

My mission in Nicaragua during Revolutionary Times

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Managua, the capital city of Nicaragua

Receiving My Mission Country

I found out which country I would be going to in the morning, as some of us gathered in the meeting space of Rev. Paul Werner's office in Camberg, Germany. As soon as we sat down, Pastor Werner took up one file after another, calling out the country's name and waving it over his head, waiting for a hand to go up in a positive response. A thousand ideas rushed through my mind. *Should I decide for Africa, which is closer to home?* I wondered. *Or perhaps it would be better to go to Latin America, where Christianity is everywhere? Oh, my God, tell me please, which one, which one??!!* When "Nicaragua," was shouted out, all of the sudden I felt my arm shoot in the air. As if it was not me alone who chose, but some force from beyond that moved me. And that sealed it. Nicaragua would be my destiny; it felt like when one gets married to a spouse. I gleaned the first basic information from the blue file folder: Nicaragua, a small land located in Central America; language, Spanish; population, mainly American Indians; and the economics -- their Gross National Product was one of the lowest in the region. I fantasized myself in this tiny land. Turning my head to the right, I imagined I could see the Atlantic Ocean... and looking over to the left I'd behold the Pacific Coast. But after a few moments I came to my senses. What brought me back to reality really quickly was when I heard that the German group would be the first ones to arrive in those countries, by the end of April, following True Father's request that someone be there before May 1. Wow!

Arriving in Nicaragua and the Early Days

On April 28, 1975, I was with the last batch of missionaries leaving Germany. After changing planes in Miami, two and a half hours later I arrived at Managua's airport -- which gave me the impression of a good sized bus terminal. Stepping out of the plane into the open air, I felt as though I had entered an oven, with an overwhelming gust of hot air surrounding me. However, I said to God: *Here I am, the representative of True Parents arriving on Nicaraguan soil.* Thus, when I stepped with my right foot onto the tarmac, I remembered Neil Armstrong when he landed on the moon. I gazed around in awe. The airport was located on a wide open space surrounded by green grass, allowing me to spot a plume of smoke on the horizon coming out of a volcanic cone. *How beautiful! Was I in Paradise?* Mid-May, just after the first rains had splashed down, the American sister, Katherine Cromwell, arrived in Nicaragua. I was able to understand Katherine's English a little when she spoke very slowly. The first thing she pulled out from her luggage was a framed picture of Father and Mother. It looked so lovely and depicted them holding hands with their eyes closed, obviously in deep prayer. It was taken at the Holy Ground in the garden of their Belvedere residence. The moment I glanced at True Parents, tears broke out of my eyes, as I felt their deep prayer protected us. My reaction moved Katherine so much, that she gave me the picture immediately as a gift. My heart was just melted. I longed for True Parents -- it would have been so

wonderful if I could have met them even once before going to the foreign mission. In reality several more years would pass before my fervent desire would be fulfilled.



Marianne Irwin (left) and Katherine moving into their first house (the gentleman is their driver)

We found a house to live in, which was very humble, but the rent was affordable and we already had some acquaintances living in the neighborhood to start witnessing to, as Katherine reminded me. “It is the best place for now,” she said, so we rented it. There was nothing in the house. No furniture, no closet, no privacy, even the bathroom wall had spaced planks that people could look through at night. Security had much to be desired -- the lock on the door was weak. In a nutshell, the place had no beauty at all. Everything looked ugly and dirty to me. I wished we were not there. I felt a heaviness being there and complained in my heart. If our leader back in Germany had not advised us that our attitude in the new place should contain the readiness to start out with nothing, at “zero level,” I couldn’t have adjusted to these circumstances. On one of our first evenings in the house, as we were sitting on our sleeping bags on the floor, I saw on this dirty wall some letters smeared which seemed to look like SMM or Sun Myung Moon. As I reflected on this it was as if a light came on, and I felt this voice in my heart telling me, *Child, I was here before you came. This is my place where I have been all along.* Pondering on this helped me think through what I came here for and questions came to my mind: *How can I reject being here? How did I not want to be where God, my Father has been all this time?* The process helped me to change my attitude. I understood that I was in the right place, at the right time. Now I felt ready to invest my heart. For us three missionaries, painting and repairing our house together took many weeks working side by side. This helped us to learn about each other since we were complete strangers.

Mitsuaki Nonami, the Japanese missionary, spoke enough English to converse with Katherine. I mostly listened in, trying to follow what they talked about. As we got to know each other, we slowly let down our guard and revealed our real character. As we deepened our relationship, all the challenges of understanding our different personalities, customs and cultures came to the forefront.

In Nicaragua all day long the sun burns down mercilessly, people always avoid direct exposure, walking with an open umbrella, or using any little shade of a traffic sign or light post when they have to wait for the bus. Finally in the evening hours people come out of their homes. Parents, grandmas and grandpas pull out their rocking chairs on the front porch or halfway into the street and sit idly together chatting. They enjoy observing the children who in great numbers now populate the street playing. Whenever I had a chance to walk during this dusk hour, I could not avoid my eyes from peeking inside the poorly lit quarters of the houses I passed in front of. I could see the simple furnished rooms, a picture of Jesus or the Last Supper perhaps on the wall. But there was such a warm human element coming from inside, such a closeness to one’s soul. Nobody minded that strangers stared through the windows or door.

One day, Katherine told us about an interesting incident she experienced before coming to Nicaragua. The American members going to the foreign missions had their special training as we Germans did, the difference was that Father personally paid them several visits. One day there was a question and answer session and Katherine ventured to ask, “How can I find prepared persons in my new country?” Father answered straightforward saying that she, “should go around early in the morning and late at night to see in which house light was coming through the windows,” which is to say the families that get up early in the morning and prepare could be the special people she is looking for. In retrospect, these words would be prophetic for Nicaragua, since the first members were from such a family.

Early on we met this young man named José. He did visit us frequently in the coming months. We learned about his family background. Being born to a simple farmer's family, he grew up in the countryside. When we met him he was working as a waiter in Managua. On many mornings he came over to our place, or, occasionally Nonami and Katherine went to his room to teach him another chapter of the Divine Principle.

One day José invited us to visit his father's house, a farm about 40 km outside the capital city. This was our first encounter with a family of the countryside. What wonderful people, what simple lifestyle, and in the end it was also a historical meeting. The front part of their home built from sturdy bricks, and the other half from wood planks. Only the main room had a cement floor. The other rooms and kitchen had dirt floors. The home had no electricity, nor did they have running water. The meals were cooked on an open fireplace, so the smoke had turned the kitchen wall black. I saw some bare-footed children run about, mixed with bustling hens and chicks. A sturdy set of wooden rocking chairs begged our attention in the main room. From the tile roof ceiling, several field tools hung suspended next to a few rolled-up hammocks.



Nicaragua, with the Mombacho Volcano in the distance

This was the Espinoza family home, truly a Third World home -- a place no one from the "First World" could imagine living in. The nature around it was gorgeous. Peaceful and pure, the beautiful sight of volcano Mombacho close by, the hilly fields freshly planted with orderly rows of beans. Banana and mango trees were everywhere. José's father, Don Rafael, had thirteen children and -- as we learned -- at the last birth, a set of twins, his wife died along with one of the babies. Since then the father had lived alone and, with the financial help of his older sons and daughters, brought up the smaller ones.

That day we were received with so much hospitality and warmth to the point where external circumstances did not matter anymore. José had some younger sisters, age nine, eleven and thirteen whom we met that day, hiding shyly behind the door. These girls would become Nicaragua's first blessed sisters in the future. Just as True Father's words to Katherine many months before, the Espinoza family was one who rose up very early in the morning. Don Rafael, would get up as early as two or three each day, doing some chores in the fields and around the house, taking advantage of the cool dawn hours, many times under moonlight. The children, at their young age, went out every morning before going to school and would sell fresh bread to the neighboring homes, carrying it in huge baskets on their heads.

The Revolutionary Time Starts in Nicaragua

One day, I was giving a Divine Principle lecture at Doña Olga's home in Altagracia. We were good acquaintances with her whole family. Shortly after starting with the presentation, a sudden machine gun fight broke out nearby. Our first reaction was to seek protection, crouching down on the floor and listening to hear if any stray bullets would penetrate the corrugated zinc roof. Since this was not the case, I suggested to continue the lecture. As the theme on this day was *The Human Fall*, I could not get rid of the impression that the devil always tries to disturb when people listen to this lecture.

The shootings continued all afternoon, creating a frightening atmosphere. Just when I made the decision to stay overnight at Doña Olga's home, Nonami-san arrived to pick me up. He had heard the heavy crossfire all the way from home and became very concerned about my return. When the rebels were using machine guns, the explosions sounded so loud as though the fighting took place around the next street

corner. We bid Doña Olga's family good-bye, heading carefully out of her house and down the block. There we encountered other pedestrians, several of them carrying sticks with a piece of white cloth tied on it as a makeshift truce flag, hoping not to be shot. Luckily, the shooting had moved much further away and we arrived home safely.



Three missionaries Marianne Irwin (right), Katherine Cromwell and Mitsuaki Nonami

for this nation was my spontaneous feeling.

A gush of sympathy for God flooded through me and at the same time I was remorseful not being more alert of His needs at this time. It felt as if all the people on God's side were asleep -- not just at this moment -- but overall, unaware that a battle was being waged over Nicaragua's destiny between the godly and ungodly forces. Stretching out the antennas of my spirit, I became aware that even at this late hour, the devil with his evil forces were not resting but tirelessly working towards their goal to bring Nicaragua under Communist sovereignty. At this realization, my heart beat strongly as though ready to burst, making me sweat all over. The evil powers were alert while everybody else was dormant. Only God was sweating blood and carrying the cross -- alone. I felt sorry for Him, so endlessly sorry. I cried for a long time holding on to this realization. I felt helpless, thinking *something should be able to save Nicaragua*. I wished there would be enough time to educate the whole population about True Father's vision, the Head-Wing ideology. I called out to the forces of heaven and earth, battling and pleading for this to be granted. *By what conditions, though? How could it be accomplished?*



Sandinista soldiers

condition that could prevent this tragedy from happening to Nicaragua. With my heart and soul, I cried so loud that I felt it echoed throughout the universe. I wanted my voice to reach True Father. I kept asking God if, even at this late hour, there was no other alternative for this situation. I cried so hard, streams of liquids coming out of all the openings in my head, my eyes, nose and mouth.

Just as in my spirit, my physical heart started hurting as if it had to burst. I felt so, so deeply sorrowful for Nicaragua. I was sorry for what would be happening to the Nicaraguan people, especially the younger generation. So much more blood would have to be shed from now on, so many more people would have to die. I was very sad and knew this was the sadness of God Himself. I understood and felt how God in many occasions passed through situations where He saw His children choosing the wrong way. Then seeing them smashed by the pain, He could not touch nor do anything for them, even if He wanted to help them so badly. In this moment, I felt so much sympathy for Him, so much closeness in my bitter despair -

A Look into God's Heart

I made it a custom every evening, after we had closed the day with prayer together, to climb up to the open veranda on the third level of our house. Underneath the night sky, I could encounter God and feel out the atmosphere of the country. The city at this hour, lay dormant, dark and silent below me.

One late night in April, as usual, I found myself climbing up the stairs to meditate. The imminent rainy season created such a dense and humid atmosphere to the point that even stars in the sky had difficulties to shine down. There was no wind -- not even a leaf on any tree was moving. When I looked over the hazy sky, I noticed with shock an unusual dark-red spot. It immediately reminded me of a droplet of blood. It was the moon covered by the very humid air, projecting a red color. *Oh, it must be You, Heavenly Father, shedding your precious blood*

- we were holding and consoling each other. I don't know how many hours passed in this manner. I just remember that I could barely use my eyes afterwards because of swelling.



Mitsuaki Nonami washes dishes on a typical wash-stone, under the sky

When I think about this particular event, as I write it down, I remember having heard True Father say that he and True Mother had countless such encounters with God. Father shedding millions of tears because he felt God's sorrow so real after he came to understand how heartbroken God was that He became separated from us, His children.

My husband Michael and I want to express our endless gratitude to True Parents for having entrusted us with such an important mission, even though they needed better equipped and prepared people to do the job. We feel we received so much more than we ever gave. We want to offer the eighteen years we spent in this beautiful land, and the years we lived in Siberia and on the island of Jamaica on God's altar of history.

This testimony is prepared from excerpts from my memoir On His Shoulders.