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Inside Immigration Detention Centers
by Lorena Martinez

Maria Salazar was only sixteen years old when she had to flee her home in Honduras due to sexual harassment from gang members in her hometown. She grew up in the capital, Tegucigalpa, which was full of gang members by the time she turned thirteen. She and her mom took on the journey of coming to the United States to seek asylum because they knew that she was no longer safe in her home; however, what they did not foresee was what would happen when they crossed the border between Mexico and the United States. “I was told by other people before coming that once the police catch you, they just take your information and let you go with your family,” she told me, “but that was far from the truth.” What followed being caught was being moved through different immigration detention centers for the span of over a month. Although it is legal to seek asylum in the United States, Maria and her mom—like other immigrants—were treated as criminals for doing so.

Immigrants coming to the United States seeking asylum are held in detention centers, which are prison-like facilities, while waiting for a court hearing that determines whether they will be granted asylum in the country. The time they spend in these places varies with each person, and so does the rate at which they are granted asylum; according to *USA Today*, “the federal Executive Office for Immigration Review, a branch of the Justice Department, reports the median grant rate [for asylum] for courts nationwide is 11%” (Conolly, et al). Therefore, migrants are detained for extended periods of time with little to no chance of being granted asylum. Although this is now the norm, and the presence of detention centers is increasing exponentially, it was not always this way. At the end of the 1970s, it was merely a system holding 3,000 migrants a day (Kassie). According to *The Guardian*, “the number of people held on an average day by ICE ... has grown more than twentyfold since 1979” (Kassie). The article reports that although the number of undocumented immigrants has declined since 2007, the government is dealing with both undocumented immigrants already living in the country, as well as ones that continue to arrive (Kassie). Thus, they are not only detaining people coming from the south border but also those who are already in the country. As the number of immigrants in detention centers increases, so does government funding for these facilities. Although the United States government spends billions of dollars per year in ICE funding, the sanitary conditions in these facilities are below what is expected, and there is little to no medical care or access to hygiene products for detainees.

There are several immigration facilities throughout the country, each with different sanitary conditions. Immigrants who cross the border and get to Texas report of a specific one they call “la Hielera” (the freezer) due to its extremely low temperatures. It is a prison-like facility—immigrants are detained in jail cells—with the exception that it does not have any beds and detainees are not allowed to shower. “It was freezing cold and they did not provide us with blankets or anything,” Maria tells me about the conditions in this place, “so we would be sitting on the floor shivering from the cold.” To make matters worse, agents take away some of the clothes migrants wear to protect themselves from the cold, after searching them upon arrival. “I felt like this was their way of punishing me for entering their country,” she commented. “The

entire time I spent there I felt like I was being punished.” Maria told me that her mental health was deteriorating during this time, and that she was depressed. “The way in which they had us in la Hielera—laying on the floor, not letting us shower, the fact that everyone could see us using the restroom, and such—made me feel like a caged animal,” she commented about what contributed to her mental state at this time. Maria and her mom felt as though they were being dehumanized during this time, as do many other migrants, even though they had not done anything to receive such treatment. Yet, there are people who argue that they deserve to be treated that way because they enter the country illegally.

Maria commented that often immigration agents made her feel less-than. “In the interviews with immigration agents,” she said, “they would tell me that I had come to *their* country for nothing because they were going to send me back to where I came from.” Maria, and other people in these places, faced discrimination often. “There was a Mexican agent that would make fun of us and tell us how we were an embarrassment to his people,” she added to show that this did not only come from American agents but from Mexican American ones as well. She told me about some of the factors affecting her mental state: “I felt like I had come to invade somebody’s country, and I felt this way because that is how they [agents] made us feel. They made me feel like I was not wanted, so I felt very alienated.” Although Maria’s experiences were mostly bad in these places, she commented that unexpectedly there was a turn of events when she was transferred to a new facility.

The detention center where Maria and her mom had spent the most time at was quite a bit bigger than the other places they had been to. She told me that they had been moved there without being told where they were going, so they thought that they were being sent to Mexico. In contrast to la Hielera, the conditions in this place were relatively better and so was the treatment they received. “In here, doctors did a checkup of us and they assigned us an ID,” she told me after I asked what some of the differences in this place were. There also were no jail bars in this place, and she was assigned a bunk bed to sleep on, so Maria had more freedom than she did in the other two places she had spent time at. “I remember that they let us go out for the very first time in days. As I was walking out, I looked up and saw a sky I have never in my life seen before. It was the bluest sky I have ever seen, and I felt so hopeful and happy looking up to it. I did not feel caged anymore,” she told me with a sense of relief in her tone and a joyous look on her face. “It felt like I was free again, and it felt good to feel the sun again after experiencing so much cold. So, I would say that this was a turning point in my journey, because I no longer felt defeated, and I felt like maybe there was some hope in our case.”

When asked how she felt about her journey to the United States, Maria answered saying that although she suffered, she believes that she did not suffer as much as other immigrants have on their way here. That may be due to the fact that she came here in 2015, way before detention centers were flooded with more people than they can accommodate. Thus, treatment of immigrants worsens as the population in these facilities increases. “I do not think that any person deserves to go through what I went through in these places,” she told me with a sorrowful look on her face, “and it saddens me to see how much worse they have gotten.” She also mentioned that she considers her experiences in these places to be traumatic. “I live with the fear that one day an immigration officer will stop us and send us back to a place that is no longer our home,” she said after telling me that she was not granted asylum. She is now 20 years old and living undocumented in the country. Thus, she was forced to start working immediately after

graduating high school, and the only jobs she can get to help her struggling family are ones that pay very poorly. Nonetheless, she still has hope. Although Maria was not granted asylum, she remains hopeful for her future and believes that one day she will no longer have to live her life in fear.

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