

The First Two Months of the Zapatistas

A Tzotzil Chronicle

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Translator's Note

Marián Peres Tzu is a member of the Tzotzil-Maya community of Chamula, which lies immediately to the north of San Cristóbal de Las Casas in the Chiapas Highlands. In his childhood and early youth, he worked as a coffee picker on the plantations of Chiapas's southern Pacific coast, and as a cane-cutter in the state's Central Valley. Since the early 1980s he has lived in a mostly Protestant *colonia* on the outskirts of San Cristóbal and earned his living re-selling on street corners the vegetables that he buys at the end of each day from fellow Chamulas forced to unload their unsold produce before boarding trucks to return home.

As the following pages attest, Marián is also a lively story-teller. Over the last eight years, he has contributed a steady stream of his own stories and the transcribed oral histories of his neighbors to the Tzotzil Publishing House ("Taller Tzotzil"), which has included them in a number of its books. In addition, whenever my wife and I have been outside of Chiapas, Marián has written to us regularly in Tzotzil to keep us up with the latest news, tell jokes, and just gossip.

What follows is a selection from Marián's first letter after New Year's Day, 1994. In it, he describes the complex reactions to the Zapatista Uprising of Indians in the area of San Cristóbal who did *not* rebel. Clearly, there was a lot of fear early on, especially among the inhabitants of established, traditional communities who have been engaged for almost two decades in the violent persecution of an emerging Protestant minority in their midst. Even among many of these *tradicionalistas*, however, this fear seems to

have given way within a few weeks to a dawning sense of pride at what other Indians—the Zapatistas—had accomplished. By mid-February, the mood seems clearly to have turned around, becoming almost festive as it became obvious that the Army and police had orders to avoid further conflict, thus permitting even Indians who had not rebelled to redress old grievances.

Marián's latest letters, during the last months of 1994 and the first of 1995, describe how since the giddy euphoria of the first half of 1994 people have become increasingly anxious about the escalating tensions between Indians and non-Indians, between those who are struggling for the rights of the poor and the private armies being raised by the rich, and, among Indians themselves, between dissidents of all sorts, Zapatistas or not, who oppose the government, and *tradicionalistas*, who still tend on the whole to support it. Everyone is aware that the current situation is unstable, and there is great fear about how it will finally sort itself out. Nevertheless, at the same time, the new consciousness of—and joy in—a wider Mayan identity and its potential political strength that became apparent during the first months of 1994, and that is so evident in the following letter, continues to be strong.

Jan Rus
March, 1995

Just a note about style: Tzotzil custom dictates that no one talk too long before surrendering the floor, so native stories tend to be short, and, if well told, to build up to a clear punch line or moral. In part, this is an expression of a deeply-felt sense of democracy among Tzotzil-speakers: nothing is ever decided until everyone has had a say, so no one should monopolize 'the word.'

In part, however, it is perhaps also an outgrowth of the fact that stories often have to be told quickly, on the run, as it were, to friends one meets in the market, passes on the trail, or pauses to talk to at the end of a row while working in the fields. Longer speeches are of course possible, but Marián's letters, if long, tend to be strings of short, discrete anecdotes like the pages that follow.

Early January: Preparations and Visits

Before the invasion of San Cristóbal, everyone always talked about how the soldiers at the army base overlooking the southern approach to the city had spread booby traps all around their land, how they had fixed it so no one would ever dare attack them. If the poor Indians ever came to make trouble, everyone said, the soldiers would finish them off right there, before they even got out of the forest. The army officers are *maestros* of killing, they said, and all they have to do every day, their only chore, is teach the young soldiers how to kill. And as if all of that weren't enough to scare away a bunch of raggedly peasants, all the people said, the soldiers also have mounds of bombs stored behind their fort. Nothing but special bombs for killing Indians!

K'elavil, look here: According to what people said, the soldiers had strung a special wire around their barracks that was connected to a bomb every few steps. If the damn Indians ever did come around, they said, all the soldiers would have to do was lean out of their beds and touch the wire with a piece of metal—like, say, a beer can—and the bombs would all blow up. And if the Indians tried to cut the wire, it would also blow up. But of course, the soldiers are famous for never sleeping, so the Indians would never even get close to the bombs in the first place. No one, the soldiers figured, would ever get past them.

But after all those preparations, what happened? On January first, the soldiers were asleep when the Zapatistas arrived in San Cristóbal! But snoring! They didn't see the Zapatistas go by their check-points with the other passengers on the second-class buses! They didn't notice the Zapatistas get out of their buses at the station and walk into the center of town! They didn't see anything! And when the soldiers woke up, the Zapatistas had already seized the *Palacio de Gobierno* and set up their own guards around the city! After all, it was the Army that was left outside of town, safely holed up in its barracks! The Zapatistas won by just ignoring them! Not until the next day, when they had finished their business in town, did the Zapatistas finally go to pay a visit on the soldiers!*

* The Zapatistas attacked the army post at Rancho Nuevo on January 2nd, as they were retreating from San Cristóbal.

The Zapatistas are only Indians, but what the army officers forgot is that Indians too are men. And since they are men, they also could be armed and trained, just like the army. All they needed was the idea. And as it turned out, their thinking was better than the army's! They fooled the officers, who are *maestros* of killing! Since that day, all of us, even those who are not enemies of the government, feel like smiling down into our shirts.

If there is a sad part to all of this, it is that even though the Zapatistas are men, they will have to live in hiding from now on. They won't be able to sleep in their own beds in their own houses, but will have to stay hidden in caves in the jungle. If they want to make babies like everyone else, they'll even have to screw in the caves. Like *armadillos*!

Early January: Uncertainty in Chamula

When word first came that the Zapatistas had occupied San Cristóbal, all the Chamulas said that they weren't afraid. But that was a lie; they were. Just to keep up appearances, though, everyone said that the only one who really had anything to be scared of, the single person responsible for all the bad things that have happened in Chamula, was the municipal president. In truth, of course, all of them knew that they too had participated in the round-ups and expulsions of their Protestant neighbors, and they were all afraid the Zapatistas were going to come and exact justice. They had heard that the Zapatistas were well armed and figured they wouldn't waste a lot of time listening to excuses, that they would just kill all the Chamulas who had beaten the Protestants and burned their property. And what could the Chamulas do about it? They didn't have any good weapons, just some .22 rifles, a few pistols, and one or another old shot-gun—enough to scare their unarmed neighbors, maybe, but against real soldiers they wouldn't have a chance. Instead of fighting, they all said, everyone in the whole town would be better off if they just stayed in bed and screwed one last time.

As you can imagine, however, if everyone else was worried, the municipal president himself was terrified. He was so scared about what the Zapatistas and Protestant exiles would do to him if they ever caught him that he walked around for a week with a hard-on. But stiff! He better than anyone knew all of the terrible things that had been done. But he wasn't alone. To tell the truth, the whole town was afraid.

Finally, since there was no other defense, the *presidente* announced that the whole town should offer candles and incense at the sacred caves and mountain tops and ask for the protection of God and the saints. Since Chamula's *j-iloletik* [shamans] are famed for their power, this seemed like such a good idea that the officials of the *municipios* of Zinacantán, Amatenango, Mitontic and Huistán decided to join in as well. Together, they thought, maybe their prayers would be powerful enough to keep the Zapatistas away.

On the appointed day, scores of officials and dozens of chanting

shamans, all dressed in their ceremonial clothes and many carrying candles and *yavak'aletik* of burning incense, assembled at the church in Zinacantán. From the church and sacred mountain of Zinacantán, they proceeded together to the sacred cave at the border of the *municipio* of San Andrés, and then to the mountain of Chaklajun on the road between the *cabecera* of Chamula and San Cristóbal. They prayed for more than an hour at each site. *Kajval!* [Lord]: There was so much incense it was like a fragrant fog, and the whole entourage seemed to hum like bees as each man murmured somberly in his own prayers:

Have Mercy, *Kajval*,
 Have Mercy, Jesús.
 Make yourself present among us, *Kajval*,
 Make yourself present in our incense, Jesús
 With us, your daughters,
 With us, your sons.

We have brought you food, *Kajval*,
 We have brought you drink, Jesús,
 To awaken your conscience,
 To awaken your heart,
 That you might lend us your feet,
 That you might lend us your hands,
 That you might discharge your rifle,
 That you might discharge your cannon.

What sin have we, *Kajval*?
 What guilt have we, Jesús?
 Don't you see that we are here,
 sacred lightning?
 Don't you see that we are here,
 sacred thunder?
 We beg that you close the roads to
 your sons who are coming,*
 We beg that you close the roads to
 your daughters who are coming,
 That you bind their feet,
 That you bind their hands,
 That you silence their rifles,
 That you stifle their cannons,
 If only for an hour,
 If only for two hours, *Kajval*,
 Although they come at night,
 Although they come in the day,

* i.e. the Zapatistas.

Although they come at sundown,
 Although they come at sunrise.

Holy guardian of the earth,
 Holy guardian of the sky,
 Because we come on our knees,
 Because we come bent over,
 Accept this bouquet of flowers,
 Accept this offering of leaves, *Kajval*.
 Accept this handful of incense,
 Accept this offering of smoke,
 That we come to offer at your feet,
 That we come to offer to your hands,
 Holy Father of sacred Chaklajun,
 Holy Mother of sacred Chaklajun.

As the days passed and the Zapatistas never came, it seemed that the prayers had worked...

Early January: The Evangelicals' Prayer

The traditional officials and *j-iloletik* were not the only ones who were afraid during the siege of San Cristóbal, however. The Chamula evangelicals—the *expulsados*—were also scared. Since they live in colonies on the outskirts of the city, it might even be true that at the beginning they were even more frightened than the traditionalists. But even later, when they saw that the Zapatistas meant them no harm, they continued praying because now they were afraid the national army was going to kill them. Their prayers sound just the same as the traditionalists, but if you listen to the words they say different things. Here's the prayer of the pastor of the colony *Paraíso*:

Our Lord Jesus Christ,
 God, who is in Heaven,
 Lord, we are your daughters,
 We are your sons,
 Look, Lord, at the thoughts of
 those who are invading,
 Look at how they don't want
 the good you bring,
 How they are coming with arms,
 How they are coming with machetes,
 But listen to our words,
 Eternal Father,
 You alone decide what will be,
 You alone prepare what will be.
 We, Lord, without you can do nothing,

We, without you, are not complete.
 Listen, Lord Jesus Christ,
 You who accompany us on your path,
 You who accompany us on our walk,
 There is nothing we can do without you,
 There is nothing we can start
 without you, Lord.

Look at us,
 See us,
 On your path,
 On our trip, Lord.
 We only ask your favor, Lord,
 That they not come to hit us,
 That they not come to fight us,
 In our houses,
 In our homes.
 You, Father,
 You, Lord,
 Accept our thanks,
 That what you say will be done,
 That your children will do
 only what you have thought.
 Look, Lord, pardon us,
 That we do not know how to
 communicate with you more
 respectfully,
 That we are not worthy to
 address you, Lord.
 This is the only way we know,
 Only like this,
 In our own language,
 With our heads bowed, Lord.
 Hallelujah,
 Hallelujah,
 Hallelujah.

Late January: Toward a Free Market

For the first two weeks or so after the seizure of San Cristóbal, not a single *kaxlan** official showed his face in public—not a policeman, not a parking officer, not a collector of market fees. Not one. They disappeared! They were so terrified of the Zapatistas that they hid. But the moment they were sure the Zapatista Army was gone and wasn't coming back, Ha!, immediately the parking officers were back unscrewing

* The word *kaxlan*, pronounced 'kashlan,' is a corruption of the Spanish word *castellano*, Castilian, and is the Tzotzil word for non-Indians.

license plates, the municipal police beating up drunks, and the market collectors chasing away poor women trying to sell tomatoes and lemons on street corners. With the Zapatistas gone, suddenly they were fearless again. But when the Zapatistas were here, they stayed in their bedrooms with the shades closed, quaking with fear. They couldn't even get it up with their wives they were so scared.

You see what that means? They were afraid of *Indians*, because that's what the Zapatistas were, Indians. When we other Indians realized that, we felt strong as well. Strong like the Zapatistas. The *kaxlanetik* of San Cristobál have always pushed us around just because we don't speak Spanish correctly. But now everything has begun to change.

One example of this is that in mid-January, when the *kaxlan* officials were all still hidden, the Indian charcoal sellers got together and formed the '*Organización Zapatista* of Charcoal Sellers.' Then, without asking anybody's permission, they moved from the vacant field where they had always been forced to sell in the past to the street right next to the main market. The thing is, *ak'al* is really dirty—everything around it gets covered with black dust—so the market officials had always kept it far away from the part of the market frequented by 'decent people' and tourists. With no one to stop them, however, the charcoal sellers came to be near everyone else.

But there are a lot of other Indians who have always been relegated to the edges of the market too. When these people saw that the charcoal sellers had changed their location without asking anyone's permission, they started coming around and asking if they could change as well. *Hí-jole!* Suddenly there were a couple of hundred people sitting in orderly rows selling vegetables and fruit and charcoal in what used to be the parking lot where rich people left their cars! The first day they gathered there, the leader of the charcoal sellers gave a speech. "*Brothers and sisters!*" he cried, "*Don't be afraid! There are too many of us selling here in this street now! Let all of those who have been forced to sell out of the backs of trucks, all of those who have been driven to the edges of the market, come sell right here in the center with us! Let them come and take a place here in these rows we have made, and then we'll see if the kaxlan officials dare say anything! Only one thing to all of those who join us: I don't want to hear anyone talking about being afraid! If we remain united and firm, we have nothing to fear!*" All the Indian peddlers jumped to their feet. "*We're with you!*" they responded joyfully.

So every morning early all of these people came and formed themselves into neat rows and spread their goods out on the ground. But then the day finally came when the Market Administrator returned. Since he's the boss of the market and all the surrounding streets, he stomped up to the first charcoal seller he saw and demanded "*Who gave you permission to sell here?*" "*No one had to give us permission because we belong to an organization.*" "*What fucking organization? Pick up all this shit and get the hell out of here before I lose my temper,*" the Administrator screamed, "*I don't want to hear another word from any of you assholes! Are*

you going to fucking obey or not?" Mother of God! He seemed pretty mad. *"No, we're not going to move. We're poor and hungry, and we have to sell to eat,"* the Indian said stubbornly. Then the leader of the charcoal sellers spoke. *"You sound brave now,"* he said evenly to the Administrator, *"but when the Zapatistas were here you didn't say anything because you were hiding behind your wife's skirts. Not until now have you had the balls to talk. So who's the asshole? Maybe it would be better for you if you kept quiet, because if you run us off we're going to make sure the sub-comandante of the Zapatistas gets your name, and then we'll find out how much of a man you are. You might win today, but maybe you ought to think about what it's going to cost you in the long run."*

Hijo! The Administrator had never been talked to like that by an Indian before! He started to tremble, who knows whether from fear or rage, and then he turned and fled without saying another word, taking all of his fee collectors with him.

And that's where things remain at the beginning of March. Thanks to the Zapatistas, the Indians are learning to stand up for themselves...

Early February: The Governed Do Not Consent

Then there's what happened in Teopisca.* In February, some Indian squatters from outside the town seized the *kaxlan* municipal president. They said he hadn't kept his campaign promises, and just grabbed him. He tried to make excuses for himself. *"I already spent my entire budget on you,"* he begged, *"I paved your streets, I brought electricity to your houses, I brought you water faucets, I made new roads for your trucks... What more do you want?"* But according to all of the people, none of what he said was true. The streets aren't paved, there's no electricity, no faucets, no roads; nothing. In truth, the president and his friends just stole all the money.

Well, the squatters almost lost their heads and killed the president. Some wanted to hang him and they say someone even took a shot at him. But eventually others calmed the crowd down, and in the end all they did was truss him up like a pig, throw him in a pick-up truck and send him back to the state government in Tuxtla.

The thing is, those squatters were Indians, Chamulas! There was a handful of poor ladinos among them too, but most were Chamulas! And they managed to capture and depose the president of a *kaxlan* town! Of course, it was the president's own fault; no one forced him to steal the municipality's money. But now all the politicians have to be careful. We 'poor dumb Indians' aren't afraid the way we used to be. Now we've all learned from the Zapatistas how to meet our collective problems: with unity. Obviously, the squatters didn't have machine guns and grenades like the Zapatistas—just .22's and shotguns. No; it was their unity that gave them strength!

* i.e. the next ladino town south of San Cristóbal.

Mid-February: The Festival of Games

Since everyone in Chamula was still afraid at the beginning of February that the Zapatistas were coming, *K'in Tajimol* didn't go well this year. Instead of coming and staying two or three days as in the past, visiting with their friends and sleeping on the ground, everyone came down from their hamlets to watch for just a few minutes before scurrying back to their houses and closing the doors. Nobody wanted to be part of a crowd in the town center.

As if that weren't enough, the army had forbidden fireworks. No one could have sky-rockets [*cohetes*], fire-crackers or pin-wheels. Nothing. The head religious officials were able to have just a few *cohetes* for the celebration itself, but only by getting a special permit from the army. The municipal president had to go ask in person, and only won out after explaining that the religious officials had been saving for twenty years each to put on the fiesta, and that it—and their lives—would be ruined without rockets.*

In San Cristóbal, on the other hand, fireworks are absolutely prohibited. No exceptions. But *cohetes* are just as much a part of their traditions as ours, so all their fiestas are very sad. Of course, there are still marimba bands, games, and always a little bit of liquor. Nevertheless, the fiestas are sad and fearful. The soldiers don't even want anyone to drink; if they catch a drunk, they beat him up. They don't want anyone to be noisy or out of order.

After all, though, neither the army nor the Zapatistas came to Chamula's *K'in Tajimol*. Not many other people came either, for that matter. The fiesta didn't go well.

Mid-February: Mayan Justice

When the negotiations with the government began in mid-February, the Zapatistas, as a sign of good faith, freed the former Governor, Absalón Castellanos Domínguez, whom they had captured at his ranch at the beginning of the revolt. They say he got sick at the end, that he wouldn't eat anything. Maybe it was because his hands were tied behind his back for six weeks, who knows... Personally, I think he got sick because he couldn't stand the Zapatistas' cooking! It was nothing but Indian food: corn and a little beans. No meat. There is no one in the Zapatistas' camp in the jungle but Indians, and Indians aren't used to eating meat. We can never afford to buy it, and even if an animal dies we have to sell it. Poor old *don* Absalón: since he's rich, he's not accustomed to going without meat every day...

Still, when they freed him, outside of his hands, which were a little swollen, he seems to have been okay. That's more than you can say for

* 'Festival of Games': the Mayan New Year, celebrated at Carnaval.

Indians who are arrested by the authorities, rebellion or no rebellion. When Absalón was Governor, they were always beaten, whether they were guilty or not, even before they were questioned, 'so they would learn to have respect.' All the Zapatistas did to Absalón, on the other hand, was take his ranch away from him and divide it among peasants who have no land. Who knows whether they will get to keep it...