

The Last Zapatistas Forgotten Heroes

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Photos by Sarah Perrig

Born in 1896, Colonel Emeterio Pantaleón still fights for peasants' rights in Morelos.

*We are not fish that we live from the sea,
We are not birds that we live on air,
We are men who live from the land.*

A peasant from Morelos

The sacred book of the Maya, the *Popol Vuh*, says that man was made from corn. Anyone who has visited the Cacaxtla murals painted by the Chicalanca Olmecs in the eighth century will already know how important these origins are throughout Mesoamerica. One of the paintings depicts a corn field in

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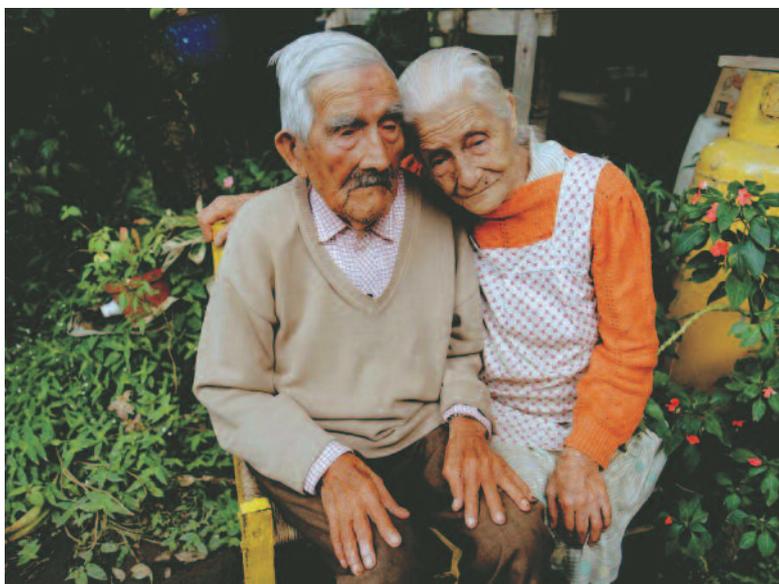
which all the ears have human faces. We Mexicans are men of corn. But we have forgotten this; so much so that most of the corn consumed in Mexico is imported.

When Mexico-Tenochtitlan fell on August 13, 1521, Cuauhtémoc (or “falling eagle”), the last Aztec *tlatoani* made a prophesy, now part of Mexico’s oral tradition: Our sun has left us, he has left us in the shadows, we know he will return to illuminate us once again. While he dwells in the house of the dead, there in our houses, mothers and fathers must teach their children how one day we shall rise reunited gaining strength from the new sun to fulfill our destiny. These words spelled hope for a people condemned at the time to domination.

The war of independence, the nineteenth-century civil wars including the war of the Reform and the Revolution were fought among criollos, people of mestizo blood or foreigners.

Indigenous people were never protagonists in any central struggle in Mexico; repeatedly used as cannon fodder, their voice was always forgotten. That is until 1910, when Emiliano Zapata headed up a revolution against the established order. Even though he began by defending the land in his native Anenecuilco, his struggle attracted supporters all over the country and became a

national movement, the first that really included “profound Mexico” in a national project. The taking of Mexico City and the triumphal entrance of Francisco Villa’s and Emiliano Zapata’s peasant armies December 6, 1914, is the only historical event in Mexico in which indigenous people participated as the origin and aim of the struggle. Cuauhtémoc’s prophesy seemed to be coming true. Hope was transformed into victory. Nevertheless, neither Zapata nor Villa had political ambitions, and so they formed a revolutionary government to represent their struggle and left for home to be near their people. This is how the Zapatista Commune was formed, an attempt to carry out a national project based on Mexican specificities and roots. For the entire year of 1915, the state of Morelos was truly free and sovereign. “For us, the commune was the triumph of the revolution,” says 98-year-old veteran Mauricio Ramírez Cerón, a Zapatista intelligence agent. “For the first time we were autonomous and we worked for ourselves, not for a boss or the corrupt government. I remember how enthusiastically everyone worked. It was like a miracle. But it wasn’t a miracle that had come out of thin air. It was a miracle we had fought for and that we deserved, a miracle for which many of our comrades had given their lives.” But



Pictured here with his wife, Private Valeriano Villamil joined Zapata’s army to avenge the government’s murder of his father.



Mauricio Ramírez Cerón, born in 1903, acted as a spy when he was still a child.

the Zapatista miracle could not survive. “Venustiano Carranza had no stomach for us Indians being free. I think he was jealous...and that was when he brought in the whole army to finish us off.”¹

With Villa defeated in the north, Carranza used all his forces to fight the last holdout of “barbarism” that stood in his way to the presidency of Mexico. But the residents of Morelos considered themselves Zapatistas first; so, when he went up against Zapata, he went up against the entire state.

With the constant government attacks, Emiliano took refuge in the mountains and kept the struggle alive using guerrilla warfare until 1919. In that year, he circulated a manifesto originally written October 20, 1913, which read, “We will not cease for a moment in our struggle until, victorious, we can guarantee with our own head the advent of a time of peace based on justice and, as a result, economic freedom. It must always be remembered that we do not seek honors, we do not hope for rewards, that we will simply live up to our solemn commitment to give bread to the disinherited and a free, peaceful, civilized homeland to the generations of the future.”²

A few days later, Emiliano Zapata would be gunned down, betrayed by Pablo González and Jesús Guajardo, who were applauded by Pres-

ident Venustiano Carranza. The hope of redemption, or simply of a life with dignity for the peasants and indigenous people of Morelos lay on the ground at the Chinameca hacienda April 10, 1919.

Two years ago, I set myself the task of seeking out the last “men of corn,” the last surviving combatants of the legendary Liberating Army of the South, the last Zapatistas, to do a documentary film.

Little by little, I made friends with them. These centenarians had experienced slavery on the haciendas, the revolutionary war and 70 years of PRI dictatorship and were now part of Mexico’s supposed transition to democracy. They were men with much more far-reaching opinions than I had expected.

After living in the countryside for months, I found a history that was completely different from the one told in textbooks. These men’s absolutely realistic testimonies showed the true face of the history of Mexico.

“One day my father and I saw how the hacienda owner shoved a peon, one of my father’s fellows, because he had answered him back,” says soldier Felipe Ramos Vargas, born in 1901. “The peon fell into the tank of sap and was cooked to death.”



Feliciano Mejía, a courier who hid messages in his sandals, is now a sculptor.



Doña Concepción was one of many *soldaderas* who served in Zapata’s army.



Private Concepción Amazende Choca, born ca. 1889, was a pottery merchant when he joined up.



Felipe Ramos Vargas (1901-1999) joined the army at 13 after being beaten by a hacienda owner. He served directly under Zapata.



Don Feliciano.

“Carranza brought the Yaquis to fight Zapata. They forcibly recruited them in their homelands and brought them here as cannon fodder. I heard Obregón himself tell them, ‘Go on, go on [into battle]! If you die, you’ll all be reborn in your homelands.’ And, since what they wanted was to go home, they fought all the harder... And all that just to end up dead on the battlefield.” This is the declaration of foot soldier Valeriano Villamil, who added, “The government gave the Yaquis and their soldiers a marihuana cigarette and a piece of brown sugar before every battle to make them fearless.”

“To make a bomb, we used any kind of skin, a cow hide or a pigskin. We would fill it with bits of iron and wrap it up and put a fuse on one end. When the government came, we would light it and throw it at them from about 10 meters away. It would slaughter people,” said Colonel Emerterio Pantaleón. “The houses had double walls with hidden entrances so that when the government came all us women would hide there,” says *soldadera* (a woman foot soldier) Irene Clara Villalba.

“I remember one day my mama was saving the last hen we had so we could eat it, and then the Zapatistas arrived. So, my mama hid my little brothers and me together with the hen under the covers, but the hen started to suffocate and cackle. The Zapatistas found us and my mother begged them not to take the last hen she had. The head of the troops said not to worry, that they weren’t going to touch the hen. My mother was happy, but the commander said that they were going to take me along because they needed a *soldadera*. So they took me away. That man was later my husband, but he’s dead now,” says *soldadera* María García Rogel widow of Sánchez.

The most controversial event was the death of Zapata: many from Morelos refused to accept that it had happened. “No, he didn’t die. His close friend died because another friend took Zapata away, an Arab friend; he took him to Arabia and that’s how we know he didn’t die because Nicolás Zapata [Zapata’s son] told me. ‘Don’t you believe it, Audias,’ he said to me,

‘Don’t you believe what people say. My father is alive and any day now I’ll take you to him,’” says Audias Anzures Soto, a 102-year-old Zapatista soldier. This messianic vision of the return of Zapata is linked to other testimonies that identify him with the myth of the reincarnation of the priest Ce Acatl Topiltzin Quetzalcóatl, a myth deeply rooted in the towns around the Tepozteco mountain in Morelos.

Colonel Emeterio Pantaleón, born in 1896, says that on his way to the meeting with the traitor Guajardo, Zapata met some washerwomen at a stream and, “The women said that they hadn’t come to wash but just to make time to be able to tell Zapata that the night before they had been serving dinner to Captain Guajardo and had heard about the treachery and that he should go back and not go into the hacienda because they were going to kill him. With that, General Jesús Salgado said to Zapata, ‘Listen, compadre, I know you’re brave but they’re going to kill us, penned in in the hacienda patio, they’re going to give it to us. We’ve loved each other all our lives and I promised to give my life for you, and I’m going to.’”

Hope for the return of the hero, a local interpretation of Cuauhtémoc’s prophesy, has kept the peasants in the Morelos countryside united.

However, today, this Zapatismo is confronting an enemy that it never imagined it would have. The mass media has begun to sow discord and division in the countryside, as it broadcasts messages that foment ambition, envy and other vices engendered by the wish to “have,” counterposed to the desire to “share” that until recently was the rule in the area. This, together with the Carlos Salinas administration’s changes in Article 27 of the Constitution to promote the sale and purchase of the land, have sunk Morelos in a chaos of urban and rural development, whose most noticeable symptoms are unemployment, crime, prostitution and drug use, not to mention the ecocide plaguing the region. “What used to be cultivated fields is now covered with buildings and foundations for supposed housing projects in places that don’t even have basic services



Private Marcelino Anrubio Montes said, “Zapata wanted something beautiful: for all of us to have a safe place to live and enough to eat”



The land left to Lieutenant Galo Pacheco Valle by Zapata was taken away from him by Morelos Governor Jorge Carrillo Olea in the 1990s.



Matías Cruz Arellano, a corrido writer, picked up a guitar instead of a gun.



Captain Baldomero Blanquet accompanied Zapata and Madero in Mexico City. "We put Madero in the National Palace and then he dismissed us courteously and left Porfirio Díaz's people in our place. They betrayed him. That was his mistake."

yet," says agricultural engineer Wolfango Aguilar Flores. "The peasants who have had to sell their lands often end up as beggars on the streets of Cuautla, Cuernavaca or Mexico City, and others have had to emigrate abroad because selling their land makes them outcasts in their towns for having betrayed the legacy that General Zapata left them at the cost of fire and blood."

"We're returning to the times of the latifundia under Porfirio Díaz!" shouts 104-year-old Lieutenant Galo Pacheco Valle. "Today injustice, ambition and tyranny reign, and that's the truth!" Private Audias Anzures pounds his cane on the ground for emphasis, saying, "What good was Zapata's revolution to us if we can no longer grow crops because all the water is contaminated, because the fertilizers and insecticides the government gives us have eroded our lands, because the foreign companies have eradicated the trees and now there's no rain? What good did the revolution do? None, because today we're worse off than we were during the Spanish inquisition."

This rethinking of this part of Mexican history needed a form of expression. With the support of the Autonomous University of the State of Morelos, photographer Manuel Peñafiel, Sarah Perrig and I were able to film all these survivors

for a documentary entitled *The Last Zapatistas. Forgotten Heroes*.

Of all the Zapatistas we interviewed, only eight are still alive. The others have gone, gone with the pain of an ailing homeland that had forgotten them. When we asked 101-year-old Captain Manuel Carranza Corona what his demands would be if today he found he needed to take up arms again, he answered with only two words. But we did not hear his answer because a moment later, he stopped breathing. The next day, when I had the time to view the rushes of the interview, I raised the volume and I could clearly hear those two words. "Land and Liberty," he said.

For those of us who have had the chance to work on this project and, in general, for me, meeting these forgotten heroes has been a reconciliation with "profound Mexico" and the most rewarding experience of my life. ■■■

NOTES

¹ All quotes from Zapatista soldiers are from interviews with the author.

² Emiliano Zapata, *Manifiestos* (Mexico City: Ed. Antorcha, 1986), pp. 23-31.