

Carlos Iván Degregori

**FOREWORD**

*Surviving the Flood: The Multiple Lives of Lurgio Gavilán*

THIS IS AN EXCEPTIONAL BOOK. MORE PRECISELY, THIS IS THE HISTORY of an exceptional life. Lurgio Gavilán was a child soldier in the ranks of the Shining Path guerrillas. He was not recruited, nor was he kidnapped or taken by force, a common practice in the years following those in which Gavilán joined the organization. At the age of twelve, he decided to join to follow in his brother's footsteps. He wanted to see the world, to change the world—at least his world—which was on the margins of, though not marginal to, the rest of the country.

It was the beginning of 1983. Shining Path, as he put it, “flooded the countryside,” and for many of the rural poor, its totalitarian nature wasn't yet apparent. And so its authoritarian rigidity was accepted in many places as an expression of the “toughness” necessary for restoring an order that seemed unjust or nonexistent. The army had just arrived in Ayacucho.

With his Little Red Book, which he couldn't read, under his arm, the boy Lurgio, a guerrilla fighter now, wandered over peaks and through valleys (more over peaks, to tell the truth, including Apu Razhuillca, the highest mountain in the northern part of Ayacucho).<sup>1</sup> He saw the burning of villages, witnessed more than a few deaths, participated in combat, and took part in executions of adolescents like himself whom Shining Path condemned for errors such as falling asleep on nightly guard duty or, like the young girl who cooked for and deloused the troops, “because, they said, she had fallen in love

with a policeman in Tambo.” Some young people began to become aware that they were part of the horror and terror: “Little by little we began to understand that the Party was a monster that assassinated its own people.” They talked among themselves about the possibility of escape, but how and where? By this time they were hated by many of the peasants, whose violence could be equally cruel. “Of course, how could they not have hated us if we had burned their village?” Gavilán remembers.

Two years after joining Shining Path, Gavilán is wounded in battle. An army officer who approaches with the intention of putting a bullet in his head sees a dirty adolescent boy who looks even younger after two years of living from hand to mouth. He drags him to his feet, ready to shoot. Gavilán feels fear but acts brave; he has to die “shouting long live Shining Path!”

At the last minute the officer feels pity for Gavilán and decides to take him with them. During the entire journey, the village patrollers (*ronderos*) implore the officer to kill the terrorist (*terrorista*). Gavilán, who speaks almost no Spanish, is protected by the officer and ends up at Los Cabitos camp, in La Mar province (which happened to share the name of the main regional army base), the notorious location of the crematoriums, where those who entered lost all hope.<sup>2</sup>

At Los Cabitos the officer burns Gavilán’s lice-covered clothes. Gavilán discovers that he isn’t the only refugee, that there are several girls and boys, former terrorists like him, also living in the barracks. His gratitude survives today, although he also knew of “Shining Path prisoners who served the soldiers’ sexual appetites and were later assassinated.”

As a child soldier in the Peruvian army, Gavilán ends up going to school in Huanta. He is a model student, earning the confidence of the young officers, and adapting to military life. When he turns eighteen, he reenlists in the army, rising eventually to become a sergeant, and then his life takes another dramatic turn. I will leave the details for him to relate, but Gavilán later abandons the army to become a novice with the Franciscans at the colonial convent of the Alameda de los Descalzos in Lima.

And, then, in yet another turn, Gavilán leaves the army to study anthropology at San Cristóbal University in Huamanga province, an in-

stitute of higher learning itself healing from the terrifying war years.<sup>3</sup> Once again, he is an outstanding student. Soon he is named assistant professor, and a few years later he earns one of the scholarships offered by the Ford Foundation through the Institute of Peruvian Studies. Currently he is at the Ibero-American University in Mexico City, the institution that originally published this extraordinary autobiography.

I got to know Gavilán at the Institute of Peruvian Studies. He is contained and soft-spoken, with a gentle personality. “How did you ever get to be a sergeant with that voice?” I ask him. “I can yell too,” he says. It was at the convent, in the waning evening hours when he would be reading the day’s epistle or a passage from the Bible, that they taught him he didn’t necessarily have to speak in that military tone or feel obliged to shout. Today he is sparing even in his gestures; only once did I see tears in his eyes, and that was when we said goodbye: he was leaving for Mexico, and I was ill.

His itinerary resembles him. This memoir is centered in those provinces that have been most battered by violence in all Peru—La Mar, Huanta, and Huamanga—but it doesn’t overwhelm the reader with bloody details. He tells everything, or almost everything, but without getting lost in the most brutal stories. Although Quechua is his first language, his Andean Spanish is nevertheless extremely beautiful, and he employs turns of phrase and regional cadences in that language that enrich the text.

A contribution of this book is that it helps to humanize the members of Shining Path, especially those in its lower ranks, and moves past the simplistic idea that they were a kind of “incarnation of evil.”<sup>4</sup> Hundreds of child soldiers and thousands of adolescents or very young adults were drawn to the organization by its discourse and some of its actions. They weren’t aliens from another planet. Sufficient time has passed for us to try to understand in greater detail who these people were, why they did what they did, how a totalitarian ideology took them in—at least for a time—and how the terrorist project came to describe a veritable parable.<sup>5</sup> Hundreds are now reintegrated into society, many without even having served prison time. The vast majority of these people are totally immersed in new lives. Some may feel a degree of nostalgia for bygone times, or continue to espouse

radical ideas or lifestyles, but they no longer favor political violence. Only a very few continue on that path.<sup>6</sup>

This reality and this autobiography both say a great deal about that which, in another article, I have called *Shining Path pyramid*.<sup>7</sup> Gavilán was at the base of that pyramid. He didn't become a village patroller, like so many others, but a soldier instead. He didn't really have an alternative. And when he returned to his village he found it destroyed: without a school, without a future. Everything had to be (re)built.

There are few autobiographies by child soldiers. We have one by Ishmael Beah—now a young adult of Sierra Leone, joyous, talkative, sporting dreads, wearing a three-piece suit and “brilliant brow,” as his family described him as a child—and happy to be in New York when I met him.<sup>8</sup> His story is radically different, just as the conflict in Sierra Leone was different, but it does have some points of similarity with Gavilán's.

There are more biographies of perpetrators but, as Leigh Payne has called them, these are “unsettling accounts,” in which neither repentance nor reconciliation appear.<sup>9</sup> In Lurgio Gavilán's book, especially in the last chapter, “Twenty Years Later,” when he returns to the places he inhabited as a child soldier, it is clear that violence belongs to the past. The very experience of writing this book, most of which he did in the Franciscan convent, has been an exercise in leaving the past behind, and in reconciling with himself. “I don't hold bitterness toward anyone. Little by little I matured. Life has just begun.”