

I lived through the earthquake behind bars

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In seclusion things look different, are lived different than how are lived by the rest of the population who are not deprived of their freedom. How we, inmates of the female prison of Tepepan, lived through the earthquakes of September 7 and 19, 2017? The answer is complex.

The first earthquake, the one on the dawn of Tuesday, September 7, took us completely off guard. In the dormitory where I live, at twelve o'clock at night, most of us were watching television and a few others were already asleep. Laying on the wall, I was sitting on the bed, relaxed, disheveled, drinking hot coffee with milk, nibbling on a sweet bread with pineapple jam, wearing the blue butterfly pajamas that I like so much, with the light off, I do not remember what I was watching, because I was already more asleep than awake, when, suddenly, I began to feel that everything was spinning.

The first thing I thought was that my pressure was up, reason why I felt dizzy, but the movement became more intense and almost immediately I began to hear how my mates left their cells, running, scared, confused, only to crouch against the bars of the dormitory and shouting to the guard who was shaking, so she would open us up in order to get out towards the green areas, a place that, incidentally, was indicated as a meeting point after the rehearsals of evacuation by earthquake, but the authority did not respond.

It was then when I left the room, in bathing slippers, altered by the increasingly strong and desperate voices of my mates. I locked the door and went to the entrance along with the others to insistently call to the guard assigned to our dormitory. I started to get very nervous, my hands were freezing cold. I noticed that a friend who was by my side, grabbed strongly to the bars of the fence, did not speak, did not shout, did not move. She was in a panic crisis and was paralyzed.

With strength I managed to detach her fingers from the bars and I hugged her. She watched me with empty eyes, as if lost. Seeing her so bad, that instinct of survival, so basic, so animal, sprouted uncontrollably from the bowels of my being, and I started screaming at the guard with all my strength. I screamed scared, I screamed in anger because the door did not open in order to go out, I screamed feeling how my vocal cords were tearing, and I did not care if the others saw me as crazy. I did not want to die. That was the only permanent thought in my head: I did not want to die.

When they realized my desperation, the others joined with much more strength. From "please, boss, open the door for us", we went to the "daughter of a motherfucker, asshole, open us the door, bitch, let us out, can not you see that she is shaking?". It was until then, when the spirits were already more than aroused, that the guard finally came up to see us, also scared by the earthquake,

and said she had to go to headquarters to ask the commander if she could open us the door. It took maybe a minute, but for us were hours. Between screaming and terming, we insisted on seeing the commander and demanded that they open us the bedroom door. Finally, the guard ran up the stairs to tell us that the gate was going to be opened for us and that the order was to vacate the dormitories and go to the courts. However, by that time the tremor had passed.

Anyway, we had to leave the dormitories. In the corridor towards the courts, several of us were telling to the guards who crossed our way, that in vain had been so much commotion with the rehearsals of evacuation, filming us coming out of the dormitories, recording the time that it took us to reach the green areas, because when a real earthquake happened, they did not even open the doors for us. A guard dared to answer that the order they had was not to open the dormitories at all during an earthquake, even if the walls and ceilings were falling on us. That if now they had made an exception, it had been only by order of the commander, nothing more.

What a thing! Now, it turned out that they had even done a favor to us, that in Mexico, safeguarding life observes an exception when it comes to people deprived from their liberty inside prisons. In other words, it means that the obligation of the State to protect the lives of people does not apply to the lives of prisoners? Does not everyone's life have the same value?

Watch out! This type of unwritten orders that govern the life of our Mexican prison system on a daily basis, such as not opening the bars of the dormitories inside prisons when an earthquake occurs, could imply the intellectual authorship of the State and the sharing of the elements that they integrate it in the crime of genocide. It is about something very delicate with serious consequences.

Finally, they opened the gates and we, the inmates, went out to the courts, some angry, others still scared, but all more relaxed seeing that nothing had happened. Some even began making jokes about how we were dressed: some in pajamas, others with a shirt and boxer with a blanket around, others in their underwear, wrapped up in a bath towel, and a few others fully dressed. Those who were wearing few clothes were shivering with cold, they looked very funny shivering like jellies, and that made us laugh, softening the desperate and angry animus that were seizing us a while ago.

We stayed outside, in the green areas, approximately ten minutes. We returned to our respective dormitories, where we were able to call our relatives in order to know how they were and watch the news to find out how intense the tremor had been and the damage it had caused to houses and buildings outside. It was then when I got to know that it had happened at midnight and that it was

8.2 ° Richter. No wonder it was felt that ugly! Thank God, everything was over and no damage was reported in Mexico City.

Despite the sixteen years that I have been deprived from my freedom, it causes me a rather strange feeling to think about “the outside”, this is, of what exists outside the four walls of this prison, as if it was a distant place and oblivious to me, as if that “outside” was another planet or another galaxy that I must know through television reports, as the news about the investigations that the NASA performs on Mars. At some point I was also part of the “outside”, but it was so long ago that it seems a distant story of my youth.

Throughout all dawn, reports on the earthquake were transmitted in the news. I listened to the information until three in the morning and then I fell asleep. My family was safe and sound, here everything was fine and outside there were no mishaps, so, slowly, I started to succumb to the warm call of that bed which asked me to curl up in its sheets to rest, until I could not take it anymore and I fell asleep.

The following days the only thing that was heard were comments that said that a stronger tremor was coming, that the past earthquake had only been a warning from nature to warn us of what was to come. Many said that those were fatalistic news that should be ignored, while others practically announced the end of the world through high mathematical calculations and prophecies. Nobody was at peace. Inside all of us throbbed the uncertainty of “and if...”, until it finally arrived. With twelve days away, that force that for a long time was absent from our lives, the one that made us shake in 1985 (thirty-two years ago), presented itself again with an unimaginable intensity.

I will never forget that Tuesday, September 19, 2017, when early in the morning, and with an intensity of 7.1 Richter, the female jail of Tepepan, began to shake us from one side to another of its walls, like rag dolls. It was a family visit day in the prisons of Mexico City. There were people from the outside who came to see their inmates. I was in the room watching television. I had already bathed and dressed. However, from one moment to another I began to feel that the floor was moving. I sat very quietly on my bed and the movement intensified greatly. Without thinking, I left the room, I closed with padlock and went to the courts almost running.

While I was going down the stairs, because the dormitory where I live is on the first floor, I listened to the walls and the glass thundered. I was filled with panic. On my way out from the dormitory I bumped into an inmate who had fainted. Other mates approached to help her, and I was about to do the same when, almost immediately, I thought: “No, I am sorry mate, I am not going to stay”, and I continued straight ahead, leaving them behind. Selfishness? I do not really think so, rather, and despite everything and everyone, I owe my action to

the instinct of survival that shouted like never “run for your life”. And it was what I did, without thinking about anything else: I ran for my life.

While I was crossing the corridor to reach the green areas, I could not walk nor run in a straight line. The movement of the earth pushed me strongly from one place to another. It seemed as if I was drunk, and if that was not enough, small pieces fell from the ceiling and the visibility was difficult due to the amount of dust that invaded my path. While I was crossing that corridor, which seemed infinite, I only had the strength to pray, to ask God not to allow me to die crushed that day. I walked, in small stretches I ran, then I walked again, praying all the time. I was really scared. I came to think that I was living the last moments of my life. It was something frightening. There are no words to describe the fear you feel when you face something that comes out of all human control.

Finally, I arrived to the courts. There I met with the other mates who were also leaving frightened their dormitories, many of them crying, most of them trembling without stopping. The earthquake was over and that was when I began to observe the people I had around me. Some were standing, but most were sitting on the floor, practically in shock. They had opened the door of the visiting room which overlooks the prison and the people who were in it were evacuated. A half hour later, the commander issued the order that the visitors should leave the prison to begin assessing the damage. Little by little people said good bye to their inmates and withdrew with great mortification in their faces.

A few minutes later, they got the employees out of the center through the back door, the one where the groceries from the two stores of the prison are introduced. When we saw this action, we got scared again. We thought that the prison was in such bad conditions that not even the employees wanted to stay. They had us concentrated in the courts and we were not allowed to get out of there, not even to go to the toilet in the visiting room, which was only a few steps away. We were also uncommunicated. They kept us in the green areas for about three hours. Little by little we were reassured seeing that we were well and that the prison had not collapsed... on what we could appreciate from where we were.

Several mates got together in groups for praying. We also approached to others who were praying the rosary. At that moment it did not matter who was Catholic, Jewish, devotee of Santa Muerte or who believed in the devil. We were all together. Watching for each other. Some praying and praying for the others, for everyone's families, for the people from outside. It was something beautiful, really. I remember it and my eyes fills with tears, because it was at that moment when we realized that we can coexist without fighting, without

arguing, without facing each other. We were all united, taking care of each other, giving us encouragement, sharing, even if it was a piece of bread for several of us to lower the fright. It was something that I do not know if we will live again as inmates, but the moment will remain engraved in my mind forever.

After three hours, and because several of us wanted to go to the bathroom, finally they opened the door of the courts and we entered the dormitories. We were fearful, reluctant to enter. We had heard the windows and the walls thundering. We asked the authorities the approval from Civil Protection to be certain that the penitentiary was not going to collapse in the middle of the night, and some elements of that organization inspected room by room, the common areas and each corner. We were informed that there was minor damage, but no structural damage. In short, the prison was habitable and, already more trustful, we returned to the rooms. We asked the commander to, please, not to close the gate of the dormitory, in case there were replicas throughout the night. We were still so scared, inmates, guards and the administrative staff, that they had no problem leaving open the dormitory.

Once inside, the first thing I did was call my family to make sure they were all right. I was able to call without problem and they were calm. Some mates also were able to call. After, the lines collapsed and we were cut off from the outside. It was when we started watching the news, and then we learned about the enormous devastation that existed throughout Mexico City. We could hardly believe it. The images said everything, words were not necessary. Houses and buildings collapsed, people gobbled by rubble, cars crushed by billboards in the middle of the streets, people crying and trying to get their trapped relatives out, dogs barking when identifying their badly wounded owner... it was hell on earth.

I was shocked, tears came down when seeing the pain of so many people, I wanted to get out running to help, do something, but I was imprisoned, behind bars. Ironically, safer than any of the people who were in the middle of the streets or inside houses and buildings on the outside. God had mercy on us, the prisoners. Having nowhere to run, he covered us with his mantle and protected us from disaster. I still can not believe the great blessing that came to us, since there was not even one prisoner dead, nor a collapsed prison in Mexico City. Thank you, blessed Jehovah, for your infinite mercy.

However, knowing that my family and we in the prison were well, and watching the disaster that overshadowed so many people outside, I prayed, I prayed for all of them, I prayed for those who had died and so that their relatives would soon find peace in their souls, I prayed for those who were beginning to send help to this or that collection center, I prayed so that would not lack hands to find those who were still fighting for their lives inside the destroyed buildings

and houses, I prayed so that we would realize that Mexico is one and that the differences are what make us strong, not the ones that destroy us, because in the end, Mexico has always proved to be one, despite that misfortunes tear us in the inside.

After this day, many others of pain and anguish followed, but also of strength, of hands that did not stop helping their fellows, of faces that saw in the others that of a brother, of legs that served as support for those who could no longer support themselves, of words of encouragement for the one who was disconsolate, of a hug and a smile for the one who was crying for those whom he lost and why he lost.

I would not change my country for any other in the world. We are one big family, despite the differences between us in terms of skin color, creed, social stratum or any other. Mexico is great and its strength lies in its people.

Mexico is still standing!