

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Mexico City Earthquake of 1985

Personal Experience

O H 1492

GUADALUPE MORGAN

Interviewed

by

Thomas Burns

on

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B This is an interview with Guadalupe L. Morgan for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the Mexico City Earthquake of 1985, by Thomas J. Burns, on May 6, 1992, at New Castle, Pennsylvania.

Mrs. Morgan was born in Mexico City. Worked for the Readers Digest there and was an eye witness to the terrible earthquake of 1985. Mrs. Morgan please state your name, date of birth, current address and occupation.

M My name is Guadalupe Morgan. I was born on December 8, 1953. My address is 4301 Columbia Pike, Arlington, Virginia, 22204.

B. Your occupation?

M I am an editor with the World Bank.

B When did you begin to work for the Latin American edition of Readers Digest?

M I started in June, 1972.

B Could you tell us something about what it was like to work there, your basic duties, the first things that they had you doing, the kind of stories, and so forth, that you were responsible for?

M: I started just after school. I studied to be a secretary and I accepted work to be a typist. Then after six months, I was doing some proof reading and started to do some other things. The last few years I was doing some research. My last position there was the Chief of the Research and Documentation Department.

B I understand that you have published four or five articles in that Latin American edition that you wrote yourself, is that correct?

M Yes, kind of. In the international editions, we have different kinds of articles. For example, they are called adaptations. So you take an article that was published in another edition that has a local interest, but it could be also of interest to our edition, so we adapt to our reader, to our audience, using examples, local examples, and local anecdotes and statistics. So, actually that is where I work, in a couple of them. Then I worked on an original article about children's art, drawings that they made. It was a contest, a national contest, of how the children feel about their country. They chose many paintings and poems about that and it was a very interesting project. Well, I worked on that story, and that was a very good experience because I never thought I was going to write something for the Reader's Digest. Of course this article was for the Latin American editions. I felt very good about it because it was approved and I did not have any trouble. Of course it involved selecting the work of the drawings and the text for every painting. So, it was a

nice experience. Unfortunately, my work did not allow me to write many articles, something that I would like to do. Because my main job was checking the original material and the adaptations.

B While you were at the Reader's Digest, when you were coming back from lunch one day, you mentioned that you had had a very unusual experience. Something like a paranormal experience. Could you describe that for us?

M Yes, of course. First of all I do not believe in ghosts or spirits and this was very strange situation. This was a new building. One day I was coming back from lunch with one of my colleagues and we were about two or three meters from the elevator and we saw a woman standing in front of the doors. Then the doors of the elevator opened and she went in and the doors closed but my colleague ran. It just took one second and the doors opened again before the elevator could go to another floor. Then we get in and we just look at each other because nobody was inside, so it was a very strange thing. Because for time it was impossible that someone can go up to another floor. So we look at each other, "Did you see what I saw?" He said, "Yes, there was something inside." We could never explain what really happened.

After that, I started to make some findings about that fact without saying what I had seen. It happened that several people had seen the same woman. We described her. She was a very small, thin woman with long hair. I remember very well that she was dressed in light green. I started to make some findings and without saying what I had seen. It happened that all the people had seen the same woman in different clothes in the building, but they could not explain. It was like they saw her and then she disappeared. So we started to think that maybe she could be a spirit. Up here, I do not know if this is true or not, that many, many years ago where the building was built there were just empty lots on the outskirts of Mexico City. I remember that I read that many times in the newspapers, news about women, that they were killed and thrown away there. They were abandoned. I started to wonder if this has to do with that. If the spirit of this woman who was assassinated was just wandering there. I really do not know. I always wanted to find out, in the newspapers in Mexico, if many years ago someone was killed and described if it was like this woman. That was my experience.

B Has anyone reported seeing her since then?

M Well, I moved here five years ago. I think when I saw this woman it was about 1985. I do not remember the date very well. I never talk about this anymore with my former colleagues.

B. When you saw this lady, or this woman, was there any kind of indication that she was aware of your presence or anyone else? Did she seem to look at you or anyone else?

M No, I never saw her face. She was standing in front of the elevator and I was coming

from the back. So, I just saw her from the back. She has long hair, but she never turned to see us.

B When she stepped into the elevator had the doors closed on the elevator?

M Yes. But by then we were very close to that and my friend went and immediately pushed the buttons and the doors opened immediately. There was no time.

B So there was no time for her to go to like the second floor and get out and then have the elevator come back?

M Right.

B That is very unusual.

M My other colleague, he is a journalist, and he does not believe in ghosts either but we felt that it was very strange happening.

B I can imagine. Did you get on the elevator afterwards?

M Well yes, I was not scared. Actually I was very excited at having seen this. It was lunch time, so when I came to my floor I said, "Guess what we saw? We saw a ghost." We even started to joke. Later, of course, I thought about it that it was something not normal and started to make this findings. I verified with other people. It was amazing that they described the woman exactly as I have said here. My colleague's name is Gabriel Paramo, he is a journalist in Mexico City, he is not working for Reader's Digest any more.

B In September 1985, Mexico City suffered a devastating and tragic earthquake. Now I understand that you were an eyewitness to this and that you were actually there when this happened. Right from the very first moments of the earthquake could you just tell us what you remember, what you saw? Share the experience with us.

M Yes, of course. Well, Mexico City has a lot of earthquakes and actually I was used to them. Of course, I always got scared because of the earthquakes but I never panicked or anything like that. We were used to them. At least, we have one or two a year. Not very hard but sometimes I was at work, sometimes I was at home. So, it was a little bit after 7:00 in the morning.

It was September 19, 1985. I think that is a date that no Mexican will forget. So, I was getting ready to go to job. It was a Thursday. I was getting ready to get into the shower. I felt something like I was dizzy and I had to hold the sink because I thought I was going to fall. But then I realized that the earth was moving. So, I immediately thought it was an earthquake. So I immediately went to the bathroom where my little

nephew was sleeping I pulled him from his crib, and put a blanket on him and ran into the door way Because that was the only thing that you could do, to stay at the door way Because it is dangerous to go to the street because the electricity poles can fall or the trees or whatever So, we stayed My mother and father were there and we just were standing there feeling the movement My father's car was in the street and it was moving so hard that it seemed that it was going to be up the sidewalk, the car

B You could feel the earth moving beneath your feet?

M Oh yes, definitely It was like first into circles and then we called I don't know the word in English

B Oh, undulating, up and down

M It was like this first, and then like this

B Well, undulating up and down

M Of course I felt it, it was hot As soon as it stopped I remember I said, "This is the hardest and the longest earthquake I ever felt in my life "

B You had been through a number of them before?

M Many Well, we were scared We got into the house and I sat down I said, "What should I do, go to work or not?" Because we did not know The electricity went out for awhile Later it came on We put the radio on They said because of the electricity many poles had fallen down The traffic was like chaos and they recommended not to go outside There was no news about damage or anything It was very early, very soon after the earthquake

We decided to watch the movies a little bit. One of the main TV networks went off and we could not understand why So we were just watching the other network We just have two networks, one private and one public network. We have about six or seven channels, that is all So the private network was not on the air So we were listening to the radio and watching the movies Suddenly we started to hear news about some buildings had collapsed So what is this? It was like the traffic was terrible because it was 7 19 in the morning so by then the traffic was pretty deep The rush hour had started About 8 00, 8 18, I decided to go to work I was a little bit afraid because I was listening to the news in the radio in the car. That is when I started to hear that many buildings had collapsed and there were fires in houses That was very unusual for the people in Mexico City because we always thought that because of the characteristics of our soil that is in our lake bed It was like a sponge, that always was going to withstand the earthquakes Actually we had had very hard earthquakes and we never had serious damage.

- B Almost like a spring underneath the surface.
- M Exactly But this time was so hard and so long that it really damaged this area So I went to the office, there was no damage
- B Before you go on, how did most people react to this around where you were? Was there any panic or anything like that?
- M No, since I think that we were used to these kind of earthquakes, nobody I remember my mother was praying All of the people, that is what they do, pray I never heard screams or anything like that We just stayed there and later people started to go out and see The area where I lived there was no panic at all, no hysteria or anything like that So when I arrived at the office, I was a little bit afraid of what I was going to see because the news was very alarming Buildings here and there have collapsed Fortunately nothing, no damage in the area were the office is. Someone brought a radio Nobody could work Most of the people arrived late Someone brought a radio and we just were there listening and listening, we could not believe
- Finally we learned that the building of the television office, that is the private network--it is very powerful--had collapsed. That is why they were not on the air Jacob Cabloduoski, he is a newsman, very powerful man This man, he has the news show at night He is very powerful He has all the influence in the public opinion He went into the streets because television has also a radio station So he was transmitting through the radio He was like a living witness He was going practically to the streets and he was describing I made myself feel like goose bumps. It is something that I think I will never forget He was describing where he was in buildings, schools, office buildings High school used to start at 7 00 in the morning So all the high schools were packed with children He was describing as he was going along the streets, the damage he was seeing It was very, very impressive We could not believe that that was happening in Mexico
- B By impressive, you mean extensive?
- M Extensive.
- B Widespread?
- M Widespread. The drama that was living in the city You could not believe that this network station had fallen There were a lot of dead people that were in all the buildings There were several buildings there in that area and two or three fell. The cafeteria was full of journalists, workers and it fell. I do not remember how many dead people but there were a lot He just described it like pancakes. You know, the buildings that were thirteen floors, it was like pancakes
- B Were there dead in the street? I mean corpses in the street?

M I do not remember saying that. By mid-morning it was like a chain reaction. There was something very interesting about the reaction of people. Mexico City is one of the biggest cities in the world, metropolitan area. It has almost 20,000,000 people. As many big cities, constantly people do not react, do not trust to other people. But that day it was like a change, a complete change. Everybody was helping. It was like expressed solidarity among all the inhabitants in Mexico City. So by then a lot of people with their houses started to take out all the debris and started to pull bodies injured and dead people.

B So, in that way, it brought out the best of people trying to help other people?

M Definitely. It was, of course, a lot of disorganization. There was chaos from everybody from everywhere in the city, mainly in downtown city and some scattered places in there, in this half of the city. The most damage was in the downtown area, where many old buildings were. They collapsed. There were some new buildings that did not comply with the building regulations, that unfortunately fell. One of the most dramatic cases was one big apartment building in the Tlatelolco area. This big, big residential complex with many apartment buildings, condominium buildings. This building was called Nuevo Leon. This building had a structural problem for many years and they did not fix it. Unfortunately, during the earthquake it fell and a lot of people died there. Do you want me to tell about the story about the Digest? Why I got involved in all this, or do you want me to continue on that?

B Well, I think the earthquake right now would be the most important part of it.

M I mean how I learned more about this, because the Digest published an article about that.

B Yes, that would be fine.

M Well, I would like to tell you two little things that were very ironic of that day. Mexico City is a very big city and we still have certain things that are very peculiar. When the trash is picked in the streets there is the trucks, so the people have to come from their houses to take out the trash actually to a truck. The people know that the trash truck is there. The trash man rings a bell. So, it is something that is very familiar in all neighborhoods. When we were listening at the office of this tragedy in the area, the trash man passed in front of my office ringing the bell. That, for me, was like an irony. The drama was living in Mexico City and in this part of the city life continues like everything at that moment.

Another thing that I will never forget is that Mexico City is very polluted, the sky is always gray. It is very rarely when you see blue sky, only when it is very windy. I do not know what happened, but it was the most gorgeous evening I ever remember in many years. It was beautiful. We had a beautiful sunset. It was clean. It was just gorgeous day. I could not believe it. It was like a feeling, "Oh my goodness, this is a wonderful day." The attitude of many of my co-workers was, "What can we do?" Because we felt

obligated. But by then, the help had been well organized. They were telling, "We have enough. Do not do anything." The only thing they wanted was, even the McDonalds were not operating. So what we did was go to get a lot of medicines and all of the supplies for first aid things and took it to the Red Cross, because we really wanted to do something.

B About what time, if you can remember, of the day was it before that happened, where things seemed to be getting under control a little bit? How long did that take, late afternoon?

M Yes, late afternoon with the government. Of course the government at the beginning said that we did not need any help from the foreign countries. It was like a, "We can manage." But when the government started to see the dimension of this tragedy, of course they said, "Please help us." It seems to be that same day but I think the following day they realized that it was just out of control and that we needed help. That is why the people, the rescue teams from France, England, Germany, the United States, Italy, and from so many countries came and started to help. Many of these people found many survivors among the rubble.

B Was there anyone in your family that was hurt?

M No, thank God, nobody! But I had friends that suffered the loss of the relatives.

B And property?

M And property, yes.

B In that situation I imagine very few people, if any, have anything like earthquake insurance.

M No, it was very strange, very rare in Mexico. It is not even by law to have car insurance. So, you do not have that.

B You do not have car insurance?

M No, it is not by law. You do not have to have car insurance.

B So, very few people do?

M Yes, and the economic situation. For buildings, office buildings, and of course there is insurance. But I do not think for residence. I really do not think.

B How long generally was it, after the earthquake would you guess, until things kind of got

back to normal? Six months, a year, two years?

M Maybe six months. Even we had to work. I remember it was very hot. You always felt like going home and for a week we could not concentrate. It was difficult. Of course we found out that in order to remove the debris, and all that, took a long time.

B Many people suffer a kind of stress, kind of a delayed reaction stress from this kind of thing, that sometimes haunts them for years. Have you experienced any sort of psychological stress since then, because of the earthquake?

M A lot of fear of earthquakes. I know when I moved to the U.S. that there is no earthquake area where I live in the Washington D.C. area. I became so hypersensitive to the movements of the buildings and the noises of the buildings that are not natural. I immediately thought there was an earthquake and I got very scared. It took me about three years to get rid of that.

G When did you leave Mexico?

M I left in September 1987. So, two years after the earthquake.

G Now I understand that you met your husband because of this. He also is employed by the Reader's Digest, Brian Morgan. Can you tell us something about how you met him?

M That is right. Okay, the Reader's Digest decided to make a story, a compilation of cases to publish in the January edition. My now husband, Brian Morgan, was in charge of checking all that. Since the tragedy was in Mexico and I was the head of research, most of the research had to be done in Mexico because you had to get in touch with them, the people there. Do you want me to describe a little bit?

G A little bit about how you met, sure.

M Well, actually it was by the Fall. By then the telephone service had recovered, so you can get communication. Even in the first two weeks maybe it was very bad but by then, by the end of September, early October we were able to communicate by phone. So, we had to rely on that to coordinate the research. So he was coordinating and watching them with several international editions in Mexico. So, I would send him the information that I had to check.

B You were speaking about Brian and meeting Brian.

M: So, we had several telephone conversations knowing that we can understand what was going on with the project. One of those times we started to talk. He was curious about what my experience was, my personal experience. So, I explained to him and then he

told me that his father lived in Mexico and he had been in Mexico several times. He liked the country very much.

B: Was he down there at this time or was this by phone.

M: Always by phone, he was in Washington.

B: And this was in September?

M: 1985. So, that is the way we met. Later we met in person.

B: When did he come down to meet you?

M: I actually went to the headquarters of the Reader's Digest on a trip to visit the offices and get to know the people over there. That is where I met Brian. Later he went three times to Mexico and we started to write to each other. Our friendship started to grow and then we realized we have many common interests. One day he came on vacation and we were talking a lot about ourselves and we realized that we liked each other.

B: When did you get married, what was your marriage day?

M: We married in July 16, 1988.

B: So, since then you have left the Digest and you are working as, I understand, a translator for the World Bank.

M: I started to work first as a freelancer and doing some research also for the Digest and some small projects. I was working also on Hispanic Yellow Pages. Doing some gathering of information, and editing information for the Hispanic community in the Washington area. That was very interesting work. We provide all the information related to Hispanics in the area. Then two years ago, I started to work in the World Bank as a translator. I have been working in the language services division for three years, doing some editing and being the production editor of the annual report. This is going to be my third year. It is something that I enjoy in general. I have to work all the summer on the annual report but it is an interesting project.

G: This has been a very interesting conversation. It is unusual to have someone with an eye witness to history on something that important.

M: Thank to you.

End of Interview