"ONE DAY THE FIELDS WILL STAY GREEN"

A Journey Into Nicaragua's Northern War Zone

Managua, Nicaragua. Late February 1984. The morning heat is intense. I am sitting in the outer office of FACS (The Augusto Cesar Sandino Foundation). The foundation operates out of a large modern suburban bungalow just off the Plaza D'Espagna in what was, during Somoza's time, a middle class quarter of the city. The owners of the bungalow had fled with Somoza. The clerical and administrative staff seem all to be women.

I have an appointment to see Ligia Vigil, the FACS co-ordinator responsible for the American, Canadian and Pacific areas. She is a small, energetic woman with cropped dark hair. Lines of exhaustion and overwork run through her smile of welcome. In the course of our conversations she speaks little of her personal story but I piece together the following: She is in her early forties, and she has already had three lives. From a middle class background, she trained as a primary teacher and received part of her education in the US (she speaks excellent English). For a short time she taught in schools servicing her class, marking time in the marriage market. Following marriage came the confines of middle class motherhood: two sons and a closed domestic world. That world was cracked open by separation and a return to teaching as a single parent. Already opposed to Somoza — as were many liberal bourgeois and intellectuals — she was further radicalised by her new situation, by the contradictions exposed by her concern for full and equal educational opportunities, by the poverty and exploitation of the urban working class among whom she now lived and worked, and by the political activism of her sons as they reached their early teens. She joined the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) in the making of the revolution.

My original aim had been to find out as much as possible about the rural child-care and pre-school centre in one of the northern provinces to which funds from Australian solidarity groups like RACLA were being directed, and to get permission to visit, if possible. The news Ligia gave me was bad: the centre had been destroyed by Contras (counter-revolutionaries) barely a month after it had been built; the local area was at the moment, yet again, under attack and too dangerous to visit. However, FACS was trying to organise a new SIR (Rural Infant Service) project involving reconstruction of the destroyed centre and of others in the same area. The cost was estimated at $US20,000 and it was into this project that Australian money might go. If there was a lull in the fighting Ligia promised to get me into the area to see conditions for myself.

Over strong, black Nicaraguan coffee, I ask Ligia to tell me more about FACS and its activities.

"FACS is a private, non-government institution for humanitarian work. It's not linked with the FSLN. Rumours in the US press have done us much damage internationally. We are Sandinistas, but we welcome all private support groups involved in our grass-roots organisations. It's February 1984 and, already, we have approved ten projects (costed at $US300,000) mostly from Canadian groups. But we desperately need things we can't get in Nicaragua: clothing, shoes, medicine and medical equipment for our beloved health program — at least $1 million worth, this year."

I suggest that the supply of some of

Will Silk

* from the poem "Song of Hope by Daisy Zamora, Nicaraguan Vice-Minister for Culture"
this equipment might be a project for Australian unions, and ask why "beloved"

"The health programs, especially those where masses of people are involved, are our success of successes. By us, I mean women, women who helped plan them and carry them through. women in AMIAE and CDS throughout the country, who took the initiative in setting up services we need so much."

"How much is the blockade affecting Nicaragua?" I ask.

"It affects all our work. Peace is a determining element. We need peace in order to reconstruct our country. The blockade affects all of Nicaraguan life but, at the same time, we're determined to live, even if it means living under threat. The threat won't stop our willingness to work or our will to defend all that we've been able to achieve — all our gains.

"It specifically affects us because our government is forced to spend money on defence - money we could use in social programs. There is a general feeling: defend the revolution to the last consciousness. That's how I feel; that's how my children feel about it."

As I stand to leave, Ligia winks and says, "Remember. 'As long as Nicaragua has children who love her, she will be free'."

I wonder about the wink until, outside, I look down at the FACS letterhead on a piece of paper on which she had written her telephone number. The farewell sentence was the foundation motto and was a quote from Sandino. Significantly, Ligia had substituted the word "children" for "sons" in the original.

It is 4.30 am. I'm walking across town in Managua from my barrio to the FACS office. I have been there a while in the fighting in Jinotega province and Ligia has been able to organise a jeep. She wants to pay a visit to three villages where FACS SIR projects are under way. It will be risky, her message warned — gringos and project workers are prime targets for contra assassins — but if I wanted to take the chance, she'd be leaving at 6 am.

On the long drive north, there was time for me to get to know Ligia better and, through her, the revolution and the people who were making it.

One of the many qualities in Ligia which I found striking, a quality I had seen bubbling in so many Nicaraguans during my stay, was that of hope: hope for the best even while preparing for the worst; hope that pushed her through impossible hours of work, over so many setbacks; hope in the potential of the revolutionary alternative for Nicaragua, that gave her and others I spoke to the freedom to admit, discuss and even, ruefully, laugh over past mistakes as they developed that alternative in practice. It was a quality I'd often missed in Australian radical politics. I asked Ligia about it, in what was it anchored, how did she manage to sustain it?

"Yes, of course I have hope," she said, and paused "... and it is sustained by surprises. Time and again, the rapidly developing consciousness of

\[\text{History of Nicaragua}\]

1524

Spanish conquistadors defeat the Indians and call the newly conquered land "Nicaragua" after the Indian chief Nicarao.

Nicaragua becomes independent.

1855

North American adventurer William Walker invades Nicaragua, imposes slavery, and proclaims himself president. He is overthrown two years later.

1909

President Zelaya refuses to grant canal rights to the United States. The US State Department supports a revolt by the Conservative Party which, in turn, agrees to a permanent US military presence. US banks take control of Nicaragua's finances, railroads and communications.

1912-1926

US marines remain in the country to support conservative governments.

WINTER 1984

In Managua every corner has humble crosses or home-made plaques set in paving stones from the barricades, signifying the sacrifice of young local martyrs.
the masses takes me by surprise. It is one of my fears that we in the bureaucracy will lag behind that consciousness and let it down."

I explained to her that very probably readers in Australia would baulk at the expression "rapidly developing consciousness of the masses". They might be puzzled, or even put off, by the linking of strong personal feelings to the phrase usually encountered as a vague theoretical term or an empty cliche of sectarian rhetoric. Could she give me an example? There was a pause and, in the moment it gave for self-reflection, I realised an old, cautionary paradox: I had imported the problem. It was not necessarily one which resided in the term itself: if the Australian context had emptied it of meaning, the Nicaraguan context had filled it.

"Well, I'll give you an example," she said. "The issue of the vote for sixteen-year-olds. You were up front at the Plaza de Revolucion during the Sandino Anniversary Rally when Ortega announced the junta's support for their right to vote. So was I. I was interpreting for a delegation of foreign guests. We could see the response — such enthusiasm. The delegation's surprise was important to me — they got the message: these thousands of youngsters knew now what they wanted, they showed their joy in getting it. And that delegation will have to tell their people back home that the revolution in Nicaragua is a truly popular one, one that lives in its youth. Their surprise reminded me of my own surprise, of how the commitment of the muchachos had changed me, as I was telling you earlier."

Nearly four hours and 140 kilometres later, we're having breakfast in Jinotega, waiting for two community nurses who are going to make their rounds with us. We've left Lake Managua and the hot cotton plains well below us to the south. Jinotega, at 1,000 metres, is a small, high country town in provincial Spanish style beside an artificial lake delivering to a hydro-electric scheme. We are well into the southern mountains, in country where Sandino had his strongholds in the '30s — and Jinotega is a stronghold now. A truckload of militia — muchachos from Managua barrios — rumbles past. Farmworkers saunter by, their market delivery finished, with rifles slung over their shoulders.

The community nurses, two eighteen-year-old village women, arrive and we're off.

With Ligia as interpreter, I ask the two community nurses about their training.

They had learned to read and write through the literacy campaign. Later, with others, they had done a six-week crash course in community medicine, and still go to Jinotega one day a month for refreshers. This year, the course will run for twelve weeks.

The conversation is interrupted when the nurses visibly tense and point to a burnt-out utility beside the track. We are a few kilometres outside La Colonia, the first village on our schedule. They explain that, six weeks before, the "collectivo", packed with campesinos returning from outlying coffee fields, was ambushed by infiltrating contras as part of their rural terrorism strategy. Everyone on board had been machine-gunned and a message left saying "This is what happens if you support the Sandinistas". I asked one of the nurses if the strategy worked. "No, the opposite," she said.

"Then why do they persist?" "You're talking about people who, for 60 years, held power through terror, torture and exploitation. That's their tradition. They can't think outside of it."

As we come into La Colonia, every field, every stream, every crossroads is guarded.

The village sits on one side of a stream, hemmed closely by densely planted hills. In April last year, it had a brand-new SIR built by local voluntary labour and funded by Canadian solidarity organisations. It had stood proudly in the centre of the village beside the coffee mill. But, in late April, an elderly campesino, head of the village defence committee, tells me, a band of contras surrounded La Colonia and lobbed rockets into it from the hills.

"They attacked us as though we were a military base," he says, leaning on his rifle. "But we held them off for an hour till the militia arrived, me and my little friends." He points to some thirteen and fourteen-year-olds sitting in the group listening to us in the village square.

"Us — and those kids down there guarding the lord now. But the SIR was next to the coffee mill, and that was their main objective. The lot went up." He makes an explosive gesture with lips and hands, then spits and walks me through the wreckage.

After, Ligia takes me into the makeshift SIR, housed in a gloomy old converted coffee storage shed, and we talk to the SIR workers. There are 46 kids in the centre. Their parents are out coffee picking and they're all inside because there's an alert that contras are in the area. The shed has been divided into nursery, pre-school and infant play areas, and a primitive kitchen. Bottles are being heated and there is a smell of nappies being dried over a wood-fired oven.

The staff numbers nine, with one person in charge of each section. The workers tell me their most urgent needs and priorities at the moment: the kitchen has to be renewed, a nursery and infants' section built. During winter it's very cold and wet: a new roof is needed. The whole place has to be expanded to give more light and space.

"What's the medical situation?" I ask. The community nurses co-ordinate with a mobile health unit. There is a health centre for the villages in the area, an average of 35-50 kilometres away (about half a day's travel). The mobile unit calls once a month, contras permitting, and it is always unsafe to travel after dark. There is a hospital at Jinotega.

Education? There's an adult education program operating in each village after work. Those that know, teach; those that don't, learn. The village has a one-teacher primary school for children to the age of ten.

Ligia looks at her watch and the sun. She's concerned about the alert. La Sorpresa, the next village we are to visit, is over an hour away, further up into the hills, and the workers say things are happening up there.

As I'm climbing into the landcruiser, the old campesino comes over and grabs my hand.

"Hey, look at this," he says, grinning and shaking my hand with both of his. "Years ago I'd never been further than that next village. I was afraid to talk to a man from Jinotega. What would I say? Now, I'm holding the hand of a man from the other side of the world. I'm talking, you're listening. You tell them where you come from that's
I'll give you the revolution for me. If they come here, I'll tell them myself!"

La Sorpresa, ("the surprise"), sits like a fan on the skirt of an olive-coloured hillside. We look down on it as we emerge from a cutting and edge down a shoulder in four-wheel drive. We pass through forward defence perimeter positions — rifle pits covered by cut tree branches for shade. Each has a crew of two sub-teenagers. Their smiles of recognition are nervous. White puffs of smoke mist up from slopes a kilometre or so away on the other side of the village, and the occasional distant round of small arms fire drifts over to us.

This is the village that Ligia would like Australian solidarity groups to support. It has a population of 50 families — approximately 370 people — with 80 kids to be serviced by the SIR. The village is now the hub of a state farm which grows coffee and caraway. Previous to the Triumph, the same workers provided the workforce for an estate owned by one of Somoza's henchmen. When he fled they went on working the estate successfully and requested through their union, the ATC (the Farmworkers' Association), that the land be given to them by the state under provisions of the Agrarian Reform Laws.

Ligia points out that the dwellings rented to them by the estate owner had been shanties or barracks, but that now a new housing project is under way. The government provides pre-fabricated materials and the workers the labour power, when they have time to spare from harvest and defence work.

We visit the SIR. It is in a small barracks once used by harvest workers. There is little light, huge gaps between the unsanded rough plank floors. It is getting colder, draughtier and damper as the afternoon progresses. Plastic gives a makeshift roof cover. Through Ligia, the workers tell me the building won't make it through the wet season. They will have to make a new building true to Ministry of Welfare standards, but they need everything — except labour and enthusiasm.

As I talk with them about the centre's needs, the sound of intermittent small arms and light machine-gun fire intensifies. Everyone seems less concerned that I am. A major problem, Ligia explains is Nicaragua's shortage of US dollars previously earned from the sale of exports now curtailed by the economic blockade. Another is Nicaragua's lack of secondary industries.

"Even nails and corrugated iron have to be imported, and with the blockade we can't get enough export dollars. That's why, at this stage of the revolution, contributions of dollars and materials from international solidarity organisations are crucial to us."

As we walk up through the village towards the coffee drying plant and the old estate offices, now a community centre and regional militia command post, I think what a
O
n the verandah of the estate offices, we talk to the commandante of the regional militia about the military situation. Draped in an anorak several sizes too big for him, he is quiet, serious, and eighteen years old.

"We are in the middle of an operation," he tells us. "Three days ago, contras moved into the district in force. They burnt out one of our nearby warehouses full of coffee and a medium producer's plantation which hadn't yet been harvested. On their way in, they destroyed an outlying farmhouse. The co-operatives immediately formed a circular defence and their units went into action two hours later.

"But two days ago the contras managed to kidnap two girls from the village on their way home from the fields. We've had a series of running combats as we are trying to track them down. Yesterday there was a major combat near here. We buried ten dead contras. We have had no casualties so far, but everyone is very upset for the girls."

A short time later as we bid farewell to the SIR staff in the village, the young commandante swings by on a truck which has just come in. It is crammed with militia, boys and girls mobilised from towns to the south. He jumps off to say goodbye.

"I'm just directing them up to the combat area," he says. "The contras only got as far as this when they are part of a major offensive aimed at destroying production yields and military targets. They've not been very successful. They won't get stronger. They've shown their main strength these last weeks and they're getting weaker every day." He jumps onto the truck's running board and slaps the cabin roof. The truck moves off; the boys and girls wave. We exchange clenched fist salutes. "Venceremos, buenos fuertes," we call to each other — good luck, we shall triumph. I hope that the commandante is right.

T
he landcruiser lurches along a muddy track bordering a small lake and into the large village of Escambray. An orderly collection of new pre-fabricated houses stands on a rise in a sheltered valley. This is a village with a difference: it is comprised entirely of a resettled Miskito Indian community.

There are 1,200 people here, evacuated by the Sandinistas from Rio Coco, a large river running onto and along the Honduran border. I had asked many questions about the Miskito Problem and the Nicaraguan government's resettlement plans. The international press had been carrying reports of Nicaraguan oppression of Indian minorities on the Atlantic coast, of genocide, concentration camps and massacres. That is why Ligia had brought me here: this project is part of the larger resettlement plans and FACS is involved.

"The original development plan was to have taken place in the area where this community lived," Ligia tells me.

"In order to introduce the plan the government first had to gain the trust of the people. The FSLN moved 80 women and men to live with the community for a year on the Rio Coco. The children were in bad shape and in some parts of the area 100 percent of the population had TB. Nutrition and community health programs were begun and our people began to earn the Indians' confidence and to teach them about the revolution. But, owing to an escalation of counter-revolutionary activity along the river, they were forced to come here to a safer place.

"They moved here a year ago. They were all living under pieces of plastic in July '83 — and now it's a town. It's not yet a self-supporting community. They've been given land and are cultivating rice. They are already self-supporting with beans and corn. Here, at present, there are no fish, but the lagoon and river are being prepared for a fish hatchery."

We say hello to some women who take us over the communal kitchen, dining hall and food storage area. There is not much in the latter's larder. Over a meal of frijoles, I ask about the organisation of food production.

The land is farmed collectively; every head of family is a member of the co-operative. Coffee is going into production to earn the co-operative credits to buy capital goods and materials. The village has been given a tractor on a share basis with the next co-op, a truck and a $100,000 donation for seed and tools to make it self-sufficient. The project is supported, through FACS, by Oxfam, Canada.

"We want to get them on their own and safe. Then we can help them raise their economic standard, for example, by using coffee as a cash crop, to develop skills and build schools," Ligia says.

"What health facilities have they now?" "The village has a health centre. A doctor comes once a month; our two community nurses are doing their rounds now. Critical cases go to the hospital at Jinotega."

"Education?"

"An adult education program has been in operation from the beginning. And — yes, she checks with one of the women sitting in on the conversation, "already they've got the school up. The Ministry of Agriculture has field advisers taking care of technical instruction. I have trouble sometimes translating here. They are rediscovering their own dialect. Spanish is their second language and I have to apologise a lot."

W
e take a stroll through the village. It has the new, raw feel of a building site about it. A utility has arrived and construction materials are being unloaded outside a half-finished house. A Miskito squats amid the rooftrees with cradled rifle.

"Talk to anyone you like," Ligia encourages, and I stop outside a house at random. On the steps a woman is combing a child's hair. Ligia chats a little with her about conditions and supplies. Amid mutual shyness — I am a man and a foreigner — I'm introduced. "May I ask her a few questions?" She looks down and says, "Yes."

(I am aware of potential dangers of biased reporting here. Ligia is a dedicated Sandinista and a Hispanic. However, I've noticed that the villagers talk freely and easily with her, and I have just enough understanding of Spanish to keep a rough check on the translations. As we talk, the major
problem, rather, seems to be in the woman's hesitancy and reserve which seem generated by a sexism which is part of Miskito culture. The woman is astonished at being asked her opinions by a man, about matters that belong to the discourse of men, not women. I ask Liga about this later. She shakes her head somewhat despondently and points out that sexism in Indian cultures has caused many problems and misunderstandings between the Indians and Sandinistas — often women — who try to work with them.

We start off rather stilted, Liga translating.

"What was it like in Rio Coco?"

"OK."

"Do you miss that life, or is it better here?"

"We're getting used to it here. They miss the animals, chickens, pigs. They miss their river so much. We've lived a very long time beside the river. They are fish from here down." (She sweeps both hands down from her navel.)

I am curious about the way she is using "they", "we" and "I". Perhaps, as Liga suggests, she is just referring to other, older people in the community, but I get the impression that she is also talking very much about herself — or at least, one part of herself. She seems to be using the third person to distance that part from another part of herself and from us. The part appears to speak out of a discourse whose parameters are inscribed by community legislations on what women are supposed to think and feel.

"Why did you leave the river?"

"The war was getting closer. The FSLN told us we would have to move to be safe. By the way," to Ligia, "we got the clothes; thanks."

"We hear in the US press that the Sandinistas treat you badly."

"I don't know about others, but we are treated well. We're all right."

"What about the massacres?"

"I've never seen that." (She changes the subject.) "My husband works at the coffee plantation."

"What did he do before?"

"Worked the land, sugar cane, beans, corn. We had a piece of land, our own land."

"What's it like working the land here?"

"It was better, there, to work our own piece of land. At this moment we're coffee picking, but we are also cultivating food to eat. That's the first job."

1963

The FSLN carries out its first guerrilla actions.

1972

The FSLN sets up a rural base at Pancasan. Luis Somoza's brother, Anastasio, becomes president.

1967

An earthquake destroys the capital, Managua, killing 15,000 people and leaving 170,000 homeless. The Somoza family ruthlessly exploits the situation and appropriates most of the international aid.

1978

The FSLN intensifies its military actions. It is joined by many townspeople, eager to end the dictatorship.

1979

Somoza is overthrown, ending a war that left 40,000 dead, 40,000 orphans, 200,000 families homeless. 750,000 persons dependent on food assistance, crops unplanted, 33% of all industrial property destroyed, US$1.5 billion worth of physical damage and an external debt of US$1.6 billion.
"How do you like the idea of the co-oper- 
it?"
"If I think about it, it's good. But there are some people: they don't 
understand it."
"What do 'they' feel?"
"They're like me: they don't understand. My companero does; he 
understands. It's not a matter for women." She looks down to smile and
returns to an earlier time. "Me, I'm used to the river. Half my body was 
always in the river. That was good."
"How do the children feel?"
"I've three kids, and I'm twenty-six. The kids like it here. They're getting 
used to the river. Half my body was always in the river. That was good."
"What do 'they' feel?"
"Have the Hondurans had any 
direct contact with your people, tried 
to influence you?"
"No; but the day we left, eleven of our community decided to go to the 
Hondurans instead of with us."
"Could you tell me a bit about 
yourself?"
"I'm 37. I've got six kids. I was born 
here in Jinotega province. I went to 
the river when I was very young 
because there were no jobs here. The river population, you know, used 
to own this area. Yes, right here where the settlement is. But they were driven 
off by the latifundists from late last century till the 1920s."
(I am surprised at this piece of 
information. Part of the strength of the woman's nostalgia for the river had 
seemed to come from a notion that the 
river life was how it had always been 
before. Later, I think about the 
tielessness of oral traditions and of the 
dangers attendant in uncritically 
accepting them or romanticising them. The oral tradition, which holds some 
members of this community tightly in 
its grasp, had selected and silenced, 
rendering comparatively recent 
communal experiences timeless by 
dehistoricising and mythologising the 
sojourn by the river. Part of the 
woman's separation trauma had 
seemed more than a personal loss and 
break, a loss of and break with an old, 
timeless, hence secure, way of life felt 
by a certain sector of the community. The actual historical period had been 
three generations.)
"So, in a way, you're coming home?"
"Yes. I feel fine. I feel happy here 
with my family. I can even work. Some 
miss the river because the tradition is 
to be in the water all day. They get sad 
thinking about it. It'll be with them a
long time."
"Do you think you all made the right 
decision?"
"Well, I'm happy. Fish is the main 
thing they miss. But once in awhile we 
buy fish and bring it here. We also 
used to hunt a lot with the blow-gun. 
There's no hunting here. But there 
wasn't any on the river any more, with 
contra activity."
"How did you use lands by the river — everyone privately?"
"There was a lot of workable 
land without owners. All we had to do was 
move in, clear it and work it. We got 
on the river, chose land and settled, 
each on his own spot. When the land 
was impoverished, we'd move on. 
We'd only cultivate three-quarters of 
an acre each. Corn, beans — just 
enough to survive. That's different 
from here. You've got one area of land 
to work permanently. And you work it 
collectively."
"How do you feel about that?"
"I feel stronger to work collectively. 
There's a lot of work to do. But it's a 
new experience. We all feel we'll get 
ahead."
"How does your wife feel about all 
this?"
"She's happy. The kids are healthy 
and play around — they have a happy 
life. The older people and some of the 
women are the main ones who feel sad. 
The youngsters are in the hills looking 
after the contras. When they come 
back they feel good." He pauses. "I want to send a message to 
your people. We've planted 100 acres of corn 
already here. We're still waiting for the 
new tractor's parts, so we did it all with 
an iron stick — making a hole, 
dropping the seed. With the tractor it'll 
be different. We Nicaraguans," he 
deliberately emphasises the word, not 
just Miskitos, or this community " — 
need petrol, medicine and agricultural 
impliments. We need the help of all 
friendly people. With that you watch 
us get ahead."

We shake hands and I promise to 
pass his message on. It seems obvious 
from what he has said that within this 
Miskito community there is also 
another awareness in play, a different 
perspective of reality which has 
broken through the effects of isolation 
and gone beyond the merely local.

On the long drive back to 
Managua, Ligia, from her side of 
"the Miskito Problem", emphasises the complexities:

AUSTRALIAN LEFT REVIEW
The contradictions and tensions are far more intense on the Atlantic coast itself, where the Miskitos are only the largest of many ethnic groups, each with its own special characteristics, but all with a history of oppression. British colonialism and US exploitation robbed them of their identity, broke down their cultural frameworks — left a space. There's the drama. The counter-revolution entered the picture, contesting that space, which the revolution had politicised. On the Atlantic Coast there has been no Nicaraguan identity. Our challenge has been to develop one. The contras, on the other hand, urge opposition to the Nicaraguan government and hold out the carrot of a return to a golden age of hunting and fishing through the establishment of an autonomous Miskito nation.

"What does she think of the proposal?"

"It's totally impractical. The zone lacks resources to maintain itself as a nation. It lacks the basic products, the means of production, the human resources. Dependence on the government in Nicaragua would be exchanged for dependence on the government in Washington."

"What can be done?"

"We have made many mistakes. At first, the revolutionary government neither knew nor understood the elements of the problem. It wanted to establish the same organisational structures on the Atlantic and Pacific coasts. We have changed as we have learned by our mistakes. Increased participation of the Miskitos and other groups in Nicaraguan national life is essential. Their viewpoints expand when they go to study on the Pacific coast and in other countries. An important goal is to train local officials, health and education workers in all the areas so that administrative dependence on the Pacific coast can be overcome. We have previously had the dilemma of having to import 'specialists' and then finding they don't share the mentality of the local people.

"It's vital to stress, however, that the behaviour of the government is not paternalistic. We seek to respond to the people's own participation, further it and strengthen it. This aspect of initiative, participation and ongoing, deepening awareness is the key."

I ask Ligia how she and the Sandinistas took the charge of "bourgeois accommodationism" which had been laid against them at times by the Communist Party of Nicaragua. Specifically, I expressed my doubts about neo-parliamentary representative democracy being better than the present participatory and consultative arrangements. One form

Nicaragua reorient its economy according to the principle that the living standards of poorer sectors of the population must be improved. A land reform program is put into operation. Co-operatives are formed. Peasants and small farmers are guaranteed higher prices for essential food items.

A literacy program is carried through. Schools are built. Total enrolment in the educational system increases by 69.7%.

A national health care system is begun. Polio is eradicated, and malnutrition dramatically decreased. Mass immunization campaigns are carried out.

The number of workers unionised increases from 27,000 to 91,384. There is a 97% increase in the number of workers covered by social insurance.

Progress is made in diversifying the economy and in finding new markets for Nicaraguan products. The foreign debt is renegotiated and payments are made on time.

9,000 houses are built. Potable water is supplied to 280,709 people. Communications are improved. Important infrastructural works such as harbours, roads, and a geothermic power plant are begun.

Elections are scheduled for November 1984.

US destabilisation of the Nicaraguan revolution proceeds apace, especially under Ronald Reagan. Foreign credits and loans are blocked. Pressure is put on other nations to isolate Nicaragua. 7,000 US troops are placed in neighbouring Honduras. US naval ships patrol Nicaraguan waters. The CIA trains and finances the counter-revolutionaries in Honduras and Costa Rica. The CIA mines Nicaragua's ports.
of government was going to be exchanged for another — and the form of the latter seemed, in many ways, dictated by the expectations imposed by the critical world outside. For the last five years there had been a provisional government with two ruling bodies: the Junta (nine persons) and executive made up from the Sandinistas, the leading revolutionary party; and the Council of State consisting of delegates of the major organisational groups and mass movements in Nicaragua (the clergy, the women's movement, trade unions, private producers and employers, youth groups, all other political parties, farmers' organisations, etc.). Was it force of external political circumstances which seemed to have pushed the revolution into the conclusion that a representative system utilising solely a plurality of parties was the best way to improve Nicaragua's image?

"The elections — in one sense we don't need them," Ligia answered. "They are very much an imposition from outside. We must maintain the goodwill and solidarity of international socialism. There has been much manipulation to alienate that solidarity. Possibly it will be defused by the election announcement. In another way, we Sandinistas feel confident that this is an exercise to show how popular our support is. That is why all parties are running individually and why the National Front won't go to the elections in coalition.

"The support we have is so clear from the anniversary events in the Plaza. The night before, all those people along the Northern Highway when I was taking my delegates back to the hotel — anyone could see it. Old people out beside the bonfires, young people chanting, talking everything over so excitedly. And one could hear it in the Moment of Clamour — all over the city. How was it in your barrio?"

I tell her how it was in the Barrio Senor Lescano where I was staying. It was a poor working class ghetto, the scene of much street-to-street fighting during 1977-79.

I'd come home around 10 pm on anniversary night to find my friends Mario, Walter, Carmen and the neighbours out in the street collecting cans, rattles, whistles, guitars, flutes — anything that could make a noise. The Junta had suggested to the CDSs, who planned the anniversary celebrations, that a moment of silence be observed for the murder of Sandino. The CDSs had replied, "Silence? No way! Sandino died in the struggle for us to be heard. We'll have a Moment of Clamour instead." And so it was.

On the moment, synchronised by everyone listening to their radios, the barrio had emptied: car horns, tracer shell bursts, people banging with tools on steel lamp posts, young militia and Sandinista groups firing off blank rounds of rifle and revolver ammunition as they raced from block to block, fireworks, shouting and singing.

At the end of a very long moment we had all looked at each other and listened to the reeding rounds in adjoining barrios. Then, from the radios had burst forth a pop version of the last movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, The Ode to Joy, in Spanish. Revolutionary kitsch? Maybe, but here in Nicaragua Libre, I had been deeply moved.

"Yes, so good, so good," said Ligia. "And so important that all the people who couldn't go to the Plaza could participate too. The revolutionary process is a genuinely popular one — it's a truly working class revolution."

"There are times when I feel so badly about having to compromise, to go slowly, not to say to people's demands: 'Yes, do it now!' I understand the communists' critical position. There are many of us who are sympathetic to that position — and the communists will do well enough to have a place in government after November 4. But that responsibility I was talking about: we must not fail the trust, not that responsibility I was talking about: it's a truly working class revolution."

Footnotes
1. The Foundation is a private, non-profit, non-governmental organisation set up in 1980 to channel international non-governmental aid for reconstruction and humanitarian projects in Nicaragua. It has a board of directors (four of the seven are priests) with executive fuctions, and a co-directive body (The Council of Popular Participation) which meets monthly to coordinate, set guidelines for and work out priorities for the various projects. The council comprises representatives of all Nicaraguan associations, grassroots and labour union organisations on a national level.
2. The SIR projects — which provide a combination of infant and maternal health care, village child care, infant nutrition programs and pre-school education — have had a crucial significance in rural Nicaragua of a kind surpassed only by that of the literacy campaigns. Before the Triumph, parents had to take their infants into the cotton or coffee fields where they worked. Field conditions were abysmal: children had to be left unattended at the edge of fields; heat, insects, absence of shelter and basic facilities like water, and the strain placed on breast-feeding mothers forced to work non-stop for long hours of back-breaking labour resulted in very high infant mortality rates. The organisation of rural child care, along with the national literacy campaign, was a first priority of the incoming Revolutionary Provisional Government in 1979. Since then, SIRs have become prime targets for the contras, as part of their strategy to hinder agricultural production and to terrorise rural workers.
3. AM L A E: The Luisa Amanda Espinosa Nicaraguan Women's Association, named after the first woman member of the FSLN to die fighting, has successfully mobilised women throughout the country around issues of particular concern to women, and is organising and providing leadership in the difficult task of breaking down the barriers to women's full and equal integration into Nicaraguan society. For a full account of its development, and of the role women have played in the revolution, see Randall M., Sandino's Daughters: Testimonies of Nicaraguan Women in Struggle, (New Star Books, 1981).
4. CDS: Sandinista Defence Committees, or neighbourhood committees, are the grassroots local self-government organisations of the people. Created as organs of urban struggle against Somoza, they are the basic administrative and representative units of a government of "popular power". They send delegates to regional councils of the decision-making network of "national consultation"; they also function as forums for the dissemination and critical discussion of all aspects of government planning, often playing an initiating or correcting role.
5. Barrio: working class suburban ghetto.