

**VÍCTOR MANUEL
DURÁN**

EMILIA
MATRIARCH OF PROGRESO
(BELIZE)

PROLOGUE
BY
ALAIN SAINT-SAËNS

UNIVERSITY PRESS
OF THE SOUTH

2021

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Published in the United States by The University Press of the South. Printed in France by Monbeaulivre.fr

E-mails: unprsouth@aol.com; universitypresssouth@gmail.com

Visit our award-winning web pages: www.unprsouth.com

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Víctor Manuel Durán.

Emilia. Matriarch of Progreso (Belize).

Second Edition in English. Prologue by Alain Saint-Saëns.

Latin American Studies Series, 77.

172 Pages.

Front Cover Art by Ana María Calatayud. Photos: 'Emilia', Copyright Víctor Manuel Durán. Reproduced with Permission.

1) Literature. 2) Biography. 3) Latin America. 4) Belize. 5) Progreso. 6) Corozal. 7) Mayan Culture. 8) Male Chauvinism. 9) Alain Saint-Saëns. 10) Víctor Manuel Durán.

ISBN: 978-1-937030-64-3 (US Edition: 2019)

ISBN: 978-9-403638-37-9 (European Edition: 2021)

*For all my siblings in the beautiful village of Progreso,
in the North of Belize, where it all started for me...*

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PROLOGUE

Sometimes in literature an atypical character can be emblematic of a whole country. It was certainly true with Jean Valjean, unforgettable hero of French Victor Hugo's novel, *Les misérables*, as well as with José Arcadio Buendía, Macondo patriarch of Colombian Gabriel García Márquez's novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*; or with the title character of North American Mark Twain's novel, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Emilia Olivera, a real and humble woman, a native of the Central American country of Belize, becomes, thanks to Víctor Manuel Durán's literary talent, the true embodiment of the Belizean woman, a proud unbreakable spirit, a demanding mother and a loyal companion, who was able, with grace and determination, to face both joyful events and harsh tragedies during her long life in Progreso, a village in the Corozal District in the country of Belize.

Beyond the struggles for survival of an individual and her family through several generations, Víctor Manuel Durán, with the mastery endemic of a social Historian, depicts the progressive birth of a State from the Caste War of Yucatán (1847-1901), the bloody revolt of native Mayan people against the European-descended population, the so-called *Yucatecos*, on to the colonial order of British Honduras (1862-1981) till Belize finally reaches independence and international recognition on September 21, 1981.

Emilia Olivera, mother of Víctor Manuel Durán and seven other children, reaches, through her enduring and endearing existence, the symbolic status of mother of her young and noble homeland, Belize. Beloved by family members and

relatives, who cheered her till a few weeks from her one hundred and second birthday, admired by her fellow citizens, she earned the right to rest in peace in the small cemetery of the village of Progreso. Her soul, though, will inhabit forever the wooded banks of the large and beautiful fresh-water lagoon she enjoyed so much throughout her life.

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Chapter I

Pascuala

“Hurry up Pascuala, we do not want to be caught by those savages who are following us,” my father said as we marched through the thick jungle that separates Bacalar, in Mexico, from Corozal, in the north of British Honduras. It was March of 1858, one of the hottest months of the year and my dad and I were fleeing from the town of Bacalar which had just been sacked by the Mexican army led by Colonel Zetina and his Mestizo army, in one of the many battles of the Caste War of Yucatán.

I remember the last year I had spent in the small town of Bacalar with my mom, Sergia and my dad, who was now urging me to walk faster. Did he not understand that I was just six years old, tired, hungry and afraid? How I long for those past days when dad would come home and the three of us would eat a simple but warm meal of beans and corn tortillas! How I long to hear my mother’s voice as she, at the end of the meal, at dusk, would tell me stories, in Spanish and in our native Mayan tongue, of faraway lands, of princes and princesses in beautiful castles, of portentous birds that could foretell future mishaps and of spirits, good and evil, who lived in the forests and appeared at night to whom they pleased, to bring blessings or to wreck havoc. But I could not tell my dad these things since we had to keep quiet as we were fleeing the wrath of Zetina, sweating, tired and hungry, and trying to reach the relative safety of Corozal, which was currently under British domination and protection.

Pascuala and her dad, Doroteo, marched for three days and nights, stopping only for brief respites, until at dawn of the fourth day, exhausted and very hungry, they arrived, by crossing

the porous border, at the town of Corozal, where they thought they would be safer. At this time Corozal was a bustling town of about two thousand inhabitants, who currently were all under the protection of the British Government, all dependent on the cultivation and sale of selected agricultural products like corn, and on the export and sale of carefully chosen hardwoods, made possible by this burgeoning export industry. The population of Corozal was now swollen to at least thrice its size by fleeing Mestizo and Maya Indian refugees from Bacalar, straining to the breaking point its meager economic and food resources. Indian and Mestizo refugees were to be seen everywhere, sleeping in the parks, bathing in the sea, begging for food in the muddy streets in which they also formed uneven lines to receive rationed cups of drinking water and ill-fitting items of clothing, courtesy of some religious charities and of Her Majesty's soldiers. For Pascuala, the din produced by all these people was almost unbearable. She heard different people talking in diverse, unidentifiable dialects and languages which ranged from Yucatec, Kechi and Mopan Maya to Spanish, to Creole to the "proper" but unintelligible English spoken by Her Majesty's soldiers. Pascuala's first language was Yucatec Maya but she also understood and spoke Spanish.

As night fell, Pascuala and her dad joined the throngs of squalid and hungry refugees in the park. Men, women and children all slept, heaped together, protected by nothing but the stars and ragged army blankets, again, grudging gifts from Her Majesty's soldiers.

Pascuala dreamt about her mom: she saw the Mexican soldiers attacking the small thatch hut where they lived in Bacalar. She saw them, in her nightmarish dream, dragging her mom away as she, Pascuala, hid, and heard her screams as these undisciplined soldiers raped and killed her; she heard

them mercilessly beating her dad and heard them walk away, leaving him for dead, laughing as they called him stupid Indian, abandoning him with the certainty that he was lifeless. She remembered, now fully awake, how she came out of hiding and how her dad managed to get up, his face full of blood, and grabbing her by the hand, rushed them to the middle of the thick jungle on their way to Corozal, leaving her dead mother behind, both crying as they fled their town and home of many years.

Now in Corozal, with her dad sleeping beside her, Pascuala lay awake, wondering what would be their fate. Where would her dad take her? How would they manage?

Pascuala pensó en sus amiguitos que jugaban con ella en Bacalar y pensando en ellos se durmió y soñó con su mamá muerta. La vio cocinando, hablándole en Maya y preparando la comida para su papá. En su sueño, su mamá le dijo que no se preocupara, que todo saldrá bien pero que cuidara a su papá...

The screams of the soldiers and of the masses of unwashed and starving humanity awoke Pascuala in the early morning. It was June 30, 1858 and the British soldiers were shouting to everyone to wake up, in some cases kicking people awake as they gave each of them a tin cup filled with cold tea and bits and pieces of stale biscuits. Pascuala woke up, rubbing her eyes, as she surveyed the filthy masses of humanity, looking for her dad, who during the night had apparently moved away from her, perhaps to relieve himself in the bushes that surrounded the park. She refused the tea and scarce victuals proffered to her by an impatient representative of Her Majesty's

military, preferring instead to suffer the beginning pangs of hunger and wishing she had her hot corn tortillas with fried beans, her late mother's favorite morning meal. Her dad appeared, looking lost and sad but unlike Pascuala, he was eating a salted biscuit and drinking from a tin cup. His face lit

up as he saw Pascuala and he kissed her on the cheek as he held her by the hand. It was early in the morning but even at this time, the sun was already beating down on them causing both Pascuala and her dad to start sweating profusely.

Still holding her by the hand, Doroteo quickly but quietly, tells his daughter that they must leave Corozal and hurriedly explains, as if he were talking to a grown-up, that he does not trust the other refugees and much less the British soldiers whose intentions he does not know. He spoke to her in a hushed tone, in the Mayan language. *Pascuala begins to cry partly because she is hungry, partly because she does not know where they will end up but mostly because she is just a six-year old child who misses her mom.*

Her dad tells her that they will go to the wharf, find something to eat and try to board one of the many sailing boats moored on the dock with the hope that it will take them to a small village called Chunox, which he has heard is inhabited by many Maya Indians who have been left alone both by the British soldiers and by Zetina's revengeful army. Not fully understanding her dad, Pascuala eagerly trots beside him, desperately clutching his hand, hungry, frightened and barefooted, but lured by the thought of finding something to eat soon. At the quay, there are a few people aimlessly milling around and her dad finds some bananas which he gives her to eat while he walks towards some boats tied to the wharf and begins to talk to some of the men who are sitting in some of them. As Pascuala watches, he quickly returns to where she is and tells her that in a few minutes they are leaving for Chunox in one of the boats.

The boat ride to the village of Chunox, whose name was derived from a Mayan term for the trunk of a special tree, was uneventful but Pascuala was amazed by the beauty of the lagoon

and the river and by the lush greenness of the forest. In the village of Chunox, the *alcalde* offered them a small room in a thatched house where they were able to stay while Doroteo quickly built a small thatch house for himself and his daughter, using only natural products from the forest as was the Mayan custom. By the end of August 1858, Pascuala and her dad were settled in their meager house, and Doroteo was planting corn and squash and would supplement their diet by hunting for deer and by fishing in the lagoon that faced the village of Chunox. Pascuala, even at the tender age of six, would tend to the chickens which they were raising for food and eggs and would do the housework, cooking the simple meals of tortillas and beans and the occasional meats which she and her dad would eat together.

At night, lying in her small bed made of leaves covered by a gunny sack, Pascuala constantly dreams of her mom and vividly recalls the savage incident that took her life. She wakes up screaming most of the time, and quite often she wakes up with her dad beside her, comforting her, as he himself awakens from the same nightmares.

By the time Pascuala was eighteen years old, her dad had remarried and had started a new family in the village of Chunox. It was 1870 and Doroteo was thinking of marriage for his teenage daughter and began looking around for a suitable partner for her, as was the tradition in the Mayan culture. Not finding any suitable partners in Chunox, he decided to move his family to the nearby village of Progreso, which was situated across the Cocos Lagoon, and was a bigger and more prosperous village than Chunox, with more possibilities for marriage for his daughter and better opportunities for him to get more land. In the village of Progreso, Doroteo settled his family in a small, abandoned thatch house while he looked for

land to build his own. As he was building it, he was consulting with village elders in his quest to find the right partner for his daughter, without consulting Pascuala, as was the custom. Pascuala knew what her dad was planning and was also aware of the Mayan custom of arranged marriages. She was not particularly fond of this practice but did not dare tell her dad!

By the end of the year, Doroteo and his family were settled in their new thatch house and his life was centered around his new family which consisted of his second wife and Pascuala, whose lack of suitors concerned him. On the other hand, Pascuala, at the age of eighteen, was content to live the life she led and was determined to have a say on the selection of her future husband, despite the Mayan tradition of arranged marriages. Her daily routine consisted of her getting up at six in the morning, preparing breakfast for the family, eating her own breakfast shortly thereafter and then gathering the family's clothes which she would wash on the banks of the picturesque and peaceful Progreso lagoon. By noon, she would return home, hang the washed clothes to dry, if it was not raining, help prepare the afternoon meal and after eating it with her family, she would take a short nap after which she would start preparing the evening meal which the family would eat together. They would go to bed very early to cyclically start the next day, routinely performing the chores of the previous day. The only exception occurred on feast days: during those days, they would gather, communally, for prayers to both their Mayan and Christian deities. The prayers were usually followed by a chaperoned public dance, ostensibly to provide entertainment for the youth but in reality to offer opportunities for village elders and parents to select suitable marriage partners for their children. Pascuala was quite aware of the unstated purpose of these dances and deliberately avoided, as much as possible,

mingling with anyone, particularly those of the opposite sex, as again she was determined to choose her future mate, in strict defiance of the revered Mayan customs and traditions regarding arranged marriages.

By 1876 Pascuala was twenty-four years old and still single, in defiance of Mayan practices of being married and having a family by that age. Although this did not daunt her, it did worry her dad who by now was constantly urging her to choose a husband as he had already given up on arranging a marriage for her. *Por las noches, Pascuala soñaba con su príncipe y le rogaba a los dioses que le trajeran un hombre del quien ella podría sentirse orgullosa y a quien ella podría amar. Se dormía llorándole a su difunta madre y pidiéndole que la ayudara a encontrar a su futuro esposo y que le diera fuerzas para resistir las insistencias de su padre que seguía obligándola que siguiera las prácticas y costumbres de sus antepasados y que permitiera que él le escogiera su futuro esposo como lo hacían todas las familias de la aldea de Progreso.*

One day as Pascuala was preparing the evening meal, an older man, clearly of African origin, stopped at her door and asked her if she would please give him some water to drink. Pascuala reluctantly gave him some fresh water in a gourd and after he drank it and left, she spat on the ground and smashed the gourd to pieces, destroying it as she felt racially superior to this black man and maintained he had infringed on her private space, although ingrained ethical standards demanded that she be courteous to him and provide him with the water he had requested.

A week after this incident, the man returned, repeated his request for water which she gave him and again Pascuala smashed the gourd and spat after he had left. After this incident

occurred for the third time, it became obvious to her that this was only a ploy he was using to see her and when it was repeated for the fourth time, she gave him the water, after which she told him that he was no longer welcome in the house. However, as he was leaving, he unintentionally saw her smashing the gourd after he had drunk from it and this prompted him to reinforce his determination to make her his woman.

The man's name was Máximo Olivera and like Pascuala, he was a refugee from the Caste War of Yucatan. Unlike Pascuala, he was tall, black and spoke only the Mayan language. He was also about ten years her senior. In addition, he also had two common-law wives at the same time, Manuela and Rita, with whom he had several children. In reality, he lived with these women in two separate thatch huts, not far away from where Pascuala and her family lived. For all the above reasons, but particularly because he was black, Pascuala was determined to reject his advances although she was fearful of him as it was rumored that he possessed voodoo-like powers and was able to cast spells on women to lure them to his bed. Doroteo was furious when he was informed of Máximo's intentions and forbade him to come to his house. What bothered Doroteo was not the fact that Máximo was living, simultaneously, with two other women-what infuriated him was that he was black and Doroteo considered this an affront to his Mayan race and heritage, despite the fact that Máximo only spoke the Mayan language and had been raised entirely in the Mayan culture.

Initially, Pascuala resisted Máximo's courtship but after a few months, being inexperienced, she was unable to fight his daily, secretive and intense courtship and she accepted his amorous advances. They saw each other secretly as she knew

that her father would never accept him and in a few months, Pascuala found herself with child for him, to the utter consternation, anger and disappointment of her father and step-mother. Unable to logically explain his daughter's obsession with this man, Doroteo attributed it, together with her pregnancy, to magical spells cast by Máximo, and mercilessly drove his daughter away from his house, since in Mayan culture, she had dishonored the family. Having nowhere to go, Pascuala settled in another dismal thatch house owned by Máximo and soon found herself as his third common-law wife, eventually giving birth to two children for him, a boy and a girl. The first child, the boy, was born in 1876, and Pascuala named him Víctor Olivera. She hid Víctor from neighbors, friends and family as he was born nearly as dark as his father. When people would visit, she would hide him in a home-made *canastro* and swaddle him in blankets to keep him away from prying eyes. It almost seemed as if she was ashamed of him because of his dark skin and curly hair, although she would showcase her daughter, Carmen, who looked much more like her and her family than Víctor, her son. As for Máximo, after the birth of his children, he practically disappeared, showing up occasionally with some victuals, but literally being too busy with his other women and other children to devote any time to the raising of his two children with Pascuala.

It was in this environment of poverty and racial discord that in 1878, young Víctor, at the age of two, was raised, speaking both the Spanish and Mayan languages, and even at that young age, he began to learn, orally, from his mother, the history of his people and the hardships they endured as refugees from the Caste War. Víctor would seat at his mother's feet, listening attentively as she would recount to him who his ancestors were, how she and her dad fled from Bacalar and

would describe to him, in vivid detail, how her mother was raped and killed by soldiers of the Mexican army. After she went to live with Máximo, Doroteo completely ignored his daughter, of whom he was ashamed, and refused to accept Víctor and Carmen as his grandchildren. Both Víctor and Carmen were raised by a single mother, an uncommon and almost un-heard of practice among the Mayan tribe of that era.

Chapter 2

Isabel and Victor Olivera

As Víctor grew, he saw the world which surrounded him, in the small village of Progreso, differently than his mother did. As a young boy, Víctor noticed the poverty that was all around him and he insisted on bettering his life perhaps, he thought, through education. His mother, however, insisted that he work the land through the traditional Mayan *milpa* system of cultivating the land as she felt that this was more important than anything else Víctor could do. Pascuala also knew that as a single parent, with no visible means of support, he would need to cultivate the land by planting beans and corn and other staples to ensure the nutritional survival of the family. Pascuala vicariously looked at Victor as representing the man in the family, and as such, in this male-dominated society, she expected him to perform the tasks endemic to the male in this Mayan society. She would therefore coerce Víctor into getting up at the crack of dawn, insist that he march into the jungle, that he clear and burn the land and that he plant it with the common Mayan staples of corn, squash and beans. Víctor would obey, reluctantly, but always thinking about another, better life. He would wonder what it was like to have a father and cried every time his mother forced him to go into the forest. Although he understood the need to plant the Mayan staples just to have food, this for him was back-breaking work that yielded no visible progress and that led to nowhere, except, cyclically, to more poverty.

At night, his aching back would prevent him from sleeping and he would lie awake for countless hours trying to think of what he needed to do to get away from this circular life

of poverty and misery. On the one hand, he felt an obligation to remain with his mother and Carmen, his sister, and to help them as they struggled to survive. On the other hand, even at such a young age, he was tired, physically and mentally, of this hard and tedious work and of the abject poverty that surrounded him. His mother had physically identified his dad to him and after that, he had seen him once or twice, but had never had the actual opportunity to talk to him and ask him for help. His dad totally ignored him and avoided him every time he had occasion to run into him. Faced with what he thought was a hopeless situation, Víctor decided to run away to another village and to another environment which he felt had to be better than the one that surrounded him. For him this was an agonizing decision as he still felt loyalty to his mother and sister, Carmen. In his mind, Víctor compromised by thinking that once he had established himself and had economically bettered his life, he would return and provide for his mother and for his sister and move them away from this life of poverty and misery. Víctor realized that if he told his mother of his plans, she would, for reasons of economic self-preservation, do her utmost to prevent him from realizing them.

One night in 1890, at the age of twelve, Víctor packed his few items of clothing in a discarded bag which used to contain sugar and crying, started to walk the twenty-mile trail that wound its way across the Río Hondo and would eventually end in another small Mayan village called San Antonio. After walking for three days, exhausted, hungry and depressed, Víctor arrived at the village of San Antonio. He entered the first house he saw and begged for food and water. By coincidence, the family which provided him with sustenance and shelter happened to be the Cataneo family, whose oldest member, Olegario, was the only music teacher of the village. They