

La Historia de Nuestras Vidas

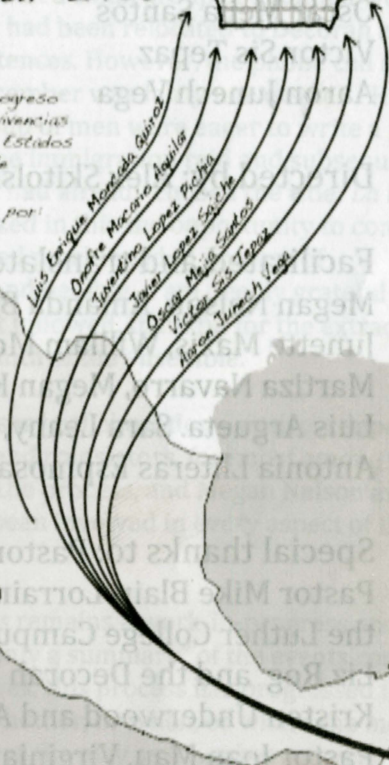
(The Story of Our Lives)

Una presentación de un trabajo en progreso
de una obra original que detalla las vivencias
personales de inmigración en los Estados
Unidos, de la redada en Postville
y detención federal.

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A work-in-progress
presentation of an original play
detailing personal accounts of U.S.
immigration, the raid in Postville, and
federal detention.



La Historia de Nuestras Vidas

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Pastor Mike Blair, Lorraine Holthaus and
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Lori Ostlie.

La Historia de Nuestras Vidas will also be performed
on Saturday, April 4th at 4 p.m., and Sunday, April 5th
at 6 p.m. in the Center for Faith and Life Recital Hall
at Luther College.

In the aftermath of the May 12th immigration raid on the AgriProcessors meatpacking plant in Postville, many in the Decorah community became directly involved in the efforts to support the workers and families affected in the nearby devastation. Though well-aware of the significance and scale of the events, I knew very little about the cultures involved and no more than a few words of Spanish. I was uncertain about what I had to offer to the relief efforts there, other than a sense of sorrow and regret as an American for how our immigration policies were being enforced.

I knew from others in town that a small group of detained workers from Mexico and Guatemala had been relocated to Decorah after serving out their prison sentences. However, the phone call from Pastor David Vasquez in December was fairly unexpected. He explained to me that the group of men were eager to write a play about their experiences of the immigration raid and subsequent imprisonment and that they had already chosen the title: *La Historia de Nuestras Vidas*. I recognized in this the opportunity to contribute somehow to an important and much-needed process of communication, reflection, and healing. I am deeply grateful for the months of collaboration that followed, thankful for the extraordinary wisdom, openness, and warmth of the ensemble.

It has been a true and necessary collaboration - entirely dependent on a community of facilitators and translators, foremost among them Kate Blair, who co-directed the process, and Megan Nelson and Amanda Brooks, who have been involved in every aspect of the play's creation.

La Historia de Nuestras Vidas remains a work-in-progress and is - as Juventino has often said - "only a summary" of the events concerned. Like the past year of their lives, this process has progressed in constant uncertainty as to whether, or when, or where the men might next be relocated. We present the play as it has been developed so far, while we still have the total ensemble within our community.

I have learned so much from Victor, Oscar, Juventino, Luis, Onofre, Aaron, and Javier. I'll carry their stories with me until the end of mine. I would be proud to call each of them my countrymen; I am certainly honored to call them my friends and collaborators.

Alex Skitolsky

Tras la desgracia de la redada de la planta Agriprocesores que pasó el 12 de mayo en Postville, mucha gente de la comunidad de Decorah se involucró directamente en el gran esfuerzo de apoyar a los trabajadores y familias que fueron afectados por la devastación. Aunque yo sabía muy bien el significado y la magnitud de los eventos, sabía muy poco de las culturas y no más de unas pocas palabras de español. No estuve seguro de lo que podía ofrecer en los esfuerzos de apoyo, además de un sentido de gran pena y arrepentimiento como un Americano para la manera en que nuestras políticas de inmigración fueron cumplidos.

Tras comunicación con otros en Decorah, supe que un grupo pequeño de trabajadores detenidos de México y de Guatemala se fueron trasladados a Decorah después de cumplir con sus sentencias de encarcelamiento. Sin embargo, la llamada de Pastor David Vasquez en diciembre fue inesperada. Me explicó que un grupo de hombres tenían ganas de escribir una obra sobre sus experiencias de la redada y el encarcelamiento subsiguiente y que ya habían escogido el título de la obra: La Historia de Nuestras Vidas. Reconocí en esta la oportunidad de contribuir en una manera a un proceso de comunicación, de reflexión y de curación muy importante y, además, muy necesitada. Me siento bien agradecido por los meses de colaboración, por la sabiduría extraordinario, la franqueza, y la calidez del conjunto.

Ha sido una colaboración verdadera y necesaria - totalmente dependiente de una comunidad de facilitadores y traductores - más importante entre ellos Kate Blair, quien fue co-directora del proceso, y Megan Nelson y Amanda Brooks, quienes estuvieron involucradas en cada aspectos de la creación de la obra.

La Historia de Nuestras Vidas sigue siendo una obra en desarrollo y es - como ha dicho Juventino - "solo un resumen" de los eventos afectados. Como en el último año de sus vidas, este proceso ha progresado en un incertidumbre constante si, o cuando, o a dónde los hombres tendría que trasladar próximamente. Presentamos la obra así como ha sido desarrollado hasta hoy en día, mientras siempre tenemos el conjunto total aquí en la comunidad.

He aprendido muchísimo de Victor, Oscar, Juventino, Luis, Onofre, Aaron, y de Javier - cargaré sus historias conmigo hasta el fin de la mía. Me sentiré orgulloso de llamar a cada uno de ellos mis compatriotas; por cierto es un honor llamarlos mis amigos y colaboradores.

Alex Skitolsky (tr. - Megan Nelson and William Montoya)

Prologue

This is a story that is still being told.
How it ends, we cannot know.
It is the story of our hopes and dreams;
The story of a long, difficult journey;
The story of disappointment,
Imprisonment, fear, and waiting.
This is *La Historia de Nuestras Vidas*.
This is The Story of Our Lives.

Part 1

When I was little, I didn't think about work.
I played behind my dad in the field.
When I was little, I dreamt of being a soccer player.
I dreamt of being a pilot in the air force,
But my parents wanted me to do something less dangerous,
To work in the fields with my Dad.
When I was small - well, I have always been small -
My parents couldn't afford to continue my education.
I went to the countryside to work with my dad, caring for cows....
I couldn't attend school - I had to help my father in the fields.
When I was a child, my father sold our land so that he could drink.
When he died we had no place to live,
And I walked the streets with no shoes.

Life is hard in Guatemala and in Mexico
The crops never earn enough, and everything is expensive.
We plant with borrowed money, and only our debts grow.
Some days there isn't enough to eat
I wanted to make a better life for my family,
So that my brothers and sisters might finish school,
So that my children might finish school.
I wanted to build a house out of brick.
This was more than just a dream;
It was a necessity.

Part 2

It is more than just a dream.
People like us have gone very far away in search of a better life.

Those in my neighborhood who came over to the U. S. were prospering. They returned with good clothes, and they bought new cars. They built beautiful houses for their families.

"Everywhere in America, there are women, cars, beer, and money"

"One hour's pay in the U.S. equals one day's work in Guatemala."

"You can buy everything your family wants when you return."

"It's easy to cross the border-

I know where you can get forged papers very cheap!"

Like my friend said the papers are really cheap -

(They only cost five months in jail!)

Yes - What about the risk? What if we don't succeed?

What if we die in the streets like others who have tried?

What if we cannot pay back the debts?

- But, you must work!

Yes, I must work

- Then, you must go!

Yes, let's go!

- Let's live the American Dream!

The American Dream!

- Yes, yes... But getting there won't be cheap!

How will I pay to cross? I have no money.

- Borrow the money!

From who?

- Not me! I don't have any money.

- Me either.

- Sorry!

- Good Luck!

One has to borrow the money to get here and go even further into debt.

It's hard to leave one's wife and children,

To long for your family and your traditions.

The journey is difficult and the path is uncertain.

Is it worth it?

Part 3

If I had known how difficult and dangerous the trip would be, I wouldn't have come.

The trip cost 6,000 dollars - 45,000 quetzales in Guatemala.

The trip took twenty-seven days.

Through the mountains,
Through the desert,
Through forests,
Through rain,
Sleeping by day and moving by night,
Sometimes by bus, but mostly on foot.
We walked for days,
And days,
And days....

The helicopters were circling above,
Our guide told us that we had to hide,
Not to look up or they would see our eyes.
The ants were crawling all over me and biting me,
But if I moved they would find me.
I heard the immigration officer yell, "We're going to get you."
"We're going to get the dogs on you."
I dove into the thorny brush
And waited until they passed.
Only then could I pull the thorns from my clothes and skin.

When we reached the meeting point,
The guide called for the truck.
When the truck arrived,
The twelve of us all crammed in,
Piled and packed on top of each other.

The truck was like an oven,
We were drenched with sweat.
When the driver told us to get out,
Three people fainted from the heat.
The driver returned fifteen minutes later with water,
And we helped the others back into the truck.

At the border, we had to climb four, very high fences.
One woman climbed the first fence,
But she was too scared to jump over.
I don't know what happened to her.

I cut my hand on the fence, and I looked for help in El Paso.
I knocked on the door of someone's house.
I asked if I had arrived in Postville, Iowa. She said,
"No, you're a long way from Iowa still."

After we crossed the border, we had to wait -
In one ranch for two days and another ranch for three days.
We waited on the floor of an empty room.
We couldn't go outside, or we might have been found.
We were tired and bored.

Part 4

I finally arrived in Postville, Iowa on February 8, 2007
- November 2, 2006 - May 24, 2007 - March 23, 2007
- December 2, 2007 - May 29, 2007 - January 29, 2007
When I arrived, I expected a city much bigger than Postville -
I didn't imagine it would be such a small town.
When I arrived it was late at night.
I arrived to friends and relatives,
To my co-workers and countrymen.
My cousin showed me around town:
"Well, Luis... This is the United States!"
As we continued to walk, I saw a line of men with beards,
Dressed all in black,
And I thought there must have been a funeral.
They were the Rabbis who worked at the kosher meatpacking plant.
I arrived in Postville and soon began to work there too.
We worked.
There was little time for anything else.
We worked hard.
We were too tired for much else.

Part 5

Some said that working in the U.S. was easy.
But not for me!
At AgriProcessors, we worked long hours:
Fourteen-hour shifts
Or fifteen-hour shifts
Sometimes eighteen-hour shifts!
And we weren't always paid fairly for those long hours!

We worked fast and with little rest.
We worked with sharp knives and dangerous equipment.
I was unaccustomed to that kind of work, and it pained me.

Many of the workers couldn't hold-up in our department.
And when the Chicano in the yellow hat took over,
We had to work faster and faster,
"And faster!"

He pressured us and treated us badly:
"If you can't do the work - there's the door!"
"Eleven people could do the work of the sixty-four workers here!"
He fired many of the workers, and denied the rest of us our breaks.

In Department 14, we could only rest
when the conveyer would suddenly stop.
But then the boss in the orange hat would arrive angry and shouting:
"What's up!? What's going on here!?"
All while the Rabbi stood watching and not working.

When I started working Department 6,
I didn't know any of the others.
Like now, I was the only Mexican in a group of Guatemalans.
In time, I became friends with the other workers.

I worked in Department 6 with Luis,
Packing ham and sausage in boxes.
The work was boring and repetitive.
Our boss in the green hat was good -
Better than some of the others at AgriProcessors

He was also Guatemalan.
And It was better than the job I had before in Postville,
Working in construction.
The boss didn't give us a lunch break, a
And we had to eat our lunches before work in the morning.

At AgriProcessors we had half an hour to eat.
But we had to change out of our bloody uniforms, goggles, and masks,
And then wait in line for the microwaves -
Which were always full!
By then it was time to get back into our uniforms and re-start the line,
Cutting and deveining,
Clearing and fixing,
Quartering and cleaning,
Day after day.

That is how our time passed, until the day they took us away -
The day our dreams ended -
The 12th of May....
The day of the raid.

Part 6

I had heard rumors around the plant that Immigration was coming.
I didn't believe it.
Every year there were rumors that Immigration was coming,
But they never arrived.

Two days before that, on Saturday, my brother-in-law had warned me,
"Be careful, Oscar! La Migra is coming tomorrow!"
But that Sunday passed and nothing happened.
I didn't believe it.

On Monday morning, I entered the AgriProcessors plant
at fifteen minutes before ten o'clock in the morning.
At first, nothing seemed different at the plant.
But as I went inside, I saw the helicopters above -
I didn't know why they were there.

Suddenly the assembly line stopped, and I didn't know why.
By the time we saw the immigration agent entering our department,
The plant was already surrounded.
We tried to find a way to escape.
We ran into another room, but there was no exit.
There was no place to hide.

Our lunch break started at ten o'clock.
I went down to the office to change my gloves first,
And I saw the men wearing jackets and hats that said "ICE".
I didn't know if they were police or immigration agents.
I went to the dining room to warn friends who were already at lunch.

Soon after I entered the plant, officers blocked all of the entrances.
No one could escape.
I knew by their uniforms that they were immigration agents.

I had just arrived to my department and began putting on my uniform.
Just as I finished, someone nearby starting yelling:

"La Migra! La Migra!"

It frightened me when I heard all of the people yelling:

"La Migra! La Migra! Hide! Hide!"

Everyone was running.

We ran - to the 2nd floor - where I hid with four of my co-workers,

To the 3rd floor - where I hid between boxes.

I waited there for two hours,

Listening to the police and immigration officers pass by,

Scared that they would find me.

- They found me.

The police were everywhere and the helicopter circled above.

They told us no to worry, that nothing was going to happen.

They weren't yelling, they were talking:

"Don't worry. We're only here to observe - you can return to your jobs."

"Don't worry - it's only a safety inspection."

"You'll be able to return to your homes."

But nobody returned. Everything was surrounded.

I asked my boss, "What's happening?"

"I don't know."

I asked the immigration official, "What will happen to me?"

"I don't know. That will be decided by a judge."

We waited this way, passing the hours,

Without knowing what might happen to us.

They finger-printed and photographed each of us.

One by one.

They chained our ankles, our hands, and our wrists.

We waited this way, in sadness - wondering about the penalties,

About what might happen to our families and friends.

Then an officer told us to get up:

"Get up! Get up! Get in a line!"

But it didn't seem like we could stand, because of how we were chained.

"Get up! Let's go!"

We struggled to get to our feet and walk outside.

Hundreds of Guatemalans and Mexicans went single-file through the plant.

We were loaded on the many white buses that were waiting.

Seated on the bus, I thought "So long Postville! So long America!"

There ended our days in Postville.

There ended our American Dream.

Outside, we could see TV news cameras and people taking photographs,
As the caravan of prison buses left the Agriprocessors plant.
For two hours we sat chained on the bus,
Without knowing our destination, without knowing our fate.
Watching America pass us by through the window – scared, silent.
It was the first of many such trips we would take,
Crowded together with other immigrants in vans, buses, and airplanes.
Never certain where they would take us next.

We arrived to the fairgrounds in Waterloo.
They had prepared a place to hold us –
The National Cattle Congress – a place meant for cows.
Like the cows we butchered at AgriProcessors.
But now we were the ones being “processed.”
They made us remove our pants and shirts
They took all of our clothes, everything we carried.
I was shivering from the cold. I was trembling with fear.
They took us to the ballroom, where they interrogated us
One by one
They asked a mountain of questions - questions about everything:
“Who did you get your ID from? Where are you from?
How did you arrive? Who brought you?
How did you find out that there were jobs at AgriProcessors?
Do you have a wife?”
Almost all the officials knew Spanish, they were Latinos.

For almost three hours, we sat there in pain and sadness,
Trembling with fear, and shivering from the cold -
While our questioners sat calmly, drinking hot coffee.

For the first time that day, we were given something to eat -
Potato chips, sodas, and water.
But I couldn't eat, because I was too nervous.
And I couldn't drink, because my hands were bound.
We were given a military type cot for the night.
But I couldn't sleep, because they kept coming in,
To remove others from the room.
And I couldn't lay still, shivering under one thin sheet,
With the chain pressing into my waist.

So ended that horrible day - the 12th of May.
This is only a summary.

Part 7

After three days and two nights, we received our sentences.
They told us that we would have to spend five months in prison.
The many immigrants were taken in smaller groups to nearby jails,
What would only be the first stop in a long series of prisons.

I was held in Waterloo for three months,
And during that time I hardly spoke a word.
I don't know what I was thinking - I was filled with sadness.
I missed my wife and my family.
I didn't have any money. I didn't have anything.
They gave me sandwiches for every meal, and there was no heat.
It was so cold, and we spent all day long sitting on the bare floor.
There, one didn't wait for anything, only food.
And even then, only sandwiches.
We were very hungry.

The night that we were taken to Mason City,
I remember that the officials that had lots of pizzas and sodas.
We requested a piece of pizza; they said,
"No we've already distributed your food. "

I was taken to a closed room at the Benton County Jail,
Where there were no windows and I couldn't see anything outside.
One could go crazy without ever seeing the sun.
I could only watch the day pass from the time on the TV.
A cell-mate made a calendar and put an X on each day,
And each day a guard would enter with more prisoners.

We were always moving from one prison to another,
without ever knowing where or for how long..
To Cedar Rapids one day, to West Union for one week,
To Mason City for three weeks, back to West Union for 11 weeks,
To Kansas for three days, and back to Cedar Rapids again -
Until the flooding began there.
When the waters rose and the electricity went out,
We were all loaded into the back of a moving truck. -
Herded together with chains on our feet, like pure animals,
Like cows.

In Cerro Gordo county jail, no lawyers ever visited me.
They forgot about me,

And I worried a lot that maybe my problems were worse than I thought. They took me to another cell, where I was with more serious criminals. They wouldn't let me watch the TV. If I put it on the Spanish channel, they took the remote control from me. We didn't understand anything.

All during these weeks, we had little contact with our friends and family. They went long periods without any news from us. Often, I didn't have money to call them. Often, they didn't know where I was being held, only that I was imprisoned somewhere - In Kansas again.

I was in Kansas for three months. I felt a little more free there. We were allowed to get out into the prison yard. There were microwaves and we could buy soup. One is accustomed to eating a lot, but in jail it is very hard. If I ate in front of my friend, he also was hungry, So I had to give him a little bit. Sometimes six or seven of us shared a little bit of soup, With one spoon, nothing more.

I was content now that this was how all my time in jail was going to go. But they came and told me that I had to fly somewhere in an airplane. I thought of Guatemala.

At the airport, 150 of us waited in chains. Everyone thought that we were going to Guatemala. I was excited, thinking that I would finally return home. But, I asked an official where we were going and he told me, "I don't know, Some other jail."

I was very sad - It wasn't the news I'd hoped for. We arrived in Miami at about 2 in the afternoon. They interviewed us, asked questions, took blood, Gave us another set of jail uniforms - so many things. We didn't finish until eleven o'clock that night.

When I finally got to my cell, the prison guard gave me a blanket. He told me to take the top bunk of one of the beds. There was no mattress on the top bunk - just the metal frame - So I didn't sleep at all that night.

In Miami, the Cuban and Colombian prisoners got together to share food and clothes. - they helped us a lot. Many of them had more serious legal problems. They told us that we shouldn't even be there. "You are workers, you don't deserve to be here. Don't worry, God will help you."

I was there for almost two months.

I was happy that I had almost served my time in prison, That I would soon return to Guatemala to see my wife.

Fifteen days before I was supposed to leave,

They came down from the office.

They told me that I had to sign a work permit.

I told them that I could not sign it.

I did not know what it was for, and my lawyer had said,

"Don't sign anything without consultation."

They said I would have to spend even more time in jail if I didn't sign it.

So, I signed it.

Already a group of prisoners had left for Guatemala.

They gave me three shirts and three pairs of pants,

And told us that we were going to Guatemala.

I felt very happy.

They told me that I would leave that Friday,

And arrive in Guatemala on Saturday.

On Friday I got up at 5 am, expecting I would finally go home.

They also told me that I was being deported to Guatemala - not to Mexico.

The consulate said that I would go with a group to Guatemala first,

Then home to Mexico. But I didn't know how it was going to happen -

I didn't have money.

But we did not return to Guatemala.

We were taken instead to the immigration center in Virginia.

Then onto Oklahoma, Kentucky, and Kansas -

Again.

To Des Moines, Dubuque, and Cedar Rapids -

Again.

But now things seemed to change.

They didn't treat us like hardened criminals.
We saw lawyers and went to court.
They replaced our handcuffs with GPS bracelets.
They gave us phone cards and told us that we were going to Decorah.
The supervisors offered us hamburgers and soda from McDonald's.
I had never imagined that I would eat another time in McDonald's,
Or that I would ever be free in Iowa again.

Epilogue

But this was no longer the United States I had imagined.
Our American Dream had become a nightmare.
And the land of freedom had become our prison.

We came here so that we could provide for our families,
And improve their future.
But we'll return to them with empty hands.
We made friends here, but now they are gone, deported.
I don't know where.

And meanwhile, we wait - without knowing for how long.
We are still waiting,
Unable to make a life here and unable to return home.

This is the story of our lives -
It is only a summary.
This is the story of our lives -
So far

It is the story of Guatemala -
And Mexico -
And America.

It is the story of thousands of immigrants,
Who cross these borders in pursuit of a dream.
It is a story that is still being told,
In the fields and factories of the United States.
How it will end, we cannot know.
But we have hope, because you are listening.

Thank you for listening.
Thank you.