

Interview: A day in Managua

Former U of A Education student Theresa Zyp recently returned from Nicaragua. She was part of the Alberta Study Tour, a group organized by the Anglican, United, and Catholic Churches.

In all, seventeen people went on the tour which lasted from October 30 to November 17. However Zyp stayed an extra week until November 24. She spoke with Gateway News Editor Mark Roppel about her trip.



Theresa Zyp.

Gateway: Where exactly did you go in Nicaragua?

Zyp: Basically we stayed in Managua. But what was unique about our tour is that we divided up into three small groups and went out into the country. I went North to San Nicholas (near the Honduran Border).

Gateway: Were you with the tour most of the time or were you free to wander around?

Zyp: Most of the time we were on speaking engagements—we weren't speaking we were listening—but we did have free time. In the evenings we could do whatever we wanted. Our schedule was pretty hectic, we met with a lot of mass organizations: we met with the CDS (Sandinista Defense Committee) which is the most important organization in Nicaragua—in terms of opposition we met with La Prensa (A Nicaraguan newspaper which generally opposes the Sandinista junta).

Gateway: What did La Prensa have to say?

Zyp: They were very, very ambiguous. He (the La Prensa representative) talked about censorship of the press but he played like an innocent child, he wouldn't say a thing. We wanted to find out what the paper's position was exactly towards the government. They (La Prensa) said "we don't think the other papers are getting censored." La Prensa gets censored because it is a very sensationalistic paper. They put censored articles up on a bulletin board outside their offices so people can come down and take a look. The guy we were talking to wasn't there during the revolution, he was an engineer who studied in Montreal and came back. He thought there was no freedom of speech.

But we talked to *Barricada* which is the FSLN (Sandinista National Liberation Front) paper and they are under the same rules of censorship as La Prensa. They (*Barricada*) said that no journal likes to be censored at all, but La Prensa puts things in a very damaging light and so gets censored more often. We asked if *Barricada* was free to criticize the government. They said "yes, we have run articles criticizing some of the government programs and the articles weren't censored at all. It was the way they were done, we were offering constructive criticism and alternatives."

Gateway: Did you think there was free speech, could people freely voice opposition to the government?

Zyp: I think so. As far as I'm concerned there was no totalitarian government. There was no persecution of the church and no hinderances on people speaking out.

We went down to see the port of Corinto after it got bombed. The damage there was just incredible. There was a reporter from La Prensa with us and he thought there was no counter-revolution at all. We asked him how he explained the bombs. He couldn't answer that. He was saying that Nicaragua was a millionaire country and before people didn't have to line up for food and now they do. I said that before there was hunger and now there isn't.

Gateway: But the reporter was allowed to contradict the government line?

Zyp: Yes. The guy who gave us the tour was a member of the Sandinista militia and he was more tolerant of the reporter than we were as a group.

Gateway: Did the people that you met support the government?

Zyp: It was not always one hundred per cent support but they were all willing to defend the revolution because things are so much better now than before.

Gateway: When you stayed in San Nicholas, did you see any evidence of land reforms?

Zyp: I don't know what their systems was there. The family I stayed with owned most of the land, but we went down to Somatillo which is six kilometres away from the (Honduran) border and spent a night there in the cooperative of Santa Teresa. The cooperative had gotten land from the government. It was a farm that was once owned by a Somocista (a supporter of former President Somoza).

Thirteen peasant families were in control—women and children and men. There weren't too many teenagers because they are in the militias. The people at the cooperative said this is the first time that they have milk for their children. They have land to work; they decide what to do.

Gateway: Are the militias made up of volunteers or is there conscription?

Zyp: The majority are volunteers, but now there is conscription for young men of 17 to 25.

Gateway: Living so close to the border, what do these people think of the contras (guerillas fighting against the Sandinistas)?

Zyp: They don't like them at all.

Gateway: Do they consider the contras a serious threat?

Zyp: The peasants are committed to defending the little that they have. In this cooperative they have eight rifles. They cannot leave their cattle out at night or else in the morning the cattle will be gone. So it is a serious threat even though the contras haven't been able to take any land. The tension and fear....

Gateway: How do these people feel about the United States?

Zyp: Not too friendly. But they make a very clear distinction between the government and the people. They are not against the American people; it is just Reagan's policies—they want him to stop the aggression against Nicaragua. It's a tense situation.

Gateway: Are the Nicaraguans expecting an invasion?

Zyp: Yes they are, everybody is getting ready for it.

Gateway: Especially since the invasion of Grenada?

Zyp: They saw Grenada as a test for Reagan in terms of how he can invade and in terms of finding out public support or reaction to this type of invasion.

There were all kinds of rumours going on along the Honduran border. People I stayed with were talking about an invasion on the eighteenth (of November). In Managua you can see them building dugouts. In the evening the popular militias get together for military practice. Everybody has their own tasks to do. When an invasion comes who will take care of the children? Who will worry about the, and health? Who is going to defend, and who is going to worry about fire...? They are very organized.

Gateway: What is the relationship between the people and the militias?

Zyp: Good. There is no fear. I have never been in a country where there was military before but (in Nicaragua) they are part of the people, and they mix. You see guys walking around with guns and you don't even blink. They (the militia) were mostly young men and women—your age and my age. They come into a normal restaurant, line up, and if they see someone, they put their guns down beside the table and go over and talk.

Nicaragua has a large army, but it is because they are arming the people. What other country in South America could do that with such confidence? Can you imagine what would happen if the people in Chile had arms?

Gateway: What evidence did you see of Soviet aid?

Zyp: One soldier had an old World War Two Soviet rifle. The only sign of Soviet aid I saw was a field hospital.

Gateway: But do the Nicaraguans depend on the Soviet Union and Cuba for aid?

Zyp: I don't think they see Russia as controlling their revolution at all. I saw a lot of Cubans out there—teachers and things. The people really appreciate the Cuban aid.

Gateway: Will there be elections soon?

Zyp: They are working on the electoral law. I think in 1985, as planned, elections will be called. There are six political parties—the Social Christian Democrats, the Conservative Christian Democrats, the Communist party and two other left-wing parties. There will be a Sandinista party. All parties participate in the Council of State.

Gateway: How does the Council of State operate?

Zyp: People elect representatives on the Council of State.

Gateway: How is it different from a full scale election?

Zyp: You are not electing a party, just a representative. Teachers, churches, womens' groups, trade unions... they elect a representative that sits on the Council of State.

Gateway: Does this council have full power or does the Sandanista Junta run things as it sees fit?

Zyp: There are three people who constitute the Junta and then you have the Council of State. All laws must pass the Council of State. It's quite democratic. The opposition has as much say as anyone else. A lot of representatives are youths. The Sandanista youth has representatives, the defense committees have representatives, teachers, farmers.... There are approximately 16 mass organizations represented in the Council of State and the political parties. There are a total of 51 members on the Council.

I found the government very open and very tolerant. They meet every week with different zones in the country to discuss problems in that zone, in terms of government programs, in terms of running their adult education, and so on. It is called *Facing the People* and it is televised nationally. I found this very exciting because people are part of the whole process.

All the organizations we met with said elections were going to be held in 1985.

The US says as long as you have elections it's democratic. Look at El Salvador—democracy is based on having elections? The reason they didn't have anything before (in Nicaragua) is that it's pretty hard for people to vote rationally when they can't read and write.

Gateway: Have the Sandanistas launched a literacy campaign?

Zyp: Yes, it started with adult education, and now peasants are able to go to university and become doctors or whatever for the first time. Education is all free there. There are still some private schools but the fees aren't too high and the curriculum is the same.

Gateway: Do you think the situation will improve or will power revert back to a privileged few?

Zyp: The people have developed a very critical sense and I think that might be the one thing that will keep the process going—people's ability to criticize and to offer suggestions.

I just think it will be sad if the process isn't allowed to continue. In spite of things they (the Sandanistas) are still going ahead with reforms. An agrarian reform gave land to 155 people while I was there.

The government recently spent \$200,000 on books. Inflation hasn't hit there. The government has kept prices very reasonable. Poor people have access to goods.

From October to December they need people to help on the farms, and they get about 20,000 volunteers—mainly students. It is a statement that people are willing to go out and do things.

Gateway: What do the Nicaraguans think of Canada?

Zyp: They look upon Canada in a good light. They say the government is ambiguous but they still remember the first donation of wheat Canada gave in 1979 when the US said no. They talk about that. They talk about the boat that goes out from Vancouver every year with donations of food and clothing.