson, in the midst of a difficult pregnancy and recovering from the aftershocks of new parenthood, you always found time to inquire about my research and to share encouraging words, your relentless support is deeply appreciated. *A mis hijos* Armando-José age 4, and Michael-James age 17, thanks for giving me space in front of the computer and understanding my long absences at dinner. But most of all, *un abrazo a mi compañero* Armando Benavides for his endless and tireless support, encouragement, and love. Many nights you listened to me, gave constructive feedback, and helped me remain focused. Thanks for believing in me!

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Chicanas during the 1960s and 1970s were actively involved in the Chicano movement concurrently with the men; however, their participation was "reduced to a cursory discussion of sexism with the movement by the authors of the leading monographs on the Chicano movement."¹ Within the context of U.S. Women's history, Chicana activism of the 1960s and 1970s went undocumented.²

Chicana and Mexican women were involved in the farmworker's struggle, welfare rights, civil rights, the anti-war movement, campus activism, community-based organizations, and issues pertinent to México and Latin America. Olga Talamante, a Chicana from Gilroy, was one of those involved. She was raised in a California farm worker family. She became immersed in the turbulent times of the 1960s and 1970s. She, like other Chicanas of the times, found ways to navigate between the Chicano-dominated

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¹Vicki L. Ruiz, *From Out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in Twentieth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), xiii.

²Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979); see also, Winifred Wandersee, *On The Move: American Women in the 1970s* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, G.K. Hall and Co., 1988).

organizations and Chicana feminist groups. Nevertheless, the political development of Chicanas during the Chicano movement and its effect on their activism has not been adequately studied in historical scholarship.

Sonia Lopez posits that two trends in the political development of Chicanas were evident as early as 1971. She describes the first trend as characterizing women who "did not see the importance of dealing with sexual contradictions" and who continued to work with Chicano men on "movement issues," thus maintaining and perpetuating traditional women's roles.³ The second trend characterizes Chicanas as organizing themselves to deal with "the inconsistencies between liberation rhetoric of the Movement and the reality as it existed for Chicanas within the Movement."⁴ This perspective of Chicana political development offers a dichotomy of choices and raises the question whether or not there existed only two options for women to exhibit their activism? How did Chicanas navigate through the nationalism and feminism of the time? How were they involved in Third World issues and did they continue to

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³Sonia A. Lopez, "The Role of the Chicana within the Student Movement," in *Essays on La Mujer*, ed. Rosaura Sanchez and Rosa Martinez Cruz (Los Angeles, CA: Chicano Studies Center Publications, University of California, Los Angeles, 1977), 26.

⁴Ibid.

organize in mixed gender organizations as in the past? Examining the informal and formal actions of women activists illuminates the interaction between the political society and the communities which women helped to construct, maintain, and change. Thus, this frame provides the construct to examine the political development and role of Chicanas and Mexican women who participated in a grassroots campaign to free Olga Talamante.

In late July 1973, Olga Talamante, a recent graduate from the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC), traveled to Argentina to visit friends and to inquire about enrolling in a graduate program at the University in Buenos Aires. Argentina in 1973 had its first democratic election after eighteen years of military ruled governments. In that year Juan Perón was elected the new president of Argentina. Argentina soon experienced internal political rifts. When President-elect Perón died on July 1, 1974, his wife Isabel Perón assumed the presidency. The social fabric was in turmoil due to exorbitant inflation and worker unrest. Soon Argentina was divided by the rise of armed resistance from the right and political parties of the left. On November 6, 1974, the Argentine government declared a state of siege and suspended civil liberties. Four days later, Olga Talamante and twelve other Argentine friends were arrested for

violating the National Security Act. They were imprisoned and tortured.

In the United States, two of Olga Talamante's college friends learned of her arrest and notified her family. An effort was started immediately to work for her release. Her parents, two former farmworkers, and the family were faced with the difficult challenge of seeking her release from a prison in Azul, Argentina. Refugio and Eduardo Talamante and several friends began to work to free their daughter. From their humble home in Gilroy, emerged the birth of the Olga Talamante Defense Committee (OTDC). Out of this grassroots committee, one woman became crucial to the campaign, Olga Talamante's mother, affectionately referred to as "Doña Cuca." Her working class ethics, courageous faith, and social activism were integral components of her activism in the campaign to free her daughter.

Other group members, males and females, who participated on the Olga Talamante Defense Committee came from various social, economic, and ethnic backgrounds. The defense committee that began as a local campaign quickly grew to a national campaign of substantial scope in terms of human power, financial resources, and political support. At times the members found it difficult to assess whether Olga Talamante would ever be freed. They sought the assistance of the United States State Department, United States embassy

bureaucrats in Argentina, and United States congressional leaders, seeking a quick resolution and release, which never materialized. However, it was with the commitment of a core group of individuals, including Olga Talamante's parents and family, supporters of the United Farm Workers (UFW), women's groups, Chicana/o activists, and solidarity committees on Latin America, who worked to exert pressure on the United States agencies that Olga Talamante's release became a reality. All of the committee members were committed to political activism; they were successful in gaining the release of Olga Talamante.

CHAPTER TWO

THE MAKING OF A CHICANA ACTIVIST: THE ROOTS OF OLGA TALAMANTE'S ACTIVISM

La Nueva Chicana (1971)

The old woman going to pray
     does her part,
     The young mother hers,
 The old man sitting on the porch,
 The young husband going to work,
 But let's not forget the young
     Chicana,
 Bareheaded girl fighting for
     equality,
 Unshawled girl living for a better world,
     Let's not forget her,
     Because,
 She is LA NUEVA CHICANA
     Wherever you turn,
     Wherever you look,
     You'll see her,
 She's still the soft brown-eyed
     beauty you knew,
 There's just one difference,
     A big difference,
 She's on the go spreading the word.
     VIVA LA RAZA
     Is her main goal too,
 She is no longer the silent one,
     Because she has cast off the
 shawl of the past to show her face,
     She is LA NUEVA CHICANA

Ana Montes, Chicana Feminist Thought

Olga Talamante became immersed in the social and civil
 uprisings of the 1960s and 1970s and depicted *La Nueva*
Chicana of the times. In a recent issue of *Hispanic*
Magazine, Talamante was recognized with an Achievement Award

for her distinguished leadership and activism to the Latino community.¹ Olga Talamante's political activism has expanded and challenged narrow gender-defined boundaries which had previously been assigned to Chicanas. Class, ethnicity, and gender remained factors in her political development; they shaped her private and public life. Like many of her contemporaries, she responded to the words of political activist Sara Estela Ramírez,

Rise Up! To Woman, Rise up! Rise up to life, to activity, to the beauty of truly living; but rise up radiant and powerful, beautiful with qualities, splendid with virtues, strong with energies.²

Talamante surpassed imposed notions of political, social, and economic limitations and obstacles, and in spite of it all she has received few accolades for her political activism and personal courage in her fight for human rights.

Olga Talamante, through her activism, sought to challenge traditional notions of Chicanas in the areas of education, family, campus activism, work, and community service. What forces did she confront and how did they shape her activism and those of her contemporaries? This

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¹"1997 Hispanic Achievement Awards," *Hispanic Magazine*, July/August 1997, 74.

²Vicki L. Ruiz, *From Out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in Twentieth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 99. These words were expressed by socialist labor leader Sara Estela Ramírez in 1910.

chapter will trace the factors and social context that shaped Talamante's political activism. Significant events shaped and influenced her activism. Her experiences in México and in the United States will be explored in the context of family, community, and education. Secondly, a brief description of the campus political culture for Chicanas/os will be presented, as well as the events that shaped her activism which led her to connect struggles in the United States with those in Latin America.

Life on the Borderlands

Because I, a *mestiza*,
continually walk out of one culture
and into another, because I am in all cultures at the same
time³

Many Mexican families have crossed geographical, political, and economic borders. Olga Talamante's family is no exception. Her maternal grandparents are one of the thousands of families who crossed the California-México border shortly after the Mexican Revolution. In the early 1920s, they worked as migrant farm workers following the agricultural crops throughout California. Similar to many other families who crossed the border, Olga Talamante's

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³Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Frontier: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute Book Company, 1987): 77.

uncles and aunts were born in the United States. Her mother, Refugio, was born on July 4, 1923 in Lompoc, California at the high peak of the harvest season. Her grandparents returned to México in the early 1930s to reside in the bordertown of Mexicali.

Olga Talamante was born on December 3, 1949 in Mexicali, México. She was the only girl in a family of four children. Some of her early recollections of her life in México are of her mother crossing the border to find work cleaning houses in the United States and of a close family and school.

Early in her life, in México and in the United States, Olga Talamante showed high academic achievement. She remembers excelling in all subjects. Her mother reported that "las maestras la respetaban" for her academic abilities.⁴ Talamante remembers a teacher who enlightened her on the social, economic, and political differences between México and United States. The teacher increased her ability to differentiate between Mexicans who favored United States goods and devalued the contributions of Mexican people and Mexicans who emphasized the value and contributions of Mexican people. This insight left a

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⁴Refugio Talamante, Interview by Lori Lujan, n.d., Tape Recording. OTDC Files. Cassette labeled "*El Dia del Barrio*", side 1. English translation: "the teachers respected her."

lasting impression on Olga Talamante, especially after she came to the United States. Olga Talamante, raised in a borderland region, was exposed to different traditions, customs, and economic interests than other parts of the Mexican republic. These did not dissipate when she crossed the international border.

Immigration to the United States:

From 1960 through the 1980s, the United States experienced its second largest wave of immigration since 1880-1920.⁵ This new wave of immigration, however, arrived mainly from Latin American and Asian countries. By contrast, Mexican immigration reached a peak during the Mexican Revolution from 1910-1920 and by the 1930s Mexican immigration rates had leveled. The Talamante family arrived in California on the heels of the early stages of this new wave of immigration in 1961. Her family mirrored the common migration pattern from México traveling as a family unit.

In 1961, Olga Talamante's father and oldest brother were working in California. Her father was in Salinas at a migrant labor camp along with her oldest brother who worked as a cook. Her father decided to move the family to

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⁵James P. Shenton and Kevin Kenny, "Ethnicity and Immigration," in *The New American History*, ed. Eric Foner (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 353.

California. Eventually he moved the family to a labor camp in Gilroy. In 1960, Gilroy was a rural farming community outside of San José with a resident population of 7,348 of which approximately 4,145 had Spanish surnames.⁶ The community was known for its orchards of apricots, prunes, walnuts, and more prominently, for its garlic fields. The local growers relied on seasonal workers and *bracero* workers to harvest the crops. Many of the workers continued the migratory chain to other cities once the harvest was complete. In 1961, the Talamante family joined the many seasonal families that arrived in Gilroy to work the fields. But they decided to stay and settled in the small community. Olga Talamante first realized that she was not returning to Mexicali when her mother enrolled her and her two brothers in school in the fall of 1961.

Education system:

At the age of eleven, in 1961, Olga Talamante should have been placed in the sixth grade but ended up being placed in the fourth grade because she was unfamiliar with

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⁶U.S. Bureau of the Census. *U.S. Census of Population: 1960. Vol. I, Characteristics of the Population.* Part 6, California. U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1963. See also, U.S. Bureau of Census. *U.S. Census of Population and Housing: 1960. Census Tracts. Final Report* PHC (1)-138. U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1963.

the English language. She recalls not knowing what was going on in class and feeling shut out and unable to participate. In México, she had been a strong academic student who participated in class, received high praise from her teachers, and excelled. Suddenly, she found herself in an environment completely alien to her. Olga Talamante, however, had a high esteem for her academic abilities and was determined to excel in her new environment. She described how she learned English: "I am very observant and I always paid attention to what was going on and sensed what was going on and that's just sort of how that period of transition happened."⁷ It was her keen sense of decoding languages and shifting through meanings by astute observation that eventually caught the attention of her instructors. Olga Talamante recalls initially being placed in the low tracking level and "all the kids knew that as the MR [mentally retarded] track."⁸ Eventually, she was re-tested and achieved scores that led to her placement at a higher level. At an early age, she exceeded the expectations of many teachers.

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⁷Olga Talamante, Interview by author, 5 November 1998, Pacifica, Tape recording in possession of author. Hereafter cited as Talamante Interview I.

⁸Ibid., "Friends Remember Argentine Prisoner," *San Francisco Examiner*, 5 December 1974.

Outside of the school setting, social events began to affect the landscape of Gilroy's politics and farmworkers' rights. Olga Talamante found herself in the midst of the change. On September 16, 1965, members of the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (UFWOC) voted to join the Filipino workers in what would become a national grape boycott.⁹ The boycott efforts extended throughout the state and, eventually, with supporters in numerous cities and towns, throughout the nation. Farmworkers and supporters in the city of Gilroy also joined *La Causa* and sought to empower people to support its organizing efforts. Olga Talamante became one of those individuals who early on joined to support the farmworkers' plight. She learned about the organizing efforts during her high school years, from 1965 to 1969.

In the fall of 1965, Olga Talamante, at the age of fifteen, enrolled at Gilroy High. Her excellent academic performance and her mastery of the English language was recognized by her teachers and this led to her placement in college preparatory courses. It was then when she realized that few Chicana/o students were enrolled in her classes. She stated, "you could count the Latino students on your

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⁹Susan Ferriss and Ricardo Sandoval, *The Fight in the Fields: César Chávez and the Farmworkers Movement* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1997), 88-89.

hand, there were two or three or four other ones, that were consistently there in those classes."¹⁰ In high school she continued to do well academically and started to participate in leadership positions. She served as the sophomore class president, secretary of the Student Council, and Vice-president of the Associated Student Body of Gilroy High. She was also involved in girl's sports. She was the recipient of many scholarships including an Educational Opportunity Program Grant to attend the University of California, Santa Cruz.¹¹ For her academic and leadership achievements, the faculty of the high school awarded her the high distinction of the "Outstanding Student Award."¹² Olga Talamante's achievements exceeded the mainstream stereotypes and perceptions of Chicanas/os. While this represents how well she was able to exceed in academics, one must also

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¹⁰Talamante Interview I.

¹¹*Gilroy Dispatch*, 6 June 1969. See the following articles regarding Olga Talamante's high school activities and achievements: *Gilroy Dispatch*, 23 May 1968; *Gilroy Dispatch*, 13 June 1968; "Four GAA Seniors Win Valuable Player Awards," *Gilroy Dispatch*, 1 May 1969; "High School Students Receive Annual Awards," *Gilroy Dispatch*, 9 June 1969; "Students Named in Who's Who," *Gilroy Dispatch*, 15 May 1969.

¹²*Gilroy Dispatch*, 29 May 1969. In addition to her outstanding scholastic and leadership achievements, she was honored along with thirty-three other students from Santa Clara County schools at a banquet in Palo Alto, California.

examine Olga Talamante's other life experiences and how she navigated and bridged her worlds.

The 1960s marked tremendous social and political changes for many Chicano students and their communities. The "Chicano Blow-Outs" affected many Chicano communities throughout the southwest and also influenced Olga Talamante. In Los Angeles in 1968, the so-called "Gang of Thirteen" were charged with felony charges and labeled subversive for organizing non-violent protests many recall as the "Chicano Blow-Outs."¹³ Hundreds of Chicanos walked out of their high schools protesting poor educational opportunities, culturally irrelevant courses, and the lack of Mexican-American teachers and counselors. These young high school and college students challenged the Los Angeles school board and educational system. The Los Angeles "Blow-Outs" called national attention to the Chicano plight in education.¹⁴ These sparked other walkouts throughout cities in the southwest. Gilroy High students also participated in the protest.

At the time, San José State University had one of the first Chicano student organizations in California. As early

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¹³Carlos Muñoz, *Identity, Youth, Power: The Chicano Movement* (New York: Verso Publications, 1989), 68.

¹⁴Rudolfo Acuña, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1988), 337.

as 1964, San Jose State students organized the first student effort in the nation to address the specific needs of Mexican-American youth.¹⁵ An objective of many Chicana/o student campus-based organizations was to conduct outreach to neighboring schools with large numbers of Chicana/o students in an effort to promote higher education. Members served as role models, emphasizing cultural pride and seeking a re-interpretation of Chicano history. The organization send members to visit Gilroy High in 1968. Olga Talamante remembered that "San José State was very political, in that period of time, these Chicano students were going out to the high schools to try to encourage the other Chicano students to go to college. I remember [them] coming to our English class."¹⁶

Local Chicana/o students began to question and re-examine the educational system at Gilroy. In an editorial in the local paper a student described the then existing tracking system this way:

"one problem facing us on the High School campus and probably others in this area, is one of dividing students into classes according to ability. The present system at GHS is often referred to as the XYZ system. In this system, the top students are put into a group called the X group. Most of these students are college prep students . . . . The

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¹⁵Muñoz, *Identity, Youth, Power*, 51.

¹⁶Talamante Interview I.

second group is labeled the Y group and . . . the Z group is the group of students who stay in school until they are old enough to drop-out."¹⁷

The same local newspaper reported that a group of students had confronted teachers at a May 20 faculty meeting with concerns of the tracking system. Although these students' concerns were expressed towards the end of the academic year, they were raised again the following year. In fact, students became more confrontational. The headlines of the *Gilroy Dispatch* reported on April 18, 1969 that "Mexican-American students air demands." A photo of a group of Chicana/o students making their demands to the principal depicts their message. Chicana/o students began to question their low enrollment in the college prep courses and made demands that courses be culturally relevant. Pat Cardona, a young Chicana, poignantly stated "Chicanos need to be enlightened and see what the world has to offer and still keep their self pride."¹⁸ Following this confrontation, the newspaper reported that "as a result of meetings held between the GHS administration and a concerned group of Chicano activists, an assembly was held."¹⁹ The purpose of the assembly was for the group to demand that the

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¹⁷Ibid., *Gilroy Dispatch*, 31 May 1968.

¹⁸*Gilroy Dispatch*, 18 April 1969.

¹⁹*Gilroy Dispatch*, 15 May 1969.

school develop culturally relevant programming to provide a historical view of Chicanas/os in the United States as depicted through "actos" performed by *Teatro Urbano* from San José State. During this period, *teatro* and *corridos* were a popular medium to raise new consciousness for the struggle toward liberation among many Chicanas/os.

Olga Talamante became embroiled in the controversy in a unique way. She was one of the few Chicana students in leadership roles and the school administration sought her to mediate the conflict between the Chicanas/os and the administration. The Chicana/o students had planned a walk-out and "the administration was looking at me like someone who would try to broker the situation but I remember they were sort of hoping that I would not walk out. Obviously, I did walk out and we all walked out to the football field."²⁰ Following the walk-out, the students organized a committee whose objective was to represent their concerns of the tracking system before the school board. Olga Talamante was selected a member of the committee, and she found herself, along with other leaders, in the role of presenting the Chicana/o demands to the school board.

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²⁰Talamante Interview I.

Community:

Olga Talamante recalls she learned the skills of mediator after she settled in the United States and found herself having to negotiate between her experiences as a daughter of farmworker immigrants and her exposure to United States values and traditions. She had lived in labor camps. She worked in the fields with other Mexican families. Her family attended the Spanish-speaking church mass on Sundays. She participated in the Catholic Youth Organization (CYO) at the local parish. Her world in essence was very Mexican. Yet "at the same time because I was in the college-bound courses, which [were] predominately white students, I became friends with white students. I knew that it was two incredibly distinct and separate worlds. I learned how to sort of mediate these two and how to explain things to these white friends that they didn't understand, and visa versa."²¹

Through her involvement in the activities of the Catholic church, Olga Talamante became aware of existing broader social injustices. A priest, Father Burke, was assigned to the parish of her neighborhood. Father Burke was deeply involved in remedying the plight of the farmworker and in improving labor camp conditions. In 1966

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²¹Ibid.

some parishioners participated in a march led by the United Farm Workers to Sacramento. It was at this time that Olga Talamante learned of the farmworkers' efforts to organize into a labor union.

Olga Talamante's achievements expanded social boundaries and challenged mainstream stereotypes of Mexicans. She was placed in college prep courses, she participated in student government, assumed leadership roles, and yet, along with other Chicana/o students questioned and challenged the inequalities of the educational system in Gilroy. Olga Talamante described this period of her life as "breaking from that role of the nice Mexican that is not going to do anything wrong."²² Olga Talamante, at a young age, held strong convictions about democratic ideals. By holding leadership roles traditionally held by white students and striving to dismantle an unequal educational system she challenged notions of inclusions. In a steadfast manner, she stated "it was one of those things like well of course we should be here! Well of course, we should [hold] these offices, why not?"²³

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²²Ibid.

²³Ibid.

Family role:

Olga Talamante's role in her family also had a substantial impact in her political activism. Talamante's position in relation to her brothers placed her in a unique position of responsibility in her family. While in Mexicali and in the United States, she was placed in charge of her younger brother and other relatives. Once the family moved to the United States she had fewer relatives to care for but she assumed a greater role in caring for her youngest brother, Eddie. As a result of her ease in learning English she quickly became the translator for the family.

The role of translator taught her the need to bridge perceptions and thoughts of two distinct cultures and customs. Olga Talamante remembers that serving as translator gave her a sense of responsibility for the family, "I would translate. I learn[ed] how to sort of take care of things."²⁴ Olga Talamante helped provide for the family in other ways as well. Throughout the school year, she baby sat for various families in the community. This experience not only allowed her to earn money but it also opened up new perspectives on class differences. Once she watched the children of a ranch family in their home and

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²⁴Olga Talamante, Interview by author, 23 November 1998, Pacifica, Tape recording in possession of author. Hereafter cited as Talamante Interview III.

noted the following, "they had nice homes with nice heating systems, nice air conditioning systems and bathrooms. [They had] lots of food and a bedroom for each of their kids, and, really the only difference was that they were the owners of the ranch."²⁵ The disparity of wealth left an imprint on Olga Talamante. She came to realize there was an unequal distribution of wealth. Material wealth was something that she was never motivated to accumulate. She had simple tastes and lived modestly. Olga Talamante's mother remembered, "I would sew all her clothing for her. [We] were poor but it was the best we had. She never complained."²⁶

Olga Talamante spent her summers working in the fields. Most of her wages went to the family. Olga Talamante recalls as she got older, "I would keep more of the money but especially when I worked in the fields, during the summer, all the money went to my mom. My mom is the one that received all the wages."²⁷

Her responsibility for the care of her younger brother, her service as the translator for the family, and the contribution of her wages to provide for the family

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²⁵Ibid.

²⁶*San Francisco Examiner*, 5 December 1974.

²⁷Talamante Interview III.

instilled in Olga Talamante a sense of obligation and commitment to help others, it also gained her a degree of independence and leadership within her family.

Community and Campus Activism

Olga Talamante's activism took on a stronger tenor after she graduated from high school and was hired by the Mini-Corp Program under the auspices of the Office for Migrant Education. Two San José State students she befriended while in Gilroy High introduced her to the program. She was assigned to provide bilingual instruction to children at different migrant labor camps. The work assignment exposed her to the subsistence standards and injustices faced by the many Mexican farmworkers, like the poor substandard housing conditions they had to endure and their exploitation by many ranchers. Having herself lived in a migrant labor camp, Talamante understood the harsh living of the farmworker families. At this point her life and work experience became coupled with a political consciousness. Working with Mini-Corp provided Talamante the opportunity to be exposed to college students who were much more politicized. She described the Chicana/o college students she worked with as "battling everything and confronting everything, and questioning why our history

wasn't being taught."²⁸ The political consciousness of her new friends left quite an impression and she found herself gravitating toward the more radical and assertive students.

Olga Talamante's activism from high school, coupled with her increased political consciousness while at Mini-Corp, served as antecedents to her college activism at the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC). In the fall of 1969, Talamante left Gilroy to enroll at UCSC where she would continue to develop her activism. By 1969, most Chicano student organizations across college campuses called themselves *El Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan* (MEChA). MEChA represented a "commitment to confront social inequities and to reject assimilation into the dominant society, commitments to be fulfilled through student militant activities both on campus and in the community."²⁹ Olga Talamante's involvement with MEChA provided a vehicle to strengthen her commitment to the farmworker struggle, the Chicano community at UCSC, and the surrounding community of Watsonville. In Watsonville, she and others organized a migrant children breakfast program.³⁰ She became involved

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²⁸Talamante Interview I.

²⁹Juan Gomez-Quiñones, *Chicano Politics: Reality and Promise, 1940-1990* (Albuquerque: University of New México Press, 1990), 119.

³⁰*San Francisco Examiner*, 5 December 1974.

in organizing the boycott efforts of the UFW, picketing, boycotting Safeway stores, and distributing leaflets. From 1969 to 1973, the UFW organized workers in the Salinas Valley and Watsonville while the UCSC community provided a strong support for the union.³¹ Olga Talamante also became involved in the many confrontations MEChA staged with the university's administration to demand the hiring of more Chicano professors and administrators and an increase in Chicano enrollment.³² In 1972, the campus newspaper reported that UCSC had an undergraduate enrollment of 4,014 students, white students totaled 3,434 and Chicanos numbered 145, comprising 3.6% of the total student enrollment.³³ The disparity in Chicano enrollment caused the students, faculty, and the local Chicano community to mobilize, and to pressure the UCSC administration to diversify its student population to reflect the surrounding ethnic make-up of local communities. Even during these turbulent times, Olga Talamante exhibited the ability to bridge gaps between

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³¹"UFW Needs Support," *City On The Hill*, (Santa Cruz) 15 November 1973. See also, "Farmworkers Strike in Watsonville," *City On The Hill*, 3 October 1974; "UCSC Writes Letters for UFWOC," *City On The Hill*, 20 April 1972.

³²"Chicano Pressure on UCSC Culminates in Recent Lawsuit," *City On The Hill*, 25 May 1972.

³³"Chicano Goals Are Listed," *City On The Hill*, 25 May 1972.

white, students of color, and Chicano students "without losing her identity."³⁴

Olga Talamante's political consciousness and activism was not confined solely to the plight of the farmworker's movement and the UCSC campus Chicano community. It also expanded into the classroom. While enrolled in an anthropology course on Mayan culture, the professor's exuberant passion and enthusiasm for the subject ignited a desire in Talamante to conduct a field study project in the highlands of Chiapas, where the professor had lived and studied. During the spring quarter of 1971, she and five Chicana/o students embarked on a field study course in Chiapas. Her research centered on grain reform and its effect on the indigenous people.³⁵ Her experiences in Chiapas enabled her to make a connection between her experience as a Chicana with a farmworker background in the United States and the plight of the indigenous people in México. Through her own experiences, Talamante started to note the disparity between the social classes that existed in both countries. She realized, that "the Mexicans despise the Indians . . . the policies were absolutely incredibly

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³⁴*San Francisco Examiner*, 5 December 1974.

³⁵Talamante Interview I., *San Francisco Examiner*, 5 December 1974.

oppressive and backwards." This was "one of my big political aha's."³⁶ For Olga Talamante, the experience of Indians in México represented the experiences of Chicana/os in the U.S. The Indians were prohibited under penalty of punishment from speaking their native language. Their lands were stolen from them and the Mexican government exploited their labor. Talamante described this event as a time when her "class awareness became more defined."³⁷ At the end of her field study, she traveled to México City.

Major political confrontations were taking place in México just before Olga Talamante arrived in México City. On June 10, 1971 an estimated eight thousand to ten thousand leftist students led an "anti-government" demonstration. They were confronted by five hundred armed youth believed to be a right-wing group. The confrontation led to violence and some students were killed.³⁸ Talamante arrived in México City on the heels of this tumultuous period. She stayed with friends who were involved with *Los Mascarones*, a political theater group. *Los Mascarones* used their theatrical experiences to highlight the class contradictions

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³⁶Talamante Interview I.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid., "9 Students Dead In Mexico City," *New York Times*, 11 June 1971. See also, "A Role in Clash Denied by México," *New York Times*, 12 June 1971; "Mexico City Police Linked to Shooting." *New York Times*, 14 June 1971.

between the Mexican government and the working classes. Their political messages were not welcomed because the government was using paramilitary forces to repress opposition against leftist groups and organizations, many from the University. Many members of *Los Mascarones* were participants in the June 10th demonstration and had taken photographs of the violent outbreak, and, thus, they were afraid that the government was conducting surveillance of the group's activities. Some of them decided to stay at the home of Peter Baird until the danger passed. Peter Baird at the time was a UCSC student and his parents were missionaries who lived in México City. Among the group who stayed with Baird, was a Chicana from California, María Acosta, and a couple from Argentina, Hugo and Norma Del Bonis.

Hugo and Norma Del Bonis were political activists. Hugo was a filmmaker, Norma an artist. They had recently traveled to New York to produce a film to document political struggles across the American continent. They already had information and slides on the Young Lords and the Puerto Rican movement. Their goal was to film the numerous emerging movements in the United States, México, Central America, and South America. The couple's activities immediately caught Olga Talamante's interest. They made a significant impact on Olga Talamante's perspective of the

world. She recalls her initial impression as "this whole other world [that] had opened up to me, México, Latin America, and the imperialism and I was appalled of the role of the U.S."³⁹

Olga Talamante's experience in Chiapas, in México City, and with the Argentine couple's activism, opened new thoughts and feelings about the world that were foreign to her. It was during this same period that Olga Talamante became aware of an internal struggle and conflict over her sexual identity. Though she struggled with her feelings, she did not explore them deeply until much later. She described her experience over her sexuality as a sub-text to her political activism. Yet, neither the political climate, nor the homophobic fears of the community-at-large, particularly the Chicano community, facilitated such exploration of feelings.⁴⁰

Olga Talamante returned to Gilroy from México accompanied by the Argentine couple. They wanted to work to earn money to travel throughout Central America to film the various struggles they would encounter along the way. Ultimately their journey was to end in Argentina. They went

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³⁹Talamante Interview I.

⁴⁰Rodrigo Reyes, "Latino Gays: Coming Out and Coming Home," NUESTRO 5 (April 1981), 44.

to work in the garlic fields with Talamante. One can ask how Talamante was able to miraculously convince this somewhat middle-class, university educated couple, who had no field work experience, to labor in the garlic fields? Olga Talamante was resourceful. She also made arrangements with the University to receive college credit for the work she expected to do during her travel to México, Guatemala, and Costa Rica.⁴¹

Olga Talamante's parents expressed some reluctance in approving her travel plans but her mother eventually supported her decision. In fact, after much deliberation and thought, her parents realized that she was going to make the trip, with or without their blessings. They never directly verbalized their reluctance to her but they did express concern. In the fall of 1971, Olga Talamante, the Argentine couple, and a friend embarked on the trip to Argentina intending or planning to capture the social and political movements of the times. In Nicaragua they experienced political complications. While meeting with students from the University, they obtained sensitive information on the Sandinista movement, in film and print. Recognizing that the Nicaraguan government would not want the information to leave the country, they hid the film and

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⁴¹Talamante Interview I., *San Francisco Examiner*, 5 December 1974.

other material in the station wagon side boards. When they prepared to cross the border into Costa Rica, government police searched them and stripped the car. They were detained for five days before the government expelled them to Honduras, whose government then expelled them to El Salvador. Cash strapped and with few resources left, Olga Talamante called her parents to ask for money to return to the United States. She returned in the summer of 1972 after almost one year on the road.

Olga Talamante immediately returned to UCSC and got a job on campus. She also became involved in developing the Third World Teaching Resource Center under the directorship of Professor David Sweet and with the assistance of two students, Ed McCaughan and Peter Baird. In addition, Olga Talamante and the Argentine couple assisted in the project to develop a resource center.⁴²

Towards the end of the summer in 1972, Hugo and Norma Del Bonis learned of the emerging political developments in Argentina and decided to return there. Olga Talamante decided to complete her senior year at UCSC and wait to

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⁴²Talamante Interview I., *City On The Hill*, September 1972 reported "several UCSC students and friends worked on an extensive project collecting resource materials on Latin America" yet, no names were listed.

travel to Argentina until after her planned graduation in 1973.

CHAPTER THREE

ACTS OF RESISTANCE AND SURVIVAL OF AN INTER-AMERICAN ACTIVIST AND POLITICAL PRISONER

It was as a Chicana campesina that I learned to struggle and my being here in Argentina is but a consequence of that consciousness.¹

The early 1970s marked a new phase of governance for Argentina with a shift from eighteen years of military governments to its first democratic election held in March 1973. Talamante, a young Chicana, straight out of the Chicano movement from California, arrived in Argentina in August of 1973 soon after the democratic elections. She witnessed the return of Juan Perón from exile and his re-election to the presidency. The return to power of Juan Perón also re-established the Peronist Party. At the same time, Argentina's neighbors and South America in general, experienced shifts in their forms of government. In September, 1973, Argentina's neighboring country Chile suffered the horrors of a bloody military coup. The United States support of the military coup generated criticism of imperialism throughout South America. Talamante shared

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¹Olga Talamante, Argentina, to Ed McCaughan, 29 January 1975, letter in OTDC File E, "Letters From OT." OTDC files in possession of Olga Talamante, Pacifica, California.

similar criticism towards the United States. This chapter will provide a brief historical overview of Argentina's political history from Juan Perón's first presidency to his death in July 1974. Secondly, it will examine Olga Talamante's community work with the people of the city of Azul near Buenos Aires. Thirdly, it will examine Argentina's imposition of the state of siege which curtailed civil liberties and led to Talamante's imprisonment in an Argentine jail.

Brief Historical Overview of Argentina

In 1930, Argentina's top military officers led a coup which toppled the government of President Hipólito Yrigoyen. This coup marked the beginning of a series of military governments which held power longer than the democratically elected governments. In 1943, another military coup removed President Ramón Castillo. Among the leaders of this coup was a young colonel named Juan Perón. By 1945, Juan Perón held the position of vice president and minister of war, retaining major power in the government. He used his positions to control the trade unions, and he developed his own power base from the support he gained from the working class masses, often referred to as the *descamisados* or

"shirtless ones."² Assisted by his wife Evita, Perón was elected President in 1946 and governed until 1955 when he was exiled to Spain following another military coup. While in power, he gained tremendous popular support through his likable personality and his economic and social policies which benefited the working class. To the workers, Perón represented a sense that "they were no longer Argentina's forgotten."³ Perón also adopted strong anti-United States and anti-British sentiment. He advocated a third position, commonly known as *justicialismo*, a line between communism and capitalism.

During the early 1950s Argentina began to experience an economic crisis. Perón responded "with increasing authoritarian and repressive measures."⁴ In an effort to recuperate from this crisis Perón began to attract foreign capital into Argentina. By mid-1955, various sectors, such as the military, traditional parties, middle classes, and students, had become disillusioned with Perón's overtures to foreign investors. In September 1955, the financial crisis reached uncontrollable proportions which led to Perón's

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²Albert Ciria, "Peronism Yesterday and Today," *Latin American Perspectives* 1, no. 3 (1974): 22.

³*Ibid.*, 22.

⁴*Ibid.*, 24.

overthrow by navy and army officers. The coup reflected populist discontent over Perón's inability to control inflation, corruption, demagoguery, and oppression.

Political scientist Alberto Ciria described the coup as a simple military operation, "but the eradication of Peronism proved to be a much more complicated task."⁵ Perón's political party was banned from political activities in 1956. The new government also banned symbols reflecting Perón slogans, songs, and emblems from the period in which he governed.

Even though exiled in Spain, Perón continued to grow in popularity, especially among "new" sectors, such as the middle class, students, and young professionals. Although many of his new supporters had not lived through his period of governance from 1946-1955, "they wanted a place in the sun in the new social order that Peronism could foster if returned to power, and they also had the feeling of power and security emanating from a very popular mass-based movement."⁶

From 1955 to 1973 Argentina was led by military or military dominated governments. The military regime of General Alejandro Lanusse through a proclamation made in

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⁵Ibid., 25.

⁶Ibid., 29.

March 1971 sought the restoration of a constitutional government and the re-establishment of the Peronist party. By March 1973, elections were held and Héctor Cámpora won the presidency supported by the various segments of the movement, especially the Peronist Youth. The Peronist Youth had "coined the official campaign slogan, 'Cámpora to office, Perón to power' (Cámpora al gobierno, Perón al poder)." ⁷ Perón returned to Argentina in June of 1973 as the next president. His return to Argentina became a dramatic event. At the airport, it was reported, thousands turned out to welcome his return but violence broke out between two factions. In the violence that ensued, "an estimated two hundred young people were killed." ⁸

The outbreak of violence in Argentina during this period reflected the political struggles and violence experienced in many neighboring countries of the southern cone. In December 1968, a Brazilian coup took place which precipitated "the largest outbreak of urban guerrilla warfare on the continent." ⁹ Coups occurred in Bolivia in

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⁷Ibid., 32.

⁸*Nunca Mas!: The Report of the Argentine National Commission on the Disappeared*. 1st American ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1986), xii.

⁹David Hodges, *Argentina, 1943-1976: The National Revolution and Resistance* (Albuquerque: University of New México Press, 1976), 2.

August of 1971 and in Chile in September 1973, which allegedly were to combat the threat of communism, socialism, and popular leftist groups seeking control of the government. In June 1973, an Uruguayan coup took place and "was aimed at curbing a rebellious congress that was resisting military pressures and efforts to launch a full-scale internal war against subversion."¹⁰

In each of these countries, the extent of the repression was a manifestation of which faction retained power. However, even Argentina imposed repression. For example, the torture of political prisoners became prominent while General Juan Carlos Onganía ruled from 1966-1970. It was during this time period when Juan Perón, while exiled, "publicly supported the movement's left wing, the Peronist Youth (JP) with its special armed formations, the Peronist Armed Forces (FAP) and Montoneros."¹¹ While the FAP and the Guevarist-oriented People's Revolutionary Army (ERP) continued their armed resistance against multi-national corporations, once Perón returned from exile in 1973, he initiated a new series of repressive laws aimed at the movement that brought him to power.

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¹⁰Hodges, *Argentina, 1943-1976*, 2.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 4.

Many Peronists anticipated a quick political and economic change with the election of Perón. Many of his young supporters became, with time, quickly disenchanted with his conservative policies. The effect was the rise of a growing distrust and distancing of the youth from the Perón government. Perón himself perpetuated the alienation by his attitude and remarks about the youth in general. "His published remarks to a Madrid journalist, '*El futuro es de la juventud, pero no el presente,*'" did little to bridge the gap between the two groups.¹²

Young Peronists had played a crucial role in the guerrilla campaigns in opposition to the military government's regime from 1966 to 1973, and they were a catalyst in organizing the campaign for Perón's return. Yet once back in power, Perón's early actions left many young people feeling betrayed. A major turning point occurred in May 1974. At the May 1st, 1974 *Plaza de Mayo* address, thousands of Peronist Youth and Montoneros gathered to display their displeasure with the government's latest labor policies. The youth interrupted the middle of Perón's address through a staged peaceful walk out. The protest

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¹²Charles A. Russell, James F. Schenkel, and James A. Miller, "Urban Guerrillas in Argentina: A Select Bibliography," *Latin American Research Review* 9, no. 3 (Fall 1974): 57. English translation: "The future belongs to the youth but the present does not."

infuriated Perón. He accused the Montoneros and Peronist Youth (JP) of "infiltrating the [Peronist] movement, of betray[ing] it, and of being more dangerous than the enemies . . . acting as mercenaries in the service of foreign interests."¹³ This marked a turning point of disillusionment among the many Peronist Youth and the Montoneros.

It is important to understand that all members of the Montoneros were also members of the Peronist Youth (JP); yet not every member of the JP was a member of the Montoneros. Many were, however, sympathetic to the Montoneros. The Peronist Youth, being supporters of the Peronist party in power, were able to lawfully organize and participate politically until September 1975. Thus, the Montoneros were able to conduct all forms of activities on behalf of the struggle, both legal and illegal, and had a decisive advantage over other outlawed left-wing organizations.¹⁴

Perón passed away on July 11, 1974 and his third wife Isabel, then vice president, assumed the office of president. She faced a difficult transition. She was unable to contain elements of the left and right wing terrorist groups. The spiraling inflation, which had

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¹³Hodges, *Argentina, 1943-1976*, 75.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 104.

reached an annual rate of 700 percent, was creating increased strife with labor groups, but she was unable to reverse the economic decline. Seeking to solidify her control and to rope in the political activities of the left, she declared a state of siege on November 6, 1974. It is in this political, social, and economic context that Olga Talamante and her twelve friends found themselves when they were arrested after leaving the home of friends on November 10, 1974.

Community Work in Argentina

On August 1973, Olga Talamante arrived in Buenos Aires, Argentina and made her way south to the town of Azul, a small town in the pampas region, two hundred miles away. She quickly became acclimated to Argentine culture and politics. In letters to her mother and family members she wrote how hospitable she found the Argentine people who shared with her their different foods and customs. In September 1973, a month after her arrival, she wrote to her mother describing the feelings of the recent election:

Ultimamente hubo mucha actividad aca por las elecciones, en las que ganó Perón otra vez. Ahora parece que se va a calmar aún mucho más las cosas acá, yo creo que no va a pasar lo que pasó en Chile.¹⁵

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¹⁵Olga Talamante, Argentina, to Talamante Family, Gilroy, CA, 26 September 1973, letter in the possession of

In her letter she discussed the Chilean military coup and assured her mother that the political climate was different in Argentina describing it as such:

Bueno, la suerte de aca es que no nos llegó ninguna colita de eso y ahora el gobierno esta más estable, así que no se preocupen. Además cualquier cosa que pase, yo me iría enseguida, lo único que voy a tener que juntar el dinero del pasaje, aunque sea a México para tenerlo listo en cuanto me sea necesario.¹⁶

Sounding a bit apprehensive and taking cautious steps, Olga Talamante began to immerse herself in activity in Azul. Through her contacts with her friend Norma Del Bonis, she gave presentations at various schools on the subject of México and the Chicano movement in the United States. In early November, Talamante began to entertain the idea of returning to California to participate in her brother's wedding in January, yet, she decided to stay to learn all she could about Argentina. She wrote, ". . . quiero aprovechar para conocer lo más que pueda, juntar libros,

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Refugio Talamante, Gilroy. English translation: "Lately there has been much activity around here due to the elections which Perón won again. It appears things will be calming down around here, and I believe what happened in Chile won't happen here."

¹⁶Ibid. English translation: "Well, as our luck would have it not a spark of trouble occurred here and now there is a stable government, so there's nothing to worry about. In any event, if anything should happen, I will leave immediately, the only thing is that I'll have to save money for my trip even if it's to México so that I'll have it available if necessary."

fotografías y cintas con musica para llevar para allá, porque me pueda servir para algún trabajo. . . ."¹⁷

As it turned out she remained in Argentina after she was retained in Azul to teach English at a private institute.¹⁸ In the letters she sent to her mother, Olga Talamante began to take on a more political tone and it is apparent that she was increasingly politicized by her Argentine experience. This political tone is captured in a letter she sent her recently married brother and new sister-in-law, she wrote the following nuptial advice:

You must remember that your children will not lead a better life if we only give them the material things, we must give them a sense of justice, a sense of freedom, a sense of human beings not just machines that work automatically.¹⁹

She kept in contact with the family and the community she left behind in California. Many of her letters centered on her immediate family's well-being, and then she inquired about members of the extended family and people in the

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¹⁷Olga Talamante, Argentina, to 'Ama, Gilroy, 14 November 1973. Letter in possession of Refugio Talamante, Gilroy. English translation: "I want to take advantage of learning all that I can by collecting books, photographs, musical cassettes that I can bring back because they could be useful in my work later."

¹⁸Olga Talamante, Affidavit filed with OAS complaint, 18 October, 1976. OTDC Files.

¹⁹Olga Talamante, Argentina, to *Queridos Padres, y Hermanos*, Gilroy, 13 May 1974. Letter in possession of Refugio Talamante, Gilroy.

community. Olga Talamante's letters included descriptions of the parents of some of her friends in Argentina. One she wrote about reminded her of her own mother. In time, she became friends with a core group of people with whom she shared information on the plight of the United States farmworker. They, she believed, shared the same plight of Argentina's poor, particularly those residing in the outlying areas of town in the *barrios*.

Talamante involved herself in a community center project, funded by the Peronist government, to build several health centers throughout the *barrio*. She got involved in several activities of the Peronist Youth. Talamante recalled "one of the campaigns that the Peronist Youth was carrying on at that time was a mass leafleting to explain to the people why they faced a scarcity of goods," and the reasons behind the scarcity of sugar.²⁰ The shortage of food staples had materialized prior to the state of siege and before inflation had begun to spiral upward. Participation in educating the community was not new to Olga Talamante. She gained experience in her involvement with the UFW campaign, during the lettuce strike, which distributed leaflets to help people understand the

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²⁰Olga Talamante, Interview by Bob Barber, [circa 1976], Tape recording. OTDC Files, Cassette labeled "Tape 4, Jail 8-9," Transcript, p. 8.

relationships between agri-business, the consumer, and the farmworker. Her participation in the activities of the UFW were tested in Argentina through her work in Azul, except that after the state of siege, she faced a different political context since her activities were considered illegal.

Prior to the state of siege, which was declared in November 1974, the Montoneros, the armed resistance arm of the Peronist Youth, went underground in their political struggle. The result was noticeable uncertainty for those involved in the Peronist Youth. As noted earlier, all Montoneros were members of the JP but not all JP's were Montoneros. The reaction to the Montoneros actions caused the group to go underground and call out for an all-out resistance to the Perón government. Yet, some members belonged to the JP, a group that was still public and legal through its membership with the party in power--the Peronists. The activities of the Montoneros created a general sense of uncertainty and is illustrated and expressed by Talamante as: "we heard the news that the Montoneros had gone underground. It wasn't a total shock . . . we were Peronist Youth. It's just like what would that mean to us since the Montoneros were illegal now? Was there going to be a whole wave of repression against Montoneros

because they had gone underground?"²¹ These were questions Olga Talamante and her friends grappled with as they assessed their work in the *barrios*. They realized their work was important and should not stop, but they had to decide how to continue doing this community work in light of the state of siege.

Talamante learned of the state of siege on a trip to the southern part of Argentina and thought it provided "the whole legal basis for people being arrested and were faced with that very concrete danger."²² When she returned to Azul, she was invited to a friend's gathering for a barbecue the night of November 10, 1974. She recalls the purpose of the gathering was to discuss the direction for the group, given the state of siege. "We were also in the process of deciding, what do we do? Do we change all our patterns and try not to be visible at all? That means not going to the *barrio*, or do we try to continue visibly as normal as possible . . . like we'd been doing all along, that we have nothing to hide."²³ Literally, from one day to the next, activity deemed legal by the party in power suddenly became illegal.

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²¹Ibid., 4.

²²Ibid., 6.

²³Ibid., 19.

As Talamante and twelve of her other comrades left the barbecue they were stopped and apprehended by Federal police outside the home about a block away. The Federal police forced them at gun point into police vehicles and took them into custody for interrogation. They were in detention for four days and the Federal police inflicted physical torture when interrogating them. In a letter to a friend in the United States, Talamante described the terrible nightmare:

We were arrested on the night of November 10th, we were taken at machine-gun point to the Federal Police Station in Azul. We were forced to remain motionless with our feet spread and our hands against the wall. Any sort of movement was punished with a quick karate blow against our head or back. After taking our names down etc., brown coarse bags were put over our heads, hands tied behind our back.

The next morning the *jefes* came to "greet" us with their merciless blows. They're real experts at placing hard effective poundings. I bent with pain as one of them kicked me between the legs but I was soon straightened by a blow on my left breast. That whole day we were interrogated constantly and by the time night came my arms were numb from being tied and my body could find no comfortable position in which to rest. Then came Tuesday. Early in the morning I could hear a *compañero*'s horrifying screams and I knew he was being tortured.

When they came to get me, I knew I was next. I was first taken to an office where adhesive tape was put over my eyes. I couldn't see anything but I knew there were several men who began interrogating me with threats and blows at first. Then, as they kept asking me things I didn't know they brought the electric machine, and they applied it to my body over my clothes. All this time I was seated on a chair held down by two hands. The pain caused by

that diabolical machine is impossible to describe. The only way I can explain it is as a burning electric current that bolted my whole body. Aside from the physical pain inflicted, one has to suffer the sadistic, denigrating repertory of those men. After that I was taken to a room upstairs and there I was totally undressed.

I was placed on a bed with my arms and legs open, which were firmly tied to the bed posts. Then the nightmare began. The machine was applied to my nipples, inner legs, vulva, to the joints on my fingers, toes, legs, stomach, to my teeth, etc. etc. The son-of-bitches know really well where the greatest pain is caused.

At one point they asked me if I preferred to be raped. I told [them] I didn't care for either but then they would give me the machine, stop, and ask me again. . . . Not being raped is the only thing I can thank them for. After that last session I was dressed and then taken to a room next to the torture chamber. I was kept there the rest of the day and the whole night without food or drink. . . .

As I was going through all of this I kept thinking that I had to be strong, that I must not weaken before those weak sick animals who actually enjoy doing those things. I thought of the many who had withstood it all courageously and that now it [was] my turn to do it.²⁴

Several days passed before word, reached the United States about Olga Talamante's arrest. Her college friends Ed McCaughan and Peter Baird received a letter on November 25, 1974 from Norma Del Bonis mailed from Argentina which informed them of the arrest.²⁵ It was not until December 4,

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²⁴Olga Talamante, Argentina, to a friend, 30 January 1975, letter in OTDC File E, "Letters from OT." OTDC Files in possession of Olga Talamante, Pacifica, California.

²⁵Ed McCaughan, Interview by author, 8 October 1998.

1974 that a United States Embassy official made a visit to Olga Talamante in Azul to check on her well-being and safety. The relationship between the State Department, United States Embassy in Argentina, and the Olga Talamante Defense Committee (OTDC) will be examined further in chapter six.

The arrest of Talamante and her friends came about because they sought to improve conditions for marginal people living in the barrios. It occurred at a time when the Perón party in power to which they belonged had become more conservative and had aligned itself with the political right wing members while launching a campaign against subversion, targeting left wing factions. Although imprisoned and having survived physical and mental torture, Olga Talamante deepened her political commitments within the confines of the prison walls. "Those damn currents actually strengthened me and deepened my convictions."²⁶ Much like other activists in the United States, such as Malcolm X, Angela Davis, and some of the members of the San Quentin Six, she became stronger in her political beliefs and commitment to social justice while imprisoned.

Telephone Interview from New Orleans, LA, Tape recording in possession of author. See also, "Olga Talamante Jailed by Argentine Authorities," *Gilroy Dispatch*, 4 December 1974.

²⁶Olga Talamante, Letter to friend, 30 January 1975.

Negotiating Political Space

Olga Talamante's arrest, torture, and imprisonment depicts the continuous repression the Argentine people endured after the mid-1950s. The repression occurring in the early 1970s escalated as the decade progressed. During the presidency of Isabel Martínez Perón, repression took two distinct forms: legal and "dirty." "Legal repression was carried out by the security forces, police and military, and was under the leadership of the Army."²⁷ Torture became a common and normal method of interrogation under the presidency of Martínez Perón, as it had existed under the military leadership of General Onganía in 1966. In a report by the North American Committee on Latin America (NACLA) on Argentina, it was noted that there existed about six thousand political prisoners and they were "subject[ed] to an inhuman treatment in the jails and many of them remain[ed] in prison without charges ever being brought against them or without ever undergoing trials."²⁸

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²⁷"Argentina: The War Goes On," *NACLA's Latin America and Empire Report*. (January 1977): 9.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 9. Many individuals imprisoned were suspected of subversive activity. "Subversive" activity held a vast and vague meaning. It was reported that such interpretations ranged from "Marxist-Leninist, traitors to the fatherland, materialists and atheists, enemies of Western, Christian values, abounded, anyone was at risk - from those who were proposing a social revolution to aware adolescents who merely went out to the shanty towns to help the people living there." See, *Nunca Mas!*, 4.

"Dirty" repression involved kidnappings and executions. This form of repression paralleled the legal forms and was used when the Armed Force could no longer contain the political and economic situation. Dirty repression was carried out by all sectors. "Hundreds of people were forcefully and brutally taken from their homes; their bodies reappeared later, showing signs of having been shot, tortured, burned or destroyed by explosives."²⁹ In Talamante's case, the police tortured her during her interrogation and demanded that she sign a forced statement, a practice used by the federal authorities with political prisoners.

During her imprisonment at the local Azul prison, she was under the control of the local authorities. Many of the local authorities resided in Azul, including the judge presiding over her case, so they were aware of the community work of Olga Talamante and her twelve companions. The judge knew many of the twelve companions since they were from well-known families in the community. While in jail in Azul, Talamante had "not been denied access to mail and communications."³⁰

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²⁹Ibid.

³⁰"Argentina Studies Fate of American," *Los Angeles Times*, 17 December 1974.

Olga Talamante came to rely on the prison mail and communication system for her survival. The women prisoners developed networks where information was transmitted via families visiting the inmates, who incidentally comprised a large number of women. This informal network allowed Talamante to transmit information from the prison to the outside world, the United States, and to Olga Talamante's mother and her friends. In early December, the U.S. Embassy in Buenos Aires sought to obtain telephone privileges for Talamante, so she could call her family to let them know of her circumstances in prison and the status of her appeal, but the efforts proved fruitless.³¹

Olga Talamante was not deterred. She found other means to communicate with her family to let them know about her status. Through the prison networks, she was able to communicate across the continent. In a letter to her mother, she wrote: *"yo le dije a la familia Etcheverry que la llame por teléfono porque a mi no me dieron permiso. Vino Ma [María] del Carmen a verme el domingo este que pasó y me contó de la carta que usted le escribió tan linda."*³²

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³¹Gilroy Dispatch, 24 January 1975.

³²Olga Talamante, Argentina, to Mother, Gilroy, CA, 3 February 1975, letter in possession of Refugio Talamante. English translation: "I asked the Etcheverry family to call you because I was not given permission. This past Sunday, Ma [Maria] del Carmen came to visit and she shared with me the beautiful letter you had written her."

Sometimes the system had a few glitches, and they were expressed in a letter to her mother as such:

Me dijo Ma del Carmen que llamó por teléfono y no había nadie en las casa de ustedes, nomas estaba Kevin y otra muchacha que dijo que era una amiga. No sé si le habrán entendido lo que dijo, dijale [sic] burro del caballo Loco que aprenda a hablar Español, que sirva de algo.³³

Not only was Olga Talamante using networks to maintain contact with her family but her mother Refugio also encouraged close friends and family members, such as the Guajardos, to write letters to her daughter.³⁴

For Olga Talamante the women's networks helped to break her isolation of prison life and served for her to obtain much needed items such as a sufficient supply of socks, not provided by the prison.³⁵ Refugio would on occasion send money to a woman who visited Olga Talamante at the prison to help defray the costs of purchasing items for her

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³³Olga Talamante, Argentina, to Mother, Gilroy, CA, 8 March 1975, letter in possession of Refugio Talamante, Gilroy. English translation: "Ma del Carmen told me she had called the house and none of you were home except Kevin and another girl who was a friend. I don't know if he understood what was being said, tell that 'mule headed' 'Crazy Horse' [Kevin] to learn Spanish so he can be of use." Kevin is a family friend who is affectionately known as Crazy Horse.

³⁴Olga Talamante, letter to Mother, 3 February 1975.

³⁵Olga Talamante, letter to Mother, 8 March 1975.

daughter.³⁶ Given the poor economic situation in Argentina, Olga Talamante knew that purchasing items for her could be a hardship on the many families, and she made arrangements to alleviate some of their financial burden. The networks provided an avenue for the prisoners' mothers to share their common pain and struggle. The networks also became crucial in getting news from the outside world. The families would provide updates on the political situation, on who was arrested, who was searched or questioned, who was threatened, and who left town or disappeared. The network reports included news from Perú and México City where many Argentine people were exiled. It was through the network of families that Olga Talamante would obtain materials to read or toiletries, sometimes smuggled into the prison. The prison networks were certainly vital for the women's survival from the monotony of prison life and served as a source of continued support for their political beliefs.

There is a paucity of research on the daily struggles of women political prisoners. In a recent magazine article, four Latina political prisoners interviewed provided information mostly on why they were in prison and revealed little about their day-to-day struggles.³⁷ These Latina

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³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Lilliam Rivera, "America's Political Prisoners," *Latina Magazine*, November 1998, 94-96.

political prisoners touched on the importance of family contact but further study needs to be completed to determine how networks facilitated their time in prison. How do women political prisoners serve their time and how do they live in relation to other women in the prison? Barbara Owen stated that a female prisoner seeks "to find meaning and rhythm in her time in prison."³⁸

Olga Talamante, along with the other women political prisoners, struggled to find and create both meaning and rhythm in their daily life in prison. Initially, they had to learn about the prison culture, what they could or could not change, or negotiate. Their activities and time were rigidly controlled. They had a fixed schedule for meals, rules related to dress, a fixed hour to wake up and go to sleep, and chores. Olga Talamante described the routine very vividly:

You got up a 6:00 [a.m.], you had breakfast at 7:00, you cleaned and you could take a bath later . . . you start cooking at 11:00 so that lunch was at 12:00, you clean and then it was siesta time . . . then you got up, then you exercise, you got ready for dinner. The routine was the same but within that, what would happen from the side of the authorities, or what was happening on the outside,

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³⁸Barbara Owen, *'In the Mix': Struggle and Survival in a Women's Prison* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 167.

or what would happen with the other prisoners, was that it was a daily tension.³⁹

There existed daily tensions that Talamante had to negotiate and work through amongst the women living together in her cell. Although Olga Talamante and her cell mates had no prior prison experience, they were what Owen calls organizationally smart women who are "skilled at interpersonal relations, managing bureaucracies, and recognizing reciprocity in terms of 'common courtesy'."⁴⁰ These organizationally smart women found ways to navigate their needs and minimize the deprivations of imprisonment and strengthen their political commitments.

The Azul prison housed political and non-political prisoners in the same cell. Unlike other prisons at that time and later, political prisoners were not housed separately from their comrades. The isolation and separation of political prisoners occurred at a later time in a systematic manner. When Olga Talamante and her friends were imprisoned they were confined with women from the lower social classes who were extremely "street smart." The non-political prisoners tended to be much older than Talamante and her friends and had different interests and

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³⁹Olga Talamante, Interview by author, 12 November 1998, San Francisco, Tape recording in the possession of author. Hereafter cited as Talamante Interview II.

⁴⁰Barbara Owen, *In The Mix*, 168.

needs. Some were career criminals who had committed crimes because they had few options given their socio-economic conditions. Talamante and her friends wanted to connect with the non-political prisoners on the basis that they were also there as a "result of the social conditions" existing in Argentina.⁴¹ Talamante and her friends learned quickly that the authorities wanted to divide the groups. "They sometimes would allow more liberties or more concessions to the political prisoners than the non-political prisoners in order to . . . get the non-political prisoners mad at [them]."⁴² This became a major problem for the women and it alternated with the changing make-up of the prison population.

Both prisoner groups developed structure to govern themselves within the walls of their cells. The political prisoners tried to develop a cooperative structure with a core group designated to serve at times as leaders. Talamante was identified as a core member and often was called to serve as mediator, negotiator, and at times diplomat for the group. Interestingly, Olga Talamante's comrades were raised in middle class backgrounds and some were university educated. Olga Talamante too was college

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⁴¹Talamante Interview II.

⁴²Ibid.

educated, but she differed in that she came from a lower social economic class in the United States. As a result of her class experience and having grown up in a racially segregated community, she had gained a repertoire of survival and coping skills somewhat distinct from the others. Olga Talamante's interpersonal skills gained her success in some situations while in jail. She was able to negotiate with the non-political prisoners as well as with the prison guards and authorities. Whenever the political prisoners wanted to speak to the head of the prison, one had to request an *audiencia*--a meeting. On several occasions, Olga Talamante and others were able to secure *audiencias* and meetings with the judge assigned to their case.⁴³

Olga Talamante and her friends also saw the value of engaging in reciprocity with the non-political prisoners as a way to minimize conflicts. When negotiating with the prison authorities, she found it important to consult with them too. Olga Talamante provided a glimpse of the reciprocity in an interview:

Sometimes we would let them know that we were going to go talk to the main heads and that we wanted to let them know what we were asking for . . . . Here we were in this situation together, so we had to respect that and not just go off on our own. Most of us were younger. We were all in our 20's . . .

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⁴³Ibid.

some of these women were a lot older. A couple of them . . . could have been our mother's age [which to] some [degree] . . . helped. They kind of saw us as young whipper snappers and what did we know. On the other hand, they [exhibited] a certain kind of mothering [toward us].⁴⁴

Some of the non-political prisoners did teach them a lot, particularly in the area of craftmaking. However, there existed a constant tension amongst the two groups that had to be negotiated.

Another way that Olga Talamante and her comrades governed themselves in prison was by dividing into work groups. Each work group was then assigned to a task such as cooking, cleaning, studying, and making trinkets. Usually the groups were assigned to a task for one week. The women prisoners were able to gain certain cooking privileges and once obtained this was something they worked hard to preserve and required the utmost cooperation from all prisoners. At times, there would be a prisoner who refused to work; usually it was a non-political one. Olga Talamante lamented:

that's when we were punished, all of us were punished for two weeks. We weren't allowed to cook and we were given the food that the prison regularly had, which was terrible, just awful. . . . That's why you needed things from your relatives, a lot of

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⁴⁴Ibid.

the prisoners would every week get stuff sent from their relatives or have some money in order to buy some stuff.⁴⁵

The types of items purchased included dry salami, crackers, tea, sugar, onions, and potatoes. A common dish they would prepare would be a stew. To cook was a real privilege and, when conflict arose among the women and the authorities suspended the privilege, the consequence was severe.

Another work group made trinkets out of scrap material. The non-political prisoners shared with Olga Talamante and her friends their knowledge and experience in making beautiful crafts, such as crochet bracelets, dolls, and paper-maché items. Talamante and her friends enthusiastically began to make items for friends, then for the male prisoners, and then they made them as gifts for their relatives. Olga Talamante described how for the women trinket making took on another purpose and meaning. "What developed was this concept that we could develop a little factory and then we could give them to the relatives, and they in turn would sell them. And then that way money would be used by the relatives to bring us the stuff that we

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⁴⁵Olga Talamante, Interview by Bob Barber, n.d. [circa 1976]. Tape recording labeled "Tape Two," Transcript, p. 18. OTDC Files, in possession of Olga Talamante, Pacifica, CA.

needed like sugar and soap and toothbrushes."⁴⁶ What might appear to be a capitalist venture in actuality was a creative means of surviving in prison and alleviating the financial burden on the families. During this period, while Olga Talamante was imprisoned, the cost of goods was extremely high, and labor strikes were taking place throughout Argentina. As a result some items, such as sugar, were extremely expensive. The money made from the sales of trinkets, Talamante believed, could be used to offset the high prices.

When Olga Talamante was not working making trinkets, she participated in a study group. In the group she would read the newspaper and then brief the others on the political and economic situation in Argentina. She would also read books and hold discussions on the content. Many of the discussions centered around the activities being undertaken by the resistance groups of the left and paramilitary right. The women also discussed topics such as Marxism and class struggles. In addition, Talamante had a small transistor radio she was allowed to keep in her possession and the women would usually designate one another the task of providing updates on the daily news. Later, Talamante's radio would be confiscated and her access to

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⁴⁶Ibid., 13.

books became limited. The women's study group sessions served as a forum with the objective of strengthening the politicization process of the many women of the Peronist Youth and were conducted in a collective manner.

In May of 1975, one of the women political prisoners gave birth to a baby girl she named Natalia.⁴⁷ The care for the mother and the child became a collective concern. They tried various methods and means to care for the child. Talamante and the others felt a sense of responsibility for the child and described it as such. "She was a daughter of militants . . . therefore, we were all responsible for her."⁴⁸ Tension soon gave way as the prisoners argued about how the child should be raised. The mother was from a well-to-do family and her relatives lavished the child with toys and clothes. Some women prisoners, Olga Talamante among them, felt that the material goods were unnecessary and should be returned. If not, they recommended to the mother to inform her relatives to bring money to purchase milk, fruits, vegetables, items which were difficult to obtain in prison but were necessary for the child's health.

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⁴⁷Olga Talamante, Argentina, to Ed McCaughan, Oakland, CA, 16 June 1975, Letter in OTDC, File E, "Letters from OT," OTDC Files in the possession of Olga Talamante.

⁴⁸Olga Talamante, Interview with Bob Barber and Lenor de Cruz, n.d., Tape recording, transcript, p. 21. OTDC Files, Cassette labeled Tape One, Side Two."

Here, we begin to see issues of parenting based in class upbringing.

Aside from the day-to-day demands of prison life, Talamante struggled with the many emotions that she experienced, such as guilt and sadness. One of her outlets was to write. She said that "I had a necessity to write, because it's almost like saying it wasn't enough."⁴⁹ For many Chicanas at this time, writing itself was considered an act of resistance. In many ways, Talamante's writing allowed her to surpass and transcend those bleak and desperate moments. The following excerpt of a poem written by Talamante captures those sentiments:

Algo Ha Cambiado

. . . a lo largo del gatillo,
los ojos vacíos nos buscan,
y en vez de uno
encuentran três, diez, cien, trescientos
Algo ha cambiado!
Nos hemos multiplicado,
nos siguen encontrando . . . .

. . . Pueden arrasar la ternura
de nuestros hijos?
la mente de mis hermanos?
las lagrimas de mi madre? . . . .
No pueden, como no pueden
arrasar cada nido de pájaros,
como no pueden deshojar cada flor,
como no pueden disfrazar

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⁴⁹Ibid., 9-10.

*la miseria.*⁵⁰

Olga Talamante's daily life in the Azul prison was filled with constant tension from trying to balance the needs of the political and non-political prisoners, the authorities, and her own frustration with the slow progress being made for the higher court to review her case. She constantly received mixed messages about her release. She recalled that her prison friends gave her three farewell parties only to find she would not be released. What Talamante thought was going to be a quick resolution of her

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⁵⁰Olga Talamante, Argentina, to Ed McCaughan, Oakland, 16 February 1975. Letter in "Letter from OT," File E, OTDC Files. Excerpt of poem is translated by Ed McCaughan and Peter Baird. English translation:

Something Has Changed

. . . Along the trigger,
the vacant eyes search for us,
and they search, but instead of one
they find three, ten, 100, 300.
Something has changed!
We have multiplied ourselves,
and they find there are more of us.

. . . Can they ever strip away the tenderness
of our children?
the minds of my brothers?
the tears of my mother?
No they can't, as they cannot
tear down every bird's nest,
as they cannot strip the petals from every flower,
as they cannot disguise
misery.

court case turned out to be a drawn out legal process, complicated by the political situation of Argentina. Perhaps Talamante's greatest source of strength came from the many letters she received from her mother and family, and friends, which began informing her they were organizing a national campaign for her release.

CHAPTER FOUR

"HE VIVIDO DOS ETAPAS DE MI VIDA; MI VIDA PASADA Y MI VIDA PRESENTE": THE JOURNEY OF REFUGIO TALAMANTE'S ACTIVISM

She's not only a mother fighting for her daughter's freedom, but a constant reminder and reaffirmation of what our success will be like, 'cause she's people, she's women, she's worker, she's the strength that we all need to go on. Olga Talamante, letter from prison in Azul, 4 May 1975.

After the military seized power in Argentina on March 24, 1976, a group of mothers spontaneously took to the streets to demand that the new government account for their missing daughters and sons who had fallen victims of the military dictatorship's violent repression. The mothers joined together in political action and although they were initially motivated by the plight of their children, a private concern, eventually the group extended the scope of their political action to encompass the struggle for human rights.¹ Similarly, thousands of miles, away on a different continent, in 1974, Olga Talamante's mother, a *campesina* quietly yet swiftly rose to action, questioning and demanding that the United States and Argentine officials protect and safely return Olga Talamante, a United States

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¹Gloria Bonder, "Women's Organizations in Argentina's Transition to Democracy," in *Women and Counter Power*, ed. Yolanda Cohen (New York: Black Rose Books, 1989), 73.

citizen. Refugio Talamante advocated that her daughter had been unjustly detained and tortured in the political strife of Argentina. Like the Argentine mothers in a later time, she too was initially motivated by the plight of her daughter in prison, a personal concern. But she gradually began to see the relationship between her struggle as a Mexican working class woman and the struggle for human rights in places, such as Chile, Argentina, and in the United States. Although the advocacy of the Argentine mother's group and Olga Talamante's mother have differed in historical contexts and time, what they demonstrate is the many ways the role of motherhood has led to political action. Motherhood has been depicted by one author as "a means to control women--through state regulation, medical intervention, and brutal military assault--and as a means by which women have sought to regain control over their lives and the lives of their children."² Refugio Talamante's move to activism illustrates how a working class Mexican woman and mother fought to win the freedom of her daughter and prevailed despite the odds. She courageously struggled to have her daughter released from a prison in Argentina and,

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²Annelise Orleck, "Tradition Unbound: Radical Mothers in International Perspective," in *The Politics of Motherhood: Activist Voices From Left to Right*, ed. Alexis Jetter, Annelise Orleck, and Diana Taylor (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1997), 3-4.

subsequently in the process, she became empowered. Her activism, when coupled with the activism of other younger women and men working on the same cause, created bridges beyond her family and community which extended to the national level.

Refugio Talamante is also known affectionately as Doña Cuca. Her activism is rooted in her family working class background and her community and religious beliefs. Doña Cuca's activism did not begin at the time when her daughter was imprisoned. She had a history of involved activism in the *barrio* which is often overlooked and not reported by historians documenting Mexican and Chicano women's experiences. She relied on her family, neighborhood, and church networks to get things done. Many women residing in the *barrios* are known as having "'reputational' status, that is, they hold local reputations for knowing how to get a neighborhood problem solved."³ Doña Cuca, known to have such a reputation, was considered a social activist.

This chapter will examine Doña Cuca's activism. To understand her activism one must examine her life experiences within her family, community, and church.

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³Mary Santoli Pardo, *Identity and Resistance: Mexican-American Women and Grassroots Activism in Two Los Angeles Communities*" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1990), 2.

Secondly, one must question how those experiences came into play in her participation in the Olga Talamante Defense Committee? What role did Doña Cuca play in the Defense Committee? How was she perceived by the committee members who were mostly university-educated whites and Chicanas/os?

Family, Work, Community, and Church

The southwest region of the United States, from the 1910 to the 1920s, experienced a shortage of workers to develop the region. There was a need for "large armies of migrants or casual workers - for instance, for ranching, agriculture, railroad work, irrigation construction, and other pick and shovel labor."⁴ The great demand for labor together with the 1917 immigration laws aimed at restricting the migration of Europeans who could not read or write, reduced the overall rates of immigration. As a consequence, the demand for Mexican labor increased.⁵ During the 1920s, United States agribusiness became the leading employer of Mexicans. The "expansion of commercial agriculture and the end of cheap labor from Europe resulted in the recruitment of Mexicans and southern blacks. By this time period,

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⁴Rudolfo Acuña, *Occupied America*, 163.

⁵*Ibid.*, 164.

Mexicans were the main source of cheap labor."⁶ States, such as California, began to look favorably toward México as a pool to meet the labor shortage.

In the early 1920s Doña Cuca's parents joined the hundreds of Mexicans who migrated to the southwest region to fill the agribusiness labor shortage. Her father Emilio Castillo and her mother Josefa Aviles migrated from Baja California to the United States in search of work. Don Emilio was born in San José de Cabo in Baja California and Doña Josefa was born in La Paz, Baja California, México. They traveled as far north as San Francisco working the agricultural crops along the way. On July 4, 1923, while the family traveled from San Francisco to Lompoc, Doña Josefa gave birth to a girl and named her Refugio. She was the couple's second girl, their first was born in Santa Rosalia, México. In 1924, they had a son born in Los Angeles. In 1926, another daughter, Eva, was born in Calexico and their last child, a daughter, was born in Baja California, México where the family eventually settled. The family returned to México before the start of the Depression. The 1930s gave rise to nativist sentiments which resulted in the massive forced deportations of Mexicans. Doña Cuca recalled her father telling stories of

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⁶Ibid., 178.

how he had to wait in line to receive his ration of rice and beans during the Hoover years.⁷

Back in México, Don Emilio and the family continued to work in the fields of the Mexicali Valley. Doña Cuca at an early age also worked in the agricultural fields. She recalled those early work experiences:

Mis primeros años . . . pues fue mi vida en el campo. Mi padre era campesino teníamos que labrar la tierra. Yo me subí[a] en un arado y maneja[ba] [las] mulas para arar la tierra para . . . sembrar algodón. También [tuve que] desgranar mazorca de maíz para el gobierno en aquel año 1933.⁸

Doña Cuca's early work experiences in the field were physically demanding, but her participation was economically necessary to sustain the family. She recalled her family being very poor. She was always working and as a result received very little formal education. In 1936 her father became ill and experienced a partial loss of vision which then necessitated that all family members work even harder.

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⁷Refugio Talamante, Interview by author, 16 October 1998, Gilroy, Tape recording in possession of author. Hereafter cited as Doña Cuca Interview I.

⁸Refugio Talamante, Interview conducted by Lori Lujan, 8 February 1976, Berkeley, Tape recording, cassette labeled "Starry Plough OTDC Benefit, OTDC Files. Hereafter cited as Refugio Talamante Interview. English translation: " The first few years of my life were spent in the country. My father was a farmworker and we had to work the land. Back then we used the plow and mules to work the land in preparation to plant cotton. I also removed the corn kernels from the cob for the [Mexican] government in 1933.

Her mother, like many Mexican women, worked in the informal economy sector, washing and ironing clothes in her home for other people. In 1937, Refugio and her siblings became aware that they were United States citizens and they began crossing the border to Calexico to clean houses in an effort to bring more money to the family. At a early age, Refugio learned to use all resources available to her to assist in her family's daily struggle to live. Refugio continued to cross the U.S./México border for work even after her marriage to Eduardo Talamante in the 1940s.

Refugio and Eduardo Talamante married July 2, 1944 and raised four children. Their four children include:

Arturo	born August 10, 1941
Mario	born July 24, 1949
Olga	born December 3, 1949
Eddie	born February 26, 1956 ⁹

Their second child Mario is the son of Refugio's brother. Doña Cuca and Don Lalo raised and cared for him as their natural son. All of their children were born in México. Doña Cuca and Don Lalo worked long hours to provide for their children. She continued to work while raising her children.

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⁹Doña Cuca Interview I.

In 1950, Doña Cuca was employed as a stock room clerk at the Kress Company, a retail store, in Calexico, a job she held for eleven years. Doña Cuca stated, with a sense of pride, that the salary she received back then amounted to *"un dolar la hora . . . llevaba cuarenta dolares a la casa, fuera más lo que mi esposo trabajaba como chofer de la ciudad."*¹⁰ She worked for this company until she and her husband decided to move to California in 1961.

Doña Cuca's employment during the 1950s reflects a rare accomplishment for a Mexican woman, given the economic conditions existing at the border. In 1950, Mexicali's population was estimated at 64,658 and in Calexico, its twin city across the border, the population was 6,433. But by 1960, Mexicali's population had quadrupled to 281,333 and Calexico's to 7,992. Coupled with the population increases came an expansion in the Mexican economy along with increased competition for labor costs, resulting in difficult economic circumstances at the borders.¹¹

Doña Cuca's feat of gaining employment illustrates how she was able to locate resources on both sides of the border

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¹⁰Ibid. English translation: "one dollar an hour, I would bring home forty dollars [at the end of the week]. It was more than what my husband made as a driver for the city."

¹¹Oscar J. Martinez, *Troublesome Border* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1991), 127.

to improve her family's economic situation. It also illustrates her ability to negotiate two distinct worlds and an ability to navigate them. It becomes clear that the notion of women's separate spheres lacks relevance to Mexican women like Doña Cuca "whose social origins make economic work necessary for survival."¹²

In 1961 Eduardo Talamante, Olga's father, traveled to California to join his eldest son, Arturo, who worked in the *bracero* camps in Brawley and Gilroy.¹³ Once there he urged Doña Cuca to gather up the three children who then negotiated her way through the bureaucracy of the Immigration Service to obtain the documents necessary to bring the family to the United States. Olga Talamante recalled her mother's roles, as "she is the one to figure out how we all got over here from México. She is the one that went to where we needed to go to get us the permits."¹⁴

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¹²Denise Segura, "Working at Motherhood: Chicana and Mexican Immigrant Mothers and Employment," in *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency*, ed. Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang, and Lina Rennie Forcey (New York: Routledge, 1994), 226.

¹³Bob Barber, "The Struggle to Free Olga," *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, February 8 through February 21, 1975, 8-9.

¹⁴Talamante Interview II.

For Doña Cuca, the move to California meant she was going to leave her extended family and job as a stock clerk and return to the difficult, back-breaking labor in the agriculture fields. However, in the fields, the family would be earning twice the amount that Doña Cuca earned at her job. She worked along side her husband with the family in the fields picking prunes, cucumbers, and garlic. Doña Cuca described the experience this way: "*Así duramos como siete años arrastrandonos allí en los files . . . y muchas veces también mucha injusticias.*"¹⁵ The life of a farmworker, whether in México or the United States, is a harsh and difficult way to make a living and often involves the whole family. In many communities across the southwest, the needs of local agribusiness dictated community affairs, such as when to begin the first days of school. Gilroy was no exception. "All through the sixties [Doña Cuca's] family worked in the fields around Gilroy . . . . For Olga and her brothers, the work continued to the first day of school, which was timed each fall to coincide with the end of the harvest."¹⁶

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¹⁵Refugio Talamante Interview. English translation: "We endured about seven years of [literally] dragging ourselves across those fields . . . and many times enduring injustices."

¹⁶Bob Barber, *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, 8.

The city of Gilroy had a large number of residents native to México and they served as a much needed work force for the agricultural industry, particularly after the halt of the *Bracero* program in 1964. As Mexicans arrived in Gilroy, they would seek out the existing Mexican community, which encompassed the local Catholic Church.

The 1960s marked an important era for Mexican Catholics in the United States. Many VIVA KENNEDY! groups organized around the presidential campaign of John Kennedy, who incidentally benefited from the voter registration campaigns led by such groups as the Community Service Organization (CSO) in the 1950s. Within the Catholic Church, new models for the church were being introduced by the Second Vatican Council.

During the period of the 1960s the Mexican Catholic "community experienced two important thrusts--one inward and the other outward."¹⁷ The inward thrust went beyond the traditional devotional Catholic and was represented by the *Cursillo* movement. The outward thrust was seen in the activism of such groups as the Latin American Mission program (LAMP), the Mexican American Neighborhood

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¹⁷Jay Dolan and Gilbert Hinojosa, eds., *Mexican Americans and the Catholic Church, 1900-1965* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 222.

Organization (MANO), and finally the United Farm Workers (UFW).

The greatest impact on the Mexican community was the *Cursillo de Cristianidad* (a short course on Christianity). The *cursillo* is an intense three-day retreat that seeks a "conversion experience" allowing the *cursillistas* to deepen their commitment to Christ and the Church. "It was particularly attractive to Mexicans because they were conducted in Spanish and were sensitive to Mexican customs."¹⁸ Incorporated into the *cursillo* is leadership training and follow-up meetings called *ultreyas*. The *ultreya* served as a means to sustain their conversion experience and create "an extended family network among *cursillistas*."¹⁹ At first the *cursillo* targeted the males first and then later included the females in an attempt to increase male participation in the Church, which traditionally had been dominated by lay women. One of the most prominent *cursillistas* of this time period was César Chávez. "In fact, many of his first recruits for the UFW were fellow *cursillistas*."²⁰ The *cursillo* movement was

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¹⁸Ibid., 222-23. The *cursillo* dates back to Mallorca, Spain in the late 1940s when two American airmen experienced a conversion there in 1957 and brought the *cursillo* back to the United States.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid., 223.

significant because it challenged its participants to action. Many *cursillistas*, such as Doña Cuca, became involved for the first time in parish life, others became involved in social justice issues within the local community.

In 1960, a priest, Ronald Burke, made a *cursillo* in Phoenix, Arizona. Later in 1962, Father Burke was assigned as the Assistant pastor to St. Mary's Church in Gilroy. While serving at St. Mary's Church, Father Burke developed a parish LAMP group (an outreach program geared toward training missionaries to do work in the border areas of México).

Along with the parish based LAMP program, he organized the Interfaith Migrant Committee (IMC) which began to investigate the migrant labor situation. The IMC began to expose the horrible housing conditions existing at the migrant camps as well as health and education concerns. Burke exposed the substandard conditions of the labor camps by showing a series of slide presentations. "During one of Burke's slide shows, a farmer whose camps were shown as an example of the terrible conditions that existed was outraged. Several farmers registered complaints with Archbishop McGucken, [and] label[ed] Burke a Communist."²¹

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²¹Ibid., 228.

The farmers' complaints failed to deter Father Burke from encouraging the IMC to investigate further other issues affecting farm laborers such as low wages, unhealthy working conditions, and lack of unionization. Although the Archbishop supported Father Burke, the pastor faced a difficult situation when the farmers exerted "financial pressure on St. Mary's. Sunday collections dropped noticeably."²² The more Burke alienated the farmers, "the more he was loved by the Mexican parishioners."²³ Burke was successful in building strong grassroots support and in developing lay leadership and participation. In 1966 Burke went to Mexicali as a LAMP missionary, and then late in 1969 he traveled to Guatemala where he remained until 1980.

It is in this context that Doña Cuca and her family entered the Mexican Catholic community at Saint Mary's. Father Burke influenced Refugio and Olga Talamante's to participate in the parish. And, it was at this time that Doña Cuca also became involved with the Church leadership.

In México, Doña Cuca would attend mass but she was not involved in parish activities. In Gilroy, she was involved with the *Guadalupana* Society, a group which coordinated and organized the Virgin of Guadalupe feast day. She cooked and

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²²Ibid., 229.

²³Ibid., 228.

prepared food for events, taught religious education, and later became a Eucharist minister. In 1971, she decided to make her *cursillo*. For Doña Cuca this experience was a turning point in her life. In her own words, she described how this experience prepared her to find the strength to deal with her daughter's imprisonment. "*Tengo 27 años que hice mi cursillo, digo, si no hubiera tenido esa experiencia quién sabe como me había ido?*"²⁴ The network of *cursillistas* proved invaluable to Doña Cuca later when the campaign to free her daughter was organized.

Through her networks of friends and *cursillistas*, Doña Cuca came to befriend a Chicano priest, Father Richard García, from Saint Catherine parish, in Morgan Hill, who had continued Father Burke's work with farmworkers and the poor in the community. Father Richard García became involved in ministering to the UFW and would continually urge the Spanish-speaking congregation to support the UFW efforts.²⁵ Doña Cuca's consciousness of the plight of the farmworker and the poor was heightened by her involvement in the Church and its leaders and grounded in social justice teachings.

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²⁴Doña Cuca Interview I. English translation: "It's been twenty-seven years that I made my *cursillo*, and had it not been for that experience who knows how things would have turned out."

²⁵Ibid.

Doña Cuca's church involvement extended outward into the community. She was recognized in the community for knowing how to get things done. If someone, either a relative or friend, needed to visit the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) or the Mexican Consulate offices in San Francisco, usually to extend their visas, Doña Cuca would guide them there. She was known in the community as a resourceful person. Many times she would not only accompany friends or relatives to the Mexican Consulate but also tell them what they needed to do.²⁶ She was adept at negotiating and interacting with governmental agencies.

Doña Cuca and her family were willing to share the few resources they had with other less fortunate persons. Olga remembered how "my parents were always very conscientious about people's misfortunes and again even though we were pretty poor ourselves, always thinking that we were more fortunate and that we could help other people."²⁷ For many Latinas, politics "consists of 'helping others,' fulfilling an obligation,' 'sharing and giving,' and 'providing support.'"²⁸ As a mother and a community member, Doña Cuca

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²⁶Talamante Interview II.

²⁷Talamante Interview II.

²⁸Carol Hardy-Fanta, "Latina Women and Political Consciousness: *La Chispa Que Prende*," in *Women Transforming Politics: An Alternative Reader*, ed. Cathy J. Cohen, Kathleen B. Jones, and Joan C. Tronto (New York: New York

created a sense of community within her family by instilling in her children that they give and be concerned for others less fortunate. As a mother, she supported her children in the best way she could with the limited resources available to her. In her daughter's case, Doña Cuca supported her involvement in leadership activities in school and church, despite the criticism of her husband. Her strong interpersonal skills and religious beliefs provided a foundation for her to help others like her husband understand the needs of their children. She had a gift for being able to reframe personal experiences so that others could understand and comprehend their situation. For example, her husband Eduardo struggled with the realities of Olga Talamante's imprisonment and often viewed it as a *castigo* (punishment) but Doña Cuca refused to view it from that perspective and replied that its not a punishment but rather a *prueba* (test).²⁹ Eduardo Talamante's interpretation of the situation offered no options and portrayed Olga as a perpetrator yet on the other hand Doña Cuca's perspective offered options or choices which portrayed Olga Talamante as in a crusade for the betterment

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University Press, 1997), 226.

²⁹Sr. Y Sra. Talamante Talk about Olga, 1 November 1975, Gilroy. Tape recording in OTDC Files.

of society. Throughout her life, Doña Cuca struggled and experienced hardship and pain, yet she had not succumbed to a role of victim. She utilized the resources available, creating alternatives for herself and family. She was able to wield political power through her networks, relationships and family to create change in her life and that of her family.

A Mother's Call to Activism

Carol Hardy Fanta posits that "Latina women's political consciousness is made up of a seamless cloth in which their personal development as women is intertwined with their roles as mothers and their emergence as political activists."³⁰ No truer is this than in the case of Refugio Talamante, Doña Cuca, as she fought a sixteen month campaign for the release of Olga Talamantes. The campaign allowed Refugio to "transform organizing experiences and social networks arising from gender-related responsibilities into political resources."³¹ This should not be interpreted to mean that Doña Cuca's activism was an extension of her domestic role; rather, it was "a process of empowering

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³⁰Carol Hardy-Fanta. "Latina Women and Political Consciousness," 234.

³¹Mary Pardo, "Mexican American Women Grassroots Community Activists: 'Mothers of East Los Angeles,'" *Frontiers* 11, no. 1 (1990): 2.

[herself] so official political decision makers must listen to [her] definitions of social justice."³²

In addition to having organizing skills and social networks, Mexican women have drawn upon cultural traditions to utilize as political resources. Historian Vicki Ruiz noted, "to meet the physical and psychological challenges (and down-right assaults), Mexican women drew upon their cultural traditions for faith, strength, and identity . . . Mexicans . . . viewed their own interpretations of Catholicism as integral parts of their cultural life."³³ Indeed, Catholicism can be seen in Refugio's everyday routines and certainly during the sixteen month campaign. The next section examines how Refugio Talamante utilized her cultural traditions, organizing skills and social networks into political resources, and how she was personally transformed and empowered in this struggle.

A few days before Thanksgiving in 1974, the Talamante family received two visitors who brought news regarding their daughter in Argentina. Unfortunately, the news which they received did not coincide with the festive holiday season. Ed McCaughan and Peter Baird, two white males, in

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³²Mary Santoli Pardo, "Identity and Resistance," 4.

³³Vicki L. Ruiz, foreword to *Songs My Mother Sang to Me*, by Patricia Preciado Martin (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1992), xv.

their mid-twenties and college educated, had the difficult task of informing a middle-aged, monolingual, working class couple of their daughter's arrest in Argentina. McCaughan and Baird who lived in Oakland, were working for the NACLA (North American Committee of Latin America) organization and had been monitoring the political events and developments in Argentina at the time. In fact, McCaughan fearful for Talamante's safety had sent Olga an airline ticket for her return to the States. Instead, they received a letter from Norma Del Bonis indicating Olga Talamante had been arrested. Ed McCaughan described this task: "you know, for Olga's parents this was sort of really a bolt out of the blue."³⁴

Peter Baird described giving the news as a heavy responsibility, he recalls:

As soon as we committed ourselves with Olga's family and said we were going to be there as long as we need to be . . . I think we just felt like if something didn't happen to a certain extent it was our responsibility that it did or didn't happen.³⁵

For the Talamantes, the news did indeed hit like "a golpe."³⁶ Immediately the family, along with McCaughan and

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³⁴Ed McCaughan, Interview by author, 8 October 1998, New Orleans, LA, Telephone interview, Tape recording in possession of author. Hereafter cited as McCaughan Interview I. In addition to working with NACLA, McCaughan was a graduate student in Latin American Studies at Stanford University.

³⁵Peter Baird, Interview by author, 3 November 1998, Sacramento, Tape recording in possession of author.

Baird, began to discuss the situation and what action should be taken. Doña Cuca began to let people know of the situation and sought help from the local priests, Father García and Father Mateo Sheedy. She quickly mobilized her church network. A special Spanish-speaking mass was held for Olga Talamante at Saint Catherine Church in Morgan Hill. Next, a prayer vigil was organized in San José.³⁷ The prayer vigil had significant religious meaning in that it was held "on the feast day of Saint Stephen the first martyr who died praying for his executioners."³⁸ Although Olga Talamante did not share the same fate, her family and supporters believed nevertheless, she was at the hands of a repressive government with unknown capabilities. Prayers were deemed necessary. Many *cursillistas* helped to organize and support these events. In an interview, Doña Cuca discussed the role of the *cursillistas*.

I know that there are lots of people who are with us. This big group called the Cursellistas [*sic*] . . . do lots of actions. The group says that if a cursellista [*sic*] doesn't do action, then he's not a Cursellista [*sic*]. All of them know about our case, they all talk about it, and the majority are with

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³⁶Doña Cuca Interview I. English translation: " a blow."

³⁷*San José Mercury News*, 22 December 1974. Richard Garcia Interview, 3 November 1998.

³⁸*San José Mercury News*, 26 December 1974.

us. I would say that it's among the rich [who] are not with us, who are the most prejudiced. Right now we have people [*cursillistas*] from Gonsalez [*sic*], Soledad, K.C. [King City], Greenfield, Salinas, Castroville, Watsonville, Santa Cruz, Monterey, and Gilroy . . . all of them join together behind this petition. Some people who can't do anything concrete at least are able to help us spiritually [*sic*]." ³⁹

Doña Cuca's *cursillista* network illustrated her ability to spread attention to the case and call for help or action. It was one of the *cursillistas* who organized the prayer vigil in San José and would later organize a benefit for the campaign. Doña Cuca relied on this network as a resource for survival and political mobilization. These church networks served as a tremendous spiritual source for Doña Cuca, as did her neighborhood networks. She said, "the neighbors come over every day and tell me, '*adelante, con fuerza.*'" ⁴⁰

Her reliance on spirituality and religion as a source of strength also could be seen in her efforts to organize the campaign. The meetings held in her home usually began with a prayer, blessing, and closed with the popular *cursillista* song, *De Colores*. Committee members described those meetings this way:

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³⁹Sra. Talamante, Interview conducted by Bob Barber, 18 January 1975, Gilroy, Transcript, p. 1, OTDC File AAA: 0.

⁴⁰Ibid. English translation, "Carry on with strength."

Doña Cuca opened the meeting with a prayer and she had several of the women in the neighborhood with her and they kind of sat at one end of the house and presided over the meeting even though the whole discussion was in Spanish. That was the first time I had met her and she had a very imposing presence, that struck me right away.⁴¹

Teresa Walsh, OTDC member recalled the first meeting she attended with Doña Cuca: "I was really impressed. I felt very at ease, I mean with the Talamantes, in their house. Mrs. Talamante opened the meeting with a prayer from the Sermon on the Mount and we sang *De Colores* at the end of the meeting."⁴²

In order to gain Olga Talamante's freedom, the committee recognized it needed to do two things. The first was to acquire information and use it to educate others of her plight. Second, in order to accomplish the first, they needed money which they planned to obtain by organizing fund raising events.

During the first few months of Olga Talamante's imprisonment, the group met at the Talamante's home in Gilroy. It was at their home that the plans for the first fund-raising event developed. A "Free Olga Dinner" was held

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⁴¹Bob Barber, Interview conducted by Lori Lujan, [circa September-November 1976], Oakland, Transcript, p. 3, OTDC Files.

⁴²Teresa Walsh, Interview conducted by Bill Berkowitz, 23 August 1976, Transcript, p. 6., OTDC Files.

on February 1, 1975, at Gilroy High School.⁴³ It was estimated that over two hundred people attended. Doña Cuca prepared the enchiladas for the event. Her culinary skills did not go unnoticed. Her cooking skills gained her a notable reputation among the committee members and later would be prominently highlighted on fliers to attract people to attend the events.⁴⁴

Not only were Doña Cuca's culinary skills discovered at the "Free Olga Dinner," but also her oratory ability to capture and move a crowd with her words. Her ability to speak freely and forcefully in a sincere manner moved many people. Many committee members commented on her oratory abilities. Two of them had the following to say:

I have never seen a Mexican mother get up there and just [sound of a fist hitting the hand]. I think she used to do that a lot . . . and just speak out the way she did. It was just mesmerizing just to watch her . . . her strength and her assertiveness. She was direct . . . a lot of people don't have that [who] are college educated to

speak just from the heart and very simply but directly, but she did.⁴⁵

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⁴³*Gilroy Dispatch*, 24 January 1975.

⁴⁴"OTDC Benefits," File G: 3a, 8e, OTDC Files.

⁴⁵Annette Oropeza, Interview by author, 23 October 1998, Oakland, Tape recording in possession of author.

The second member, a white male, shared the following perceptions:

Doña Cuca could go and her strategy would be enraged . . . but it was a different kind of rage, it's a mother's, it's a penetrating rage. It's where the eyeballs just pierce right into your body.⁴⁶

Her speaking ability was an asset to bring others into the committee. Doña Cuca's name was placed prominently on leaflets featuring her as a main speaker. This was done very early in the campaign. Although, Don Lalo occasionally shared the microphone with Doña Cuca, when he spoke, it was usually brief and he would yield the microphone to his wife. On several occasions throughout the campaign, Don Lalo was present when Doña Cuca spoke, often standing next to her for support. Working class women "seldom opt[ed] to separate themselves from men and their families."⁴⁷ Doña Cuca saw her activism as a means to deal with both a family problem and her community, and she saw the fight as acts to benefit the family. Thus, she was not in competition with her husband but in need of his support.

In contrast to Doña Cuca, Don Lalo expressed his sentiments about his daughter's arrest in a different manner

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⁴⁶Bill Berkowitz, Interview by Bob Barber, [circa September-November 1976], Oakland, Transcript, p. 13, OTDC Files.

⁴⁷Mary Santoli Pardo, "Identity and Resistance", 561.

and arena. He preferred to express his feelings through music and often sang at his home or in small gatherings. He often was accompanied by Peter Baird, the musician of the committee, and they often sang the corrido *La Carcel de Cananea* as a reminder of his daughter in prison. He too exhibited his religious beliefs by making a *promesa* (promise) to God. He vowed to not shave his beard until his daughter returned safely to him and his family. This symbolic act was deeply rooted in his conviction and deep love for his daughter.

As a couple, the Talamantes continued to work with the committee and each showed growth with the experience. However, Doña Cuca's personal development was much more apparent. The first time she was asked to speak, she recalled, "*no sabía que sabía hablar.*"⁴⁸ This illustrates her awareness of her personal development and empowerment and the shaping of her personal voice. This growth continued and she became especially politicized once she began to attend functions in the Oakland and Berkeley area.

The need to increase the "Free Olga" campaign beyond Gilroy to the East Bay required for Doña Cuca to expand her familial and community boundaries. The extension of the campaign placed a heavier demand for her time for public

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⁴⁸Doña Cuca Interview I. English translation: "I did not know I knew how to speak."

speaking. She showed an ability to cross the racial, economic, and social borders that existed between small Gilroy and the Berkeley-Oakland area, the birthplace of the Free Speech Movement. She received an invitation to speak in Berkeley on February 22, 1975 at the Unitas House and, although she was unable to attend, she prepared the following statement which was read at the event:

Somos muy agradecidos a todos. Hemos conocido a tanta personas. Aún no sabíamos que había tanta gente dispuesta a ayudarnos.

Las noticias de que nuestra hija estaba presa en Argentina nos dió una pena muy grande. Pero ahora, con todo el apoyo que Uds. nos han dado, sentimos muy contentos y llenos de fuerza para seguir adelante.

Sabemos que todo se va arreglar. Y que Olga va a volver. Pero queremos que todos seguiremos adelante y unidos siempre para ayudar a otra gente que lo necesita.⁴⁹

As the months passed, Doña Cuca learned more about the situation in Argentina. She met many Chilean exiles who resided in the Bay Area, and many political activists involved in the Latin American solidarity movements, the

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⁴⁹"OTDC Benefits," File G: 2b, OTDC Files. English translation: "We are very thankful to all of you. We have met many people. Yet, we had no idea that so many would be willing to help us.

The news of our daughter held in an Argentine prison causes us great pain. But now with the great support we have received from all of you, we feel glad and full of strength to continue forward.

We know everything will work out. And Olga will return. But we want everyone to continue forward and united to help other people who need help."

United Farm workers, and the Chicano movement. This exposure, along with the letters from her daughter, had a tremendous impact on her and became evident in her speeches and interviews. In a speech addressed to the First International Women's Day Celebration held in Salinas, she poignantly expressed:

In these historic moments, all the moments that my daughter has lived, I have lived with her. Right now, I am a prisoner awaiting sentence. I realize the new life I am living. Before, I thought the world was very small. Because then, I was living a life only for myself. But now that I have met so many 'compañeros' that have offered us their help and their friendship I realize how immense the world is.⁵⁰

Indeed, Doña Cuca's world had become immense and her perspective on life began to reflect that growth, in fact, it began to reveal her consciousness as a woman addressing gender issues. "I think women must fight for equality. A woman, besides being a wife and mother has a heart just like a man's. We feel love, struggle, and work."⁵¹

Early in December, the Talamante family had been told to expect a quick resolution which would free Olga Talamante, yet their daughter remained in prison. Thereafter, Doña Cuca's pain, grief, and struggle often became themes in her speeches. What she began to do was to

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⁵⁰Bay Area Worker, March 1975, "Talamantes' public statements," File AAA: 3, OTDC File.

⁵¹Ibid.

take what is often viewed as private suffering and thrust it into the public view, thus legitimizing her activist role as a Mexican woman, mother, and worker. She defined in her own terms how people would relate to her own personal suffering and connected her suffering to other social injustices.

Nosotros hemos sido pobres. Y con esto como que nos hemos acercado más a los que sufren. No solo a mi hija, sino a las 3000 almas que están presas en la Argentina por la misma causa.⁵²

Perhaps no other speech is better remembered by the OTDC members than the one she delivered at the Starry Plough Benefit in Berkeley on February 8, 1976. Doña Cuca spoke of two things. First, she addressed the change in her life as being a new stage of life. Second, she spoke of a mother's acceptance of the unknown fate of a daughter. She described the waiting period as a journey with two stages. "He vivido dos etapas de mi vida; mi vida pasada y mi vida presente."⁵³ She reflected on her past life by pondering the question--

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⁵²"Entrevista Exclusiva con la Sra. Talamante Madre de Olga, Chicana Prisionera Politica en Argentina," *El Quijote*, 1 September 1975, 9, in "Newsclips on OT," File C: 47, OTDC Files. English translation: "We have been poor. And with this it is as if this has drawn us closer to those who suffer. Not only to my daughter but to those 3000 souls imprisoned in Argentina for the same cause."

⁵³"Discurso de Refugio Talamante," 8 February 1976, "OTDC Benefits," File G: 8d., OTDC Files. English translation: "I have lived two stages in my life; my previous life and my present."

How can one suffer and tolerate so much? The answer for her became "*porque entre más se sufre y más se lucha, más fuerza tiene uno y menos siente.*"⁵⁴ This increased awareness of her strength is attributed to the challenges that appeared because of her daughter's arrest. As a result, she was able to see the injustices, crises, and food shortages that plagued the world whereas before her world view was much restricted. This new level of political consciousness enlarged the world for her. In her former life she was only able to see her own oppression without being able to see its relationship to the world. This process of political consciousness for Latinas is described by Carol Hardy-Fanta as:

a process of making connections--between their own lives and those of others, between issues that affect them and their families in the neighborhood or community and those that affect them in the workplace. Latina women who become politicized do so, therefore, by making connections.⁵⁵

Another example of this connection is illustrated by the conversation María Acosta had with Doña Cuca:

I remember this one time in Gilroy, . . . she [Doña Cuca] said something to me like, 'Some people say

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⁵⁴Ibid. English translation: "The more one suffers and struggles, the more strength one will have and the less one feels pain."

⁵⁵Carol Hardy-Fanta, *Latina Women and Political Consciousness*, 233-34.

that Olga was a communist. What are communist? What do you think?' I remember saying that I don't know, maybe we should know what they mean by communists. Some people say things that are bad about communists that may not be true, that may be what a communist really is. She said, 'You know I think that people use the word communist like people use the word Mexican. That it's a prejudice used to degrade people, but that it's not really that way.' That really blew my mind.⁵⁶

An important source of strength for Doña Cuca was her religious belief and faith, and her ability to relate them to her daughter's activism. In a firm voice she stated:

Yo siempre he bendicionado a mis hijos. Yo estoy orgullosa de mi hija. Y si Dios me la manda, bienvenida. Y si no, bendita de ella, porque así luchando y venciendo, muriendo, es como vamos a hacer algo. Porque alguien tiene que ser el crucificado y si es ella bendito sea Dios.⁵⁷

In addition to her public speaking and fund raising activities, Doña Cuca met with several governmental officials and bureaucrats to discuss her daughter's plight and urge their support for her release. She met with the local Argentine Ambassadors, State Department officials, local congressional representatives, and national

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⁵⁶María Acosta, Interview with Bill Berkowitz, October 1976, Transcript, p. 6-7, OTDC Files.

⁵⁷*Discurso de Refugio Talamante*, OTDC Files. English translation: "I have always blessed my children. I am very proud of my daughter, and if God returns her to me, I will embrace her. If not, may God bless her. Because it is only through struggling, defeating, and dying will change occur. Because sometimes someone has to be the martyr and if it is her, blessed be God.

representatives. She met with many state officials and wrote letters to President Gerald Ford and Argentine president Isabel Perón.⁵⁸ One of her first contacts was with the Argentine Consulate in San Francisco, accompanied by Peter Baird, UCSC professor Ralph Guzman, and Father Richard Garcia.⁵⁹ Doña Cuca and members of the OTDC met with then local congressman Norman Mineta who, after meeting with the Talamantes, pledged his support. Ed McCaughan remarked "that until they visited the Talamantes he did not make a commitment".⁶⁰

She also traveled to Washington DC twice to meet with State Department officials and Embassy Officials with whom she spoke from her heart as a mother. At these meetings she consciously utilized her role as a mother as a gender strategy to ensure that the bureaucrats heard her message and to attempt to influence them. Doña Cuca was also involved in community events and public demonstrations. The OTDC organized a public protest in front of the San

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⁵⁸Letters addressed to Presidents Ford and Perón, in "Talamantes' Public Statements," File AAA: 11, OTDC.

⁵⁹"Argentine Envoy Soothes Olga's Kin; Priest Skeptical," *San José Mercury News*, 19 December 1974; "Parents of Prisoner See Consul," *San José Mercury News*, 18 December 1974.

⁶⁰Ed McCaughan, Interview by author, New Orleans, LA, Telephone Interview, Tape recording in possession of author. Hereafter, cited as McCaughan Interview II.

Francisco Embassy on the date marking the one-year anniversary of Olga's arrest.⁶¹ At another public appearance, she shared the platform with Laura Allende, sister of the late Salvador Allende of Chile. At this community event, Laura Allende connected the Chicano struggle with the Chilean struggles and Doña Cuca's struggle as a mother.⁶²

The sixteen month campaign fostered Doña Cuca's personal development and her own empowerment. She used her church and community networks as political resources. She utilized gender-based resources and skills, such as cooking at fund-raisers and speaking themes that carried the sentiments of a mother. She also interjected her own religious ideology as a vital source for her activism and made her religious beliefs visible in meetings, public addresses, and in media interviews. She made connections of her own plight with others around the world and, more importantly, with those also fighting for human rights and

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⁶¹*San Francisco Bay Guardian*, 14 November 1975. *El Tecolote*, November 1975. See also, Elias Castillo, "Consul Urged to Free Olga," *San José Mercury News*, 6 September, 1975; "San Francisco Protest for Olga Talamante Freedom," *El Mundo*, 10 September 1975.

⁶²*El Mundo*, 24 September 1975. See also, Tape recording titled, "Suni Paz, UFW, Laura Allende," Side One, OTDC Files.

social change. She was a strong force within the OTDC as well.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE CHICANA AND MEXICAN WOMEN OF THE OTDC

What united us was not that Olga was a woman but that she represented a part of the times of political progressive concern around México and Latin America. All of us involved, the women and the men [focused] not necessarily on gender issues but on political issues that we all had a commonality of beliefs in . . . .

María Acosta, OTDC Member

In the newspaper articles providing coverage of the OTDC campaign, only occasionally would the voices of the women surface. Even Doña Cuca's voice at times could be faintly heard. However, if one equates activism with speaking roles, then one limits his/her examination of women's activism and the differing ways in which they led. If one acknowledges that men and women both lead, but in different ways, then one begins to uncover the varying degrees of activism and leadership and the women's central role within the OTDC. Sociologist Karen Sacks, in her study of grassroots organizing, examined the ways in which women organized and described their leadership role as "network centers" or "centerwomen." "Women were centers and sustainers of workplace networks."¹ This is particularly true as one examines Chicana and Mexican women's political

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¹Karen Sacks, *Caring By The Hour* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 120.

activism within the OTDC as centers and sustainers of community and workplace networks. In fact, this notion of leadership was expressed by a Chicana activist, Rosie Castro, who said: "we have practiced a different kind of leadership, a leadership that empowers others, not a hierarchical kind of leadership."² The women of the OTDC utilized networks to empower themselves as well as empower others in their political work and political development.

This section will examine the activism of the Chicana and Mexican women of the OTDC. What were the antecedents of their activism? Secondly, why and how did they become involved? And, lastly, what roles did they take on within the committee? There were eleven females involved in the committee and seven were Chicana or Mexican. They were María Acosta, Lenor de Cruz, Teresa Gonzalez, Lupe Viniegra, Lori Lujan, Annette Oropeza, and Doña Cuca. The intention is not to chronicle each participant's life but rather to examine the patterns of their activism and their participation with the OTDC.³ The women's participation in the OTDC continued the historical legacy of women's involvement with mixed gender organizations and their

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²Vicki L. Ruiz, *From Out Of The Shadows*, 100.

³Doña Cuca's activism was examined in the previous chapter and will not be examined in depth in this section.

mobilizing of familial, community, and work networks toward political activism.

Antecedents to their involvement

Each of the women involved with the OTDC was shaped by one or more of the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. The second half of the 1960s saw larger numbers of Chicanas/os attending college than in preceding decades. For many Chicanas attending college provided a context to develop political consciousness. Most of the women were from working class families whose parents had no college education. The exception was Lenor de Cruz, whose father of Guatemalan background, attended college after World War II on the G.I. Bill.⁴ Eventually, all the women attended college outside the community in which they were raised.

Prior to college, de Cruz was involved with a politically-oriented group. While in high school, she was involved with a Zionist socialist youth group and "traveled back East to work on a collective farm near Princeton."⁵ In addition, her father was also involved in civil rights

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⁴After World War II, the Chicano presence on college campuses increased as a result of the G.I. Bill. Many who attended college became activists and involved themselves in many local community struggles and community organizations. See Carlos Muñoz, *Youth, Identity, Power*, 48-49.

⁵Lenor de Cruz, Interview by Bill Berkowitz, 30 August 1976, Transcript, p. 1., OTDC Interview Collection.

issues and with the Mexican American Political Association (MAPA) in Southern California. Acosta, while in college, became involved with Eugene McCarthy's presidential campaign and traveled to the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago.⁶

All the women reported being members and participating in one of the Chicano movements such as *La Raza Unida* Party, United Mexican American Students (UMAS), MEChA, or community based Chicana/o organizations. Incidentally, two of the women explicitly reported that political, cultural, and economic struggles of their families, had shaped and motivated them to get involved in community issues similar to Olga Talamante's family struggle. And, thirdly, all the women reported first-hand participation with a Latin American movement.

Some of the women were raised in predominately Chicano neighborhoods. Others were among the few Chicana/Mexicans residing in a predominantly white or black neighborhood. Five of the women were raised in two-parent families and one was raised in a single parent household. Interestingly, four of the women reported their fathers had difficult work histories due to discrimination, physical disabilities caused by poor working conditions or military service, and few job opportunities in the non-skilled trades. All but

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⁶María Acosta, Interview by author, 4 December 1998, San Francisco, Tape recording in possession of author.

one of the women reported that their mothers worked either in the formal or informal sector of the economy, usually in low paying jobs. The mothers who stayed at home became involved in their children's education by participating in activities at their school. Thus, in essence all the women expanded their familial boundaries to include work or community networks, however, this was not always done within the context of white middle class volunteerism. Often their involvement outside the home was precipitated by economic, cultural, and political constraints.⁷

Motivations

In all cases, the Chicana and Mexican women who participated in the OTDC campaign had a common interest that linked them, which was Latin America in general. One of the first words expressed by María Acosta in an interview was the fact they came together not because "Olga was a woman but she represented a . . . political progressive concern around México and Latin America."⁸ Incidentally, at that

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⁷For a historical overview of Chicana political participation see, Cynthia Orozco, "Beyond Machismo, La Familia, and Ladies Auxiliaries: A Historiography of Mexican-Origin Women's Participation in Voluntary Associations and Politics in the United States, 1870-1990," *Renato Rosaldo Lecture Series Monograph* 10 (1992-93), 37-77.

⁸María Acosta, Interview by author, 4 December 1998.

time, none of the Chicana and Mexican women reported being members in women's organizations or involvement with the women's movement. However, they all reported first-hand experience with movements in either México, Cuba, or Puerto Rico. Two of the women described their involvement with Latin American issues as a result of their travel or experience within the Chicano movement. María Acosta, upon her return from a trip to México which involved *Los Mascarones*, was impressed with their knowledge of political movements. She recalled "when I came back after that summer, I was really impressed with what was going on, and I felt like I was being stifled at Northridge. It seemed that Chicano politics had gone just so far and weren't going anywhere else."⁹ Similarly, Teresa Gonzalez said, "I looked around the Chicanos at Berkeley . . . who were very nationalistic and it was the Chicano movement and nothing outside that. It was very hard for me to relate . . . Olga somehow embodied what I was looking for . . . ." ¹⁰ For both these women, the Chicano movement served as a launching pad and as a bridge from national to international issues.

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⁹María Acosta, Interview by Bill Berkowitz, October 1976, Transcript, p. 1., OTDC Interview Collection.

¹⁰Teresa Gonzalez, Interview by Bob Barber, 16 September 1976, Transcript, p. 1, OTDC Interview Collection.

Lenor de Cruz's involvement in the Venceremos Brigade motivated her to participate in the development of a Chicano community based organization in the Fruitvale area of Oakland called *Comite de Mexico y Aztlan* (COMEXAZ), which also led to her involvement in *La Raza Unida Party*. COMEXAZ was a community organization that produced a monthly publication of indexed clippings covering seven southwestern states newspapers focusing on Chicana/o issues. It was a key agency in the Fruitvale community among Chicana/o activists.

Another member described how, on her road trip to México in a Volkswagen bug, she was exposed to the work of *Los Mascarones* who in turn politicized her and spurred her to action in the United States. For Annette Oropeza, the OTDC was the "first political organization" she became involved with. Oropeza described her México experience this way:

It was teatro night after night and meetings during the day. Discussions about where the Chicano movement was going and what it needed and what teatro could say about that . . . . I really got drenched politically by means of teatro . . . . I came back really transformed.¹¹

Both Lupe Viniegra and Teresa Gonzalez reported that their own difficult life experiences and previous

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¹¹Annette Oropeza, Interview by author, 23 October 1998, Oakland, Tape recording in possession of author.

acquaintance with Olga Talamante influenced them to participate in the OTDC. Viniegra's experience as an immigrant to this country taught her the stark realities of living in two distinct cultures. Gonzalez who grew up in San José in a family of eight lived in poverty and experienced economic and social difficulties in her family. Gonzalez had met Talamante at UCSC and became acquainted with her through their work in the Third World Resource Center. Viniegra had met Olga Talamante before and Talamante was her husband's first cousin. The only other member of the OTDC who had first-hand knowledge of Talamante was Maria Acosta. She had met her working with *Los Mascarones* in México City in 1971.

Roles and Involvement

During the early stages of the OTDC its membership consisted primarily of the Talamantes, Ed McCaughan, Peter Baird, María Acosta, Lenor de Cruz and Eddie Escobedo. Eddie Escobedo initially organized the Stanford group and later the Southern California branch of the OTDC. To understand the roles the women played in the OTDC, it is important to also examine the men's roles in relation to the women's roles. McCaughan and Baird, lived together in a house in Oakland and both knew Olga Talamante from their college years. Bob Barber also resided with them. He knew

Baird from their work together with the UFW *El Malcriado's* newspaper. Barber later joined the committee after Olga Talamante's sentencing in September. He also filled in for Ed McCaughan and Peter Baird when they left for a few months to México for their work with NACLA. In the same neighborhood across the street resided Lenor de Cruz and María Acosta, who had met in México. The connections of the members and their networks would ultimately play a part in their work.

From the committee's inception, women's networks were central to the political work as illustrated by Doña Cuca. María Acosta and Lenor de Cruz directed the dissemination of information and used their networks to inform people of Talamante's plight and to recruit members to the committee. At the time, Acosta was working with the San Francisco Mime Troupe and recruited a fellow teatro member, Esteban Oropeza. He in turn recruited his sister Annette Oropeza who later worked with COMEXAZ along with Lenor de Cruz in the Fruitvale community of Oakland. The Fruitvale community included a large Chicano working class in the early 1970s and was a vibrant community of activism. Many Chicano community-based organizations emerged during this period including the *Clinica de la Raza*, *Centro de Salud Mental*, *Centro Legal*, COMEXAZ, Spanish-Speaking Citizens Foundation, Spanish Speaking Unity Council, and *El Taller De Artes*

Graficas, graphic center of Chicano artist and activist Malaquias Montoya. The community organized around several local issues such as police harassment, immigrant rights, and the defense committee for Barlow Benavidez.

It was within this social and political milieu, that the Chicanas of the OTDC worked. Lupe Viniegra, Lori Lujan, Annette Oropeza, and Lenor de Cruz were all connected to either COMEXAZ and/or other organizations in the Chicano Fruitvale community. Interestingly, Lori Lujan and Lupe Viniegra recalled Lenor de Cruz asking them to join the committee. Thus, these women were primary movers of information within the Oakland area. Lori Lujan supported COMEXAZ' work and was also involved as a reporter with KPFA Latin American news and *El Tecolote*, a community based bilingual newspaper in San Francisco. These women were often involved in the important task of disseminating information and community education regarding the Talamante's case to the Chicano community and the progressive left community.

El Día del Barrio was one of the large community events celebrated in the Fruitvale. This annual event brought together all the Chicano based organizations and served as a community celebration and forum for community education. Many of the women involved with COMEXAZ viewed this event as an opportunity to educate the community on Olga Talamante's

case as well as the situation in Chile, thus connecting local struggles with international ones. In 1975, the event highlighted Laura Allende, sister of Salvador Allende of Chile, and Doña Cuca as keynote speakers.¹²

The women involved themselves in leafleting, selling tickets to events and raffles, letter writing, and public speaking at neighborhood events and on radio and television. Several of the women appeared on a PBS community based program called "Pa' Adelante Mujer" and discussed Olga Talamante's case. Those present included Doña Cuca, María Acosta, Lenor de Cruz, and Teresa Gonzalez.¹³

Another area of women's involvement centered around organizing fundraising events. This entailed soliciting donations from sales of the "FREE OLGA" buttons, raffle tickets, and most notably an auction. One of the best remembered events among the OTDC was the auction of a UFW flag with María Acosta serving as auctioneer at a fundraising event at La Peña. Bob Barber's impressions were:

María did this fundraising pitch that started by asking people for \$20 bills and then \$10 bills and I was horrified at the time because I didn't think it was really appropriate, but about six or seven

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¹²*El Mundo*, 24 September 1975.

¹³Flier announcing program, "Newsclips on OT," File C: 40 1/2, OTDC Files.

hundred dollars came in that night through the benefit and the fund pitch.¹⁴

Lori Lujan described the event this way: "I remember María saying, lets get those dead presidents out of your pockets. Let's see those dead presidents . . . . It was really a high energy night."¹⁵

María Acosta's *teatro* talents, which she had often used to politicize communities, were now used to raise funds for a political cause. The event at La Peña also demonstrated her ability to develop rapport with a crowd that was ethnically and economically diverse. Events held at La Peña and Starry Plough, both in Berkeley, attracted more white activists than Chicana/os. According to one of the OTDC members, the events also drew a large audience of women.

Teresa Gonzalez another OTDC member resided in the Berkeley area and her network encompassed a cross section of political activists, some academic activists, and others involved in congressional activity. She became involved after learning about Olga Talamante's arrest from a fellow Chicano student. She then contacted UCSC Latin American Professor David Sweet whom she and Talamante had known.

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¹⁴Bob Barber, Interview by Lori Lujan, [circa September-November 1976], Transcript, p. 4., OTDC Interview Collection.

¹⁵Lori Lujan, Interview by Bill Berkowitz, [circa September-November 1976], Transcript, p.1, OTDC Interview Collection.

Professor Sweet then referred her to Baird and McCaughan. They invited Gonzalez to a meeting in Gilroy early in January 1975. Teresa Gonzalez described the first meeting and how she began to get involved.

Mrs. Talamante opened the meeting with a prayer, and said welcome to our home. They were always somewhat political prayers . . . I remember Peter trying to organize it like a farmworker meeting, each of you tell me what you've done and what you think we might do. The first impulse was to go to people that I knew in official positions, political science, and ask for their advice, just to start somewhere . . . .¹⁶

Gonzalez's initial steps led to many contacts which proved beneficial to the committee. One in particular was a contact with the National Lawyer's Guild. Teresa attended the National Lawyer's Guild meeting and was introduced to Leonard Weinglass, an attorney who was receptive to Olga Talamante's case. "Somehow he seemed really appropriate for the case" recalled Gonzalez.¹⁷ She made the necessary arrangements for Peter Baird, Ed McCaughan and herself to meet Weinglass at Santa Clara University Law School, where he was giving a talk. "We talked in a coffee shop afterwards and by the end of the meeting it was clear that he knew what he was doing and the decision was made probably

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¹⁶Teresa Gonzalez, Interview by Bob Barber, 16 September 1976, Transcript., p. 3., OTDC Collection.

¹⁷Ibid., 5.

about a week later. From then on it was Peter [Baird], Ed [McCaughan] and Ed Escobedo because he was in LA [Los Angeles] that met with Lenny [Weinglass] to prepare for the trip."¹⁸

Teresa assisted with the preparations for the first Washington D.C. trip in May 1975 by creating packets of materials to be used by Weinglass and McCaughan. She also became involved with keeping abreast with Senator Cranston's office along with Bob Barber, and made several contacts with congressional staffs and aides in Washington D.C. It was one of her political contacts that suggested "you're not a lobbying group, you don't have people there to move things for you so you have to do your own."¹⁹ The group started their own lobby campaign. A second trip to Washington, D.C. was planned for early March 1976. This time their strategy was to gather congressional support to pressure the State Department.

The second trip to D.C. involved Teresa Gonzalez and Bob Barber who arrived first to begin the lobbying efforts with the congressional staff. Later, Ed Escobedo arrived followed by Peter Baird with the Talamantes. Peter Baird also assisted to solicit congressional letters of support to

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¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid., 7.

present to the State Department. They were able to obtain twenty-six letters of support from Congressmen and Congresswomen.

The letters were presented at a meeting with the State Department. Bob Barber describes the meeting this way:

I opened the meeting by making a presentation of our demands and they just said no to every one of them. And then there was kind of an uncomfortable moment there when we were all thinking, 'Well, did we blow it or what?' And then Eddy [Escobedo] and Terry picked up the ball and really started hitting them with questions with what had happened in the past . . . it turned the meeting around to where by the end we had forced them to admit that they weren't guaranteeing anything.²⁰

Although somewhat disappointed by the results of the meeting, they felt a small sense of victory in their ability to finally get the State Department to admit to their inability to assure guarantees. Teresa Gonzalez's quick thinking and articulation skills are illustrated in Barber's description. She was instrumental along with Eddie Escobedo in putting the State Department on the defensive. Teresa Gonzalez's network helped the OTDC to obtain an attorney and congressional contacts, which proved to be valuable in their trip to Washington, D.C. Neither, she nor the other members had previous experience in seeking support from Congressmen and Congresswomen but they quickly learned. Her contacts with attorneys and congressional aides would prove to be

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²⁰Bob Barber, Interview by Lori Lujan, p. 13.

valuable once Olga Talamante and others began to work for the release of the other Argentine political prisoners imprisoned with Talamante.

The leadership roles of the Chicana and Mexican women as network centers proved an invaluable asset to the work of the OTDC. The women helped raised funds to hire an attorney to conduct a fact-finding investigation. In addition, their work helped support two trips for the Talamantes and other OTDC members to Washington D.C. to lobby for the release of Olga Talamante. Many of them led in non-traditional ways, but nevertheless they were active and committed. Many of them, like Doña Cuca, saw their activism as extensions of their beliefs which was rooted for the other women in different ideologies and experiences. As one Chicana member stated "the situations are connected even though they seem fragmented, we can see the connections."²¹

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²¹Teresa Gonzalez, Interview by Bob Barber, Transcript, p. 11.

CHAPTER SIX

THE OLGA TALAMANTE DEFENSE COMMITTEE

A woman from the *Huelga*
from California land,
took the fight to Argentina
it was more than they could stand,
though they jailed, bruised, and beat her
still she came back just as strong,
for there are more of us where she came from
and we're singing the same song.¹

The Olga Talamante Defense Committee was formed shortly after the Talamantes received news of their daughter's arrest. It started out as a small group of family and friends concerned with Olga Talamante's safety and well-being, but it was later organized as a committee. The group quickly expanded and gained momentum. The members launched a letter writing campaign, organized fund-raising events, and conducted community education via public releases, radio programming, community newspapers, and television and national newspapers. They also sought legal advice and conducted their own fact finding investigation. In all, community education would prove critical to the

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¹Peter Baird, Tape recording, cassette labeled, "5/2/76 Benefit/Side III," OTDC Files. This verse composed by OTDC member Peter Baird embodied the political spirit of the times and is sung to the music of "Could of been me" by Holly Near. The song came to have significant meaning to the members of the OTDC as they worked on the sixteen month campaign for Olga Talamante's freedom.

success of the campaign and the women's networks were instrumental in this endeavor.

What community members would rise to support a campaign to gain the freedom of a young Chicana, with a farmworker background, jailed some two thousand miles away, accused of subversive activities? In the San Francisco Bay area, the Salinas Valley, and cities across the United States, there existed communities and networks ready to participate in such an effort. What type of individual would volunteer to work on such a committee? What connection would they have with Olga Talamante's plight? What experiences would they bring to such a committee and how would they put to work their activist skills?

The Olga Talamante Defense Committee (OTDC) established chapters of support in Santa Cruz, Stanford University, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Gilroy, San José, Berkeley and Oakland. This chapter focuses on the activities of the Gilroy, San José, and Berkeley-Oakland area chapter. Most of the committee members lived in the Berkeley-Oakland area with the exception of the Talamante family and their network of friends.

This chapter will examine the composition of the OTDC, and secondly, it will focus on the issues related to Olga Talamante's case and the OTDC strategies to gain her freedom. It is inevitable that in this study many elements

of and perspectives on the campaign had to be excluded, while focusing on the key issues and strategies that involved the men and women of the OTDC.

Overview of OTDC committee

The formation of defense committees to address common social problems or to campaign for the release of political activists and prisoners, such as Angela Davis, *Los Siete de la Raza*, the Chicago Seven, and the San Quentin Six, was common in the late 1960s and 1970s. However, in the scholarship of Chicano history there is a paucity of research on the nature and makeup of defense committees. What is published reveals little about the individuals who were involved in such committees. Historian Ignacio Garcia, describing the functions the defense committees of the Chicano Movement, wrote: "few of these committees raised the funds necessary for a legitimate judicial defense, so they concentrated on publicizing issues of discrimination, police brutality, and poverty and on recruiting interested Chicanos to the Movement."² Certainly this description may characterize some defense committees of that period, but it does not appear to provide an accurate assessment of the

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²Ignacio M. Garcia, *Chicanismo: The Forging Of A Militant Ethos Among Mexican Americans* (Tucson, The University of Arizona Press, 1997), 107.

OTDC. For example, the OTDC raised sufficient funds to hire an attorney to assist the committee in understanding the legal and factual basis relevant to Talamante's arrest. With the attorney, the OTDC was better prepared to provide information on the legal matters of the case to congressional leaders and to pressure the State Department to force the Argentine government to release Olga Talamante. Another example was their success in launching a national media campaign to educate the population at large of her unjust arrest and the plight of political prisoners in Latin America. And, lastly, the fact that Talamante was eventually released was a victory for the hard work and determination of the committee.

Much of the committee's success had to do with the make-up of the individual members, the talents and resources each provided, and the degree of commitment and conviction each had to Olga Talamante's cause. It appears that the Olga Talamante Defense Committee may be the first Chicana political prisoner campaign to be launched during the Chicano movement years. The Olga Talamante Defense Committee's membership was a multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-class, mixed gender, grassroots effort. According to OTDC files, there were approximately five Anglo males, three Chicano males, six Chicanas and five Anglo females, with women comprising the majority of the committee. The

majority of the committee members were college educated or were attending college, with the exception of Doña Cuca and her family. Most had some previous connection with either the anti-war movement, the United Farmworkers, the Chicano movement, or the social movements affecting Latin America. Most had a connection with Latin America, specifically México or Cuba. Several members had traveled to Cuba on one of the *Venceremos* Brigades based in the United States.³ Some of the members were acquainted with each other through their involvement in the regional groups.

Another common linkage between the Defense Committee members was their experience with *Los Mascarones*, a political teatro group based in México City. More than half of the committee members had never met Olga Talamante yet they were able to identify with her and easily committed to fight for her freedom because of the similarity between her case and the political philosophy and activism of *Los Mascarones*. Some committee members brought a wide spectrum

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³The *Venceremos* Brigades is a national organization comprised of regional committees. Their goal is to cease the information blockage imposed by the U.S. and to show solidarity with the Cuban Revolution. As a result of the Brigades, people have had the opportunity to travel to Cuba for the past 30 years, as part of work brigades (i.e., cutting sugar cane, constructing houses) and at the same time learn first hand about Cuba's political and social life.

of political experiences, while for some it was the first political campaign.⁴

The committee's structure reflected the characteristics of many grassroots campaigns which had a loose structured format, was very fluid, and allowed in and out movement. The OTDC never had an identified, or formally elected chair. The leaders preferred that they be identified as members of the OTDC. It appears that the organization was structured to allow the members to function and make decisions in a cooperative manner. That structure sometimes worked perfectly and at other times was a cause of problems, especially during the times when there was a void in the leadership and no one could exercise the authority to fill in.

Initially, the committee planned to be very inclusive in admitting members, but early on they learned some prospective members belonged to other groups such as the Socialist Worker's Party and the Communist Party who wanted to follow other agendas. For the Talamante family and Olga Talamante's friends, such as Peter Baird and Ed McCaughan, the central objective for the committee was Olga Talamante's

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⁴Although, for some it was their first campaign. They had been influenced by the social movements of the times, such as the anti-war movement, and now they had consciously chosen to act.

freedom. They declined to take on the agendas of other groups.

Ed McCaughan commented that Doña Cuca demonstrated political acumen and had interpersonal tact when dealing with committee members with different ideologies and agendas.⁵ It was very critical for the OTDC to select group alliances that supported Talamante's cause at the early stages of the committee's organization because some groups and individuals affiliated with the media attempted to discredit Olga Talamante's innocence by linking her as a member of the Montoneros and emphasized her arrest in México for carrying literature on the Chicano movement.

One major activity of the OTDC was to combat and refute some of the negative images used to describe Talamante's case. The task was for the members to create an accurate picture of Olga Talamante's activism and provide reasons for individuals to be concerned and involved.

Another important task for the committee was to learn how to use the political process in the United States, and the political and legal machinations in Argentina, to their advantage in their quest to free Talamante. These tasks were an on-going struggle throughout the sixteen month campaign. Access to accurate information and its

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⁵Ed McCaughan Interview II.

dissemination would prove, at times, frustrating. As a result, this led the OTDC to fund and conduct its own fact-seeking investigation and then develop strategies based on the findings.

Issues of the OTDC campaign

The OTDC had three concerns which directed how they organized the work. There was fear that the political turmoil in the southern region of South America would lead to increased violations of human rights against political prisoners. This became the first major issue for the committee to address--how to proceed with the cause, while ensuring that Olga Talamante remained protected from a backlash in Argentina as a result of the OTDC's work on her behalf. The second concern addressed by the committee was how to identify the process that would be put into place for gaining Talamante's freedom. The third concern was how to go about understanding the procedures that the United States government is obligated to take to protect and secure the freedom of citizens incarcerated in foreign prisons.

When Ed McCaughan learned of Talamante's arrest, he contacted a Stanford University professor involved with Amnesty International, who referred him to the International Council of Churches and George Listor, Assistant to William

Rogers who was in charge of Human Rights for Latin America.⁶ He contacted George Listor who, on November 25, 1974, sent a telegram to the United States Embassy in Argentina with a request that the Embassy staff inquire and make a report to him on Olga Talamante's status. On November 30, 1974, the Embassy sent Listor a report that confirmed her arrest and detention. As this time, Listor assured McCaughan and Baird that he would make a request to the Embassy that a staff member be sent to Azul to visit Olga Talamante and inquire as to her status.

The U.S. Embassy compound is located in Buenos Aires, approximately two hundred miles from Azul. An official was assigned to visit Olga Talamante in prison. After the meeting he reported that she was doing well and appeared in good health.⁷ However, he failed to mention in his report that Olga Talamante informed the official that she had been tortured by Federal police with electrical shock. It was George Listor who informed Peter Baird and Ed McCaughan that Olga Talamante had been tortured with electricity.⁸

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⁶*Gilroy Dispatch*, 4 December 1974.

⁷*Gilroy Dispatch*, 6 December 1974.

⁸*San Francisco Chronicle*, 7 December 1974. See also, *San José Mercury News*, 7 December 1974. The San Francisco paper reported Peter Baird as having received the news of the torture. The San José paper reported Ed McCaughan as having received the news.

The Committee members believed early on that her case was expected to be heard in court before December 25, 1974, which raised hope with her family and friends that she would be home by the holidays. However, consular officials reported that an Argentine lawyer, Alfredo Cuesta, had been assigned to her case, and therefore she had not requested any help on the part of the Embassy staff.⁹ A few days later the scenario changed. Journalist Jonathan Kandrell reporting from Buenos Aires for the *New York Times* made the following comments about Olga Talamante's case:

The lawyer who initially represented her has dropped the case, and the court is supposed to select another lawyer to defend her and her companions. There is no indication when charges will be brought into court, according to the United States Embassy.

According to the United States Ambassador, Robert C. Hill, Miss Talamante did not seek to inform the embassy of her arrest nor did she request aid from United States officials here.¹⁰

The story raised three key issues for the OTDC. First, was it possible for Olga Talamante to receive adequate and competent legal representation to litigate the case within the context of the state of siege and at a time period when Argentine attorneys or judges who sympathized with the left were likely to face threats or possible assassination? The

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⁹*San Francisco Examiner*, 4 December 1974.

¹⁰*New York Times*, 10 December 1974.

Argentine judge presiding over Olga Talamante's case informed her that "she had a right to legal representation but that the American Embassy could not pay for it."¹¹ At the time, the Talamante family lacked the financial resources to try to seek legal representation. Ed McCaughan, determined to seek Talamante's freedom, had sent a telegram to the "embassy offering help in payment of legal fees, adding, 'Let us know the amount and where we should send the money'."¹² This case illustrates how Olga Talamante's parents would not have had the economic means to obtain equal representation if it had not been for the generosity of other committee members. The OTDC was the vehicle which provided the Talamantes access to legal representation for their daughter through funds obtained from the numerous benefits, fund-raisers, and *comidas*.

Kandrell's article raised a second issue--questioning what rights and procedures were involved in the legal process to litigate a common case in Argentina and what was reasonable for sentencing after conviction? It was known that with the state of siege in effect authorities could detain people without charges. In a letter, Olga Talamante described the legal process and state of siege paradox:

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¹¹*San José Mercury News*, 18 December 1974.

¹²*Ibid.*

Two of the friends presently in jail with us have been found innocent of all charges by the judicial power, but they cannot be released due to their being under the executive power. They are free but cannot be given their freedom! That gives you an idea of the scene here . . . .¹³

During this period, the executive branch of government often had veto power over the judicial process. The judicial process remained in effect thus maintaining some semblance of normalcy. Yet given this paradox, the Embassy and State Department kept giving false hopes for a quick resolution. Even the Argentine Consul in San Francisco had no idea how long it might be before the case would go to trial and was quoted as stating "our court procedures are quick."¹⁴ The quick court procedures never materialized in this case. In fact, there appeared to have been some miscommunication between the U. S. Embassy and the U.S. State Department on the Argentine legal process. On January 15, 1975, the *Gilroy Dispatch* reported:

Olga was found guilty January 9 by an Argentine judge without a formal trial. The United States Embassy in Argentina has assigned an attorney to represent Miss Talamante. She was found guilty of the five counts including violations of a weapons

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¹³Olga Talamante, Argentina, to Ed McCaughan, Oakland, 7 January 1975, letter in "Letter from OT," File E, OTDC Files.

¹⁴*San José Mercury News*, 19 December 1974.

law, subversive actions, resisting arrest and assault on a police officer. The fifth charge is unknown.

Then two days later the following article was printed, "Talamante conviction statement retracted."¹⁵ The article reported:

According to a cable from the American Embassy in the South American country to the United States state department in Washington, the confusion arose because the Argentine government does not follow a legal code similar to the American code of justice, but rather employs a Naopleonic Code.¹⁶

These events raised serious questions about the understanding by the U.S. Embassy officials of the legal process in a different country. Is it not the role of the U.S. Embassy to protect the interests and rights of its citizens so that they receive full protection from a foreign country's laws? Congressman Norman Mineta issued the statement "that a misunderstanding about the nature of the Argentine judicial process led to the conclusion by some Americans that a recent hearing represented an official pronouncement of guilt."¹⁷ Since Argentina maintained a Naopleonic Code of justice, and given the political act that

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¹⁵*Gilroy Dispatch*, 17 January 1975.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷*Ibid.*

suspended individual protections, the judicial process became more complicated.

The third issue that arose from the Kandrell article is the posture of the American Embassy that placed the sole responsibility on Olga Talamante to have to initiate contact with them. According to Article 36 of the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations, the host country must inform the prisoners of their rights, one of which includes their right to have them notify their country's Embassy. No mention of this was ever reported in the newspapers. In a State Department report, the question was raised: "We do not know at this time whether or not she was informed by the Argentine authorities as to her rights to ask for access to a Consular Officer as specified by the Convention."¹⁸

OTDC Strategy

As early as December 10, 1974 signs of misinformation and miscommunication, false promises of Olga Talamante's

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¹⁸Department of State, Memorandum titled "Background-Recent Developments, Case of Ms. Olga Talamante, December 17, 1974", in "State Department Documents and Communications with OTDC," File B, OTDC Files. Also, in a letter from Congressman Norman Mineta to William Rogers, State Department, 16 March 1976, Mineta writes, "It has been substantiated that the U.S. Embassy in Buenos Aires was not notified of Ms. Talamante's arrest in accordance with the regulations of the Geneva Convention." Letter in "Chisolm/Mineta" File DC: 4-1, OTDC Files.

release and uncertainty of her representation became apparent, and the OTDC recognized the need to raise money to secure their own legal counsel to assess the situation first hand. The OTDC publicly announced their intentions at their first fundraising event to send an attorney and Mrs. Talamante to Argentina as "the most effective way of securing her freedom."¹⁹ It had become apparent that any state-appointed lawyer in Argentina assigned to Talamante's case may not be in any position to win Talamante's release under any circumstances.

The preparations for the trip to Argentina got underway. The purpose of the trip would be to gather, first hand, the facts in detail about Olga Talamante's case without compromising her safety. The committee decided it would be safer and more practical to send Ed McCaughan and attorney Leonard Weinglass to Argentina. Leonard Weinglass was referred to the OTDC by member Teresa Gonzalez and was contracted to represent the family because of his prior experience working in the release of other political prisoners "and was one of the defense attorneys in the Chicago Seven and Daniel Ellsberg" trial.²⁰ The trip,

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¹⁹*Gilroy Dispatch*, 24 January 1975.

²⁰Bill Glines, "U.S. Could Have Freed Olga Talamante Long Ago," *San José Mercury News*, 29 May 1975.

planned for ten days, began in Washington D.C. with a scheduled meeting with Argentine Ambassador Alejandro Orfila. The Ambassador cabled authorities in Argentina requesting assistance for Weinglass and Ed McCaughan.

In the ten day period they were able to meet with U.S. Embassy officials in Buenos Aires, review court documents, meet with the court presiding judge, and speak to the defense attorney and state prosecutor. They also reviewed the court records and file accompanied by a noted criminal attorney who had been recommended by the Churches on International Affairs of the World Council of Churches.²¹ They were allowed to visit with Olga Talamante in the prison.

Weinglass, in a twelve page report to Congressman Norman Mineta and Senator Alan Cranston, detailed the findings of their trip:

1. No formal criminal complaint had been filed by the prosecutor; the Embassy was not aware of this.²²
2. Because of the state of siege, it was not known, if upon release of the judicial process, Olga Talamante would be

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²¹Leonard I. Weinglass, Los Angeles, to Genaro R. Carrio, Argentina, 4 April 1975, letter in OTDC Files.

²²Leonard I. Weinglass, Los Angeles, to Senator Cranston and Congressman Mineta, Washington, D.C., 21 May 1975, Summary Report of Investigation in "OTDC Documents For Public Distribution," File A: A-12, OTDC Files.

subjected to the executive power. The U.S. Embassy did not know. It was determined by the attorney that she was "in fact, subject to the executive power and would be detained upon her release in July."²³

3. The Embassy was under the assumption that Talamante could be deported regardless of the imposition of the Executive Order. It was learned after checking with immigration authorities that "the executive power actually takes priority over the deportation order."²⁴

4. In regards to the torture, Olga Talamante had complained to a federal judge at the police headquarters. The next "day she was forced to sign a written declaration with a gun pressed against her head."²⁵ When transferred to the prison, she was examined and evidence appears in the Court's summary as: "Found red marks on various parts of her body and could not determine their origins."²⁶

The report noted, "Olga's story of torture is therefore confirmed by the fresh complaint to the trial judge on the occasion of his visit on November 13th and the prison

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²³Ibid., 5.

²⁴Ibid., 6.

²⁵Ibid., 7.

²⁶Ibid.

physician's examination of November 14th."²⁷ Furthermore, it was learned that the Embassy officials never read the Court summary and were unaware of this documentation.

5. It was also learned from Olga Talamante's attorney that the weapons allegedly found in the house were "identical by serial numbers to weapons found in three other police raids on three different houses."²⁸ Furthermore, it was determined Olga Talamante was not in the house at the time of the arrest and had no knowledge of the weapons. It was also discovered that the Embassy officials never met or discussed Olga Talamante's case with her attorney.

Weinglass, concludes his report with:

In one short week, the lack of information, misinformation and erroneous assumptions which have characterized the handling of her case by the Embassy were clarified by two people uninitiated into the judicial and executive process of Argentina . . . . There appears to be no adequate explanation for the failure of the United States authorities in Buenos Aires to at least discover the facts, at a minimum, relating to her illegal detention and torture.²⁹

The visit to Argentina proved invaluable. It uncovered a lot of information which up to that time had not been available, and it also revealed that the Embassy had not

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²⁷Ibid., 7-8.

²⁸Ibid., 8.

²⁹Ibid., 10.

followed through in their promises to conduct an investigation of the facts. The Committee received a small ray of hope that Olga Talamante would be released in July, 1975, after a promise was received from State Department officials that they would do whatever was necessary to secure her release. But in actuality there was no assurance because no one could predict how the executive branch would respond. Due to the labor strikes and unrest, the spiraling inflation, and the continued campaign against leftist activists, the court postponed the sentencing to September, 1975.

During the interim months, between May and September, 1975, the Committee learned that Dante Ipolito, the Federal Judge assigned to the case had been threatened for expressing sympathetic comments on the case.³⁰ Also, the Committee learned that the family which had housed Ed McCaughan while in Argentina had been searched and the residents questioned shortly after his departure to the United States.³¹ Olga Talamante relayed information to the OTDC that her male friends had been transferred to Sierra

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³⁰Olga Talamante, Argentina, to Ed McCaughan, Oakland, 2 September 1975, letter in "Letter from OT," File E, OTDC Files.

³¹Ed McCaughan Interview by author, 7 January 1999, New Orleans, LA, Telephone interview, Tape recording in possession of author.

Chica, a prison known specifically to house political prisoners.³² In June the prison administration imposed stricter regulations relating to inmate visits. Political prisoners were allowed to receive visits only by direct relatives. Until then, this rule had been relaxed, allowing friends with special permission to visit Olga Talamante. The enforcement of the rule meant that Talamante could have no visitors. In fact, Talamante learned that one of her friends, who came to visit, had been questioned by the police, harassed at her home, and threatened not to visit her otherwise she would be arrested.³³ At the same time that conditions in Argentina worsened so did the conditions confronting Olga Talamante.

In September 1975 Talamante was sentenced to 3 years in jail on charges of "subversion," a sentence which Weinglass had predicted. However, the time arrived to see if the promises of the U.S. Embassy to assure her deportation would materialize.

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³²Olga Talamante, Argentina, Letter to Ed McCaughan, Oakland, 16 June 1975, letter in "Letter from OT," File E, OTDC Files. It is reported in *Nunca Mas!*, Sierra Chica became a detention center for political prisoners where repression escalated after the military coup.

³³Olga Talamante, Argentina, to Ed McCaughan, Oakland, 18 July 1975, letter in "Letter From OT," File E, OTDC Files.

Shortly after she was sentenced, Talamante and her friends appealed the three year prison term. State Department officials reacted to the appeal unfavorably and indicated that the action taken by Olga Talamante had "apparently disrupted the effort."³⁴ It was reported that the State Department officials were negotiating the release of Olga Talamante on "conditional parole" and then she would be deported. It was later learned that Talamante would not have met the conditions for parole because her visa expired while she was in prison and she could not meet the employment requirement. Once again the State Department placed the sole responsibility for their inability to gain her release on Olga Talamante's actions.

In a letter to Ed McCaughan, she conveyed the reasons and thoughts on the appeal:

You must understand that if I, or we, didn't appeal that meant (legally speaking) that we/I accepted the verdict. Besides, [neither] the embassy or anybody else ever gave me the assurance that if I didn't appeal I would be shipped home! This must be understood by everybody back home so that they won't be fooled by what the embassy claims. As far as my not wanting to leave, it's entirely false.³⁵

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³⁴*San José Mercury News*, 16 October 1975.

³⁵Olga Talamante, Argentina, to Ed McCaughan, Oakland, 7 November 1975, letter in "Letter From OT," File E, OTDC Files.

From the beginning Olga Talamante maintained her innocence and appeared to be struggling with what was morally right and politically expedient as resolutions to her situation. In a letter addressed to OTDC, Attorney Weinglass shared his perspective on the situation:

I don't know what to make of Olga's situation. They [State department] hint that if she were properly advised she would not have taken the appeal. Now they say she won't abandon it either. The State Department loves to speak of "her solidarity" with the other defendants. My own observation was that all of the defendants agreed that Olga should be returned to the U.S. forthwith.³⁶

The events that occurred once again raised the question of the role of the Embassy and State Department in monitoring and advising Olga Talamante and how much pressure they were willing to apply on the Argentine officials for her release. The *Gilroy Dispatch* in an editorial had the following to say:

There are hundreds of Olga Talamantes sacrificed throughout the world because of a state department which would rather play ball with dictatorships than protect American citizens. The citizens with political clout and corporate protection receive State Department aid. Those without, languish in foreign jails.³⁷

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³⁶Leonard I. Weinglass, Los Angeles, to Bob Barber, Oakland, 2 December 1975, letter in OTDC Files.

³⁷*Gilroy Dispatch*, 10 October 1975.

From the OTDC standpoint, it became imperative to pressure the State Department to negotiate with Isabel Perón's government for her release. In support, Congressman Mineta personally wrote a letter to Henry Kissinger, Secretary of State urging her release and described the handling of her case as "a sordid episode."³⁸

In the months ahead, the OTDC focused its efforts on gathering support from various organizations such as the National Women's Political Caucus, the National Council of Churches, the United Auto Workers of America, the United Farm Workers, *El Congreso*, and numerous members of Congress.³⁹ Simultaneously, the OTDC continued the letter-writing campaign and a public education campaign through talks on radio, television, and letters to newspapers. They led demonstrations at the Argentine Embassy offices in San Francisco and Los Angeles. In addition, they continued to raise funds to send the Talamantes and OTDC members Bob Barber, Peter Baird, and Teresa Gonzalez to lobby and solicit letters of support. Utilizing Congressman Mineta's office as an OTDC headquarters, its members began the work. The lobbying

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³⁸*San Francisco Examiner*, 9 October 1975.

³⁹See File D.C. 3: "March 18 OTDC Meeting with State Department--presentation of HK letters," 3-1, OTDC Files.

effort included the procurement of letters of support from seven senators and twenty-four members of the House urging the State Department to exhaust all possible resources to free Talamante, who had been imprisoned by then for sixteen months.⁴⁰

As part of the OTDC lobbying efforts, members also met with the deputy assistant secretary for Inter-American Affairs. Those present at this meeting included representatives from Mineta's office, the UAW, the National Women's Caucus, and the National Council of Churches. Doña Cuca addressed members of the Inter-American Affairs Council and made a plea for the release of her daughter.⁴¹ Yet no assurances could be given to the Talamante family.

Shortly upon their return from Washington, D.C., on March 24, 1976, the family and OTDC members received news that a military coup had occurred in Argentina. The news spurred the OTDC once again into a flurry of action calling and urging others to call the State Department for Olga Talamante's immediate release and expressing their concern for her safety and imminent danger. Responding to the latest military coup, Congressman Norman Mineta and

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⁴⁰*Los Angeles Times*, 21 March 1976; *San José Mercury News*, 29 March 1976.

⁴¹*Gilroy Dispatch*, 12 March 1976.

Congresswoman Shirley Chisolm stepped up their efforts to urge the U.S. State Department to release Talamante.⁴² In addition, California Assemblywoman Leona Egeland introduced a resolution in the State Assembly urging "President Ford to work for the release of Olga Talamante."⁴³ At a press conference in Sacramento Doña Cuca and Egeland urged "California residents to write the President and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger urging them to work for Olga's release, especially in light of the current political situation."⁴⁴

Coupled with this action were also very personal thoughts about Olga Talamante's safety. One of the OTDC members after having learned of the military coup had the following to say:

The military started taking over and we hit a big moment of crisis about what to do about it . . . we all tried to figure out what the hell we would do and how could we face the situation.⁴⁵

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⁴²Norman Mineta and Shirley Chisolm, Washington, D.C., to William D. Rogers, Washington, D.C., 16 March 1976, letter in "Chisolm/Mineta 'Dear Colleague', letter in File DC 4: DC 4-1, OTDC Files.

⁴³*Gilroy Dispatch*, 26 March 1976.

⁴⁴"Resolution Urges Olga's Release," *Gilroy Dispatch*, 26 March 1976.

⁴⁵Bob Barber, Interview by Lori Lujan, [circa September-November 1976], Transcript, p. 13., OTDC Interview Collection.

Perhaps the news of the coup hit Doña Cuca the hardest but her relentless faith and commitment did not allow her to despair. In the evening of Saturday, March 27, 1976, the Talamante family received a call from a State Department official informing them that Olga Talamante was now on a plane to the United States. Soon news of her release spread throughout the community, the state, and the nation. Family, friends, and reporters gathered at the Talamante home. Congressman Mineta drove to Gilroy that night to be near the Talamante family.⁴⁶ Ed McCaughan, Olga Talamante's close friend, upon receiving the news, flew to New York to greet her and accompany her back to the San Francisco Bay Area.

Olga Talamante arrived in San Francisco, on a Sunday afternoon and as one reporter described those awaiting her arrival greeted her with shouts of "VIVA OLGA! That was the cry that welcomed Olga Talamante, flanked by her parents, as she stepped into a San Francisco Airport arrival area a few minutes past noon."⁴⁷ Waiting in the arrival area were many friends and some supporters. Doña Cuca describes this moment this way:

We hardly slept at all last night . . . . It all

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⁴⁶*Gilroy Dispatch*, 29 March 1976.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*

happened so fast that we hardly had time to realize it was really happening. I thank God and all the people who helped to bring her home.⁴⁸

This moment captured all the struggles, commitment and determination of the OTDC committee members. For the OTDC, the victory could not have materialized without the talents of the many members. One talent in particular was Doña Cuca's culinary skills, as one writer observed, "life must have seemed at times like one giant enchilada because she did much of the food preparation for the many suppers and benefits."⁴⁹ It was estimated that OTDC raised \$6000 by food sales.⁵⁰ In addition, the Talamantes, Baird and McCaughan made estimates that the phone bills totaled \$2000 for phone calls, made within and outside of the United States.⁵¹ Many of the OTDC members volunteered hundreds of relentless hours making phone calls, holding press conferences, speaking at meetings, organizing benefits, soliciting signatures, writing articles for community newspapers, speaking at college campuses, stuffing envelopes, leafleting, serving food, and seeking donations. For some members, the OTDC reaffirmed their commitment to other causes such as the Latin American struggles, the

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⁴⁸*Los Angeles Times*, 29 March 1976.

⁴⁹*San José Mercury News*, 29 March 1976.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*

⁵¹*Ibid.*

Chicano movement, and the UFW. For Doña Cuca a working class mother, it was an empowering and politicization process and a reaffirmation of her religious faith. For other members the OTDC reaffirmed a deep friendship embodied in a political culture that was cemented and became seamless.

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Olga Talamante Defense Committee Interview Collection. Interview transcripts in the possession of Olga Talamante.

Letters from Olga Talamante to Refugio Talamante, from Argentina to Gilroy, 1973 to 1976. Personal collection of Refugio Talamante.

Letters from the Olga Talamante Defense Committee Members to Peter Baird, from Oakland, California to México City, October 1975 to January 1976. Personal Collection of Peter Baird.

Acosta, Maria. Interview with Bill Berkowitz, October 1976, transcript. Olga Talamante Defense Committee Interview Collection.

Baird, Peter. Interview by Kathy Connell, [circa September-November 1976], transcript. Olga Talamante Defense Committee Interview Collection.

Barber, Bob. Interview by Lori Lujan, [circa September-November 1976], transcript. Olga Talamante Defense Interview Collection.

Berkowitz, Bill. Interview by Bob Barber, [circa September-November 1976], transcript. Olga Talamante Defense Interview Collection.

De Cruz, Lenor. Interview by Bill Berkowitz, 30 August 1976, transcript. Olga Talamante Defense Committee Interview Collection.

Gonzalez, Teresa. Interview with Bob Barber, 16 September 1976, transcript. Olga Talamante Defense Committee Interview Collection.

Lujan, Lori. Interview with Bill Berkowitz, [circa September-November 1976], transcript. Olga Talamante Defense Committee Interview Collection.

Viniegra, Lupe. Interview by Bob Barber, 20 October 1976, transcript. Olga Talamante Defense Committee Interview Collection.

Walsh, Teresa. Interview by Bill Berkowitz, 23 August 1976, transcript. Olga Talamante Defense Committee Interview Collection.

Visual Media

CHICANO! 4 vols. Produced by National Latino Communications Center and Galan Productions, 1996. Videocassettes.

Olga Talamante Defense Committee Poster Collection. Posters in possession of Olga Talamante.

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