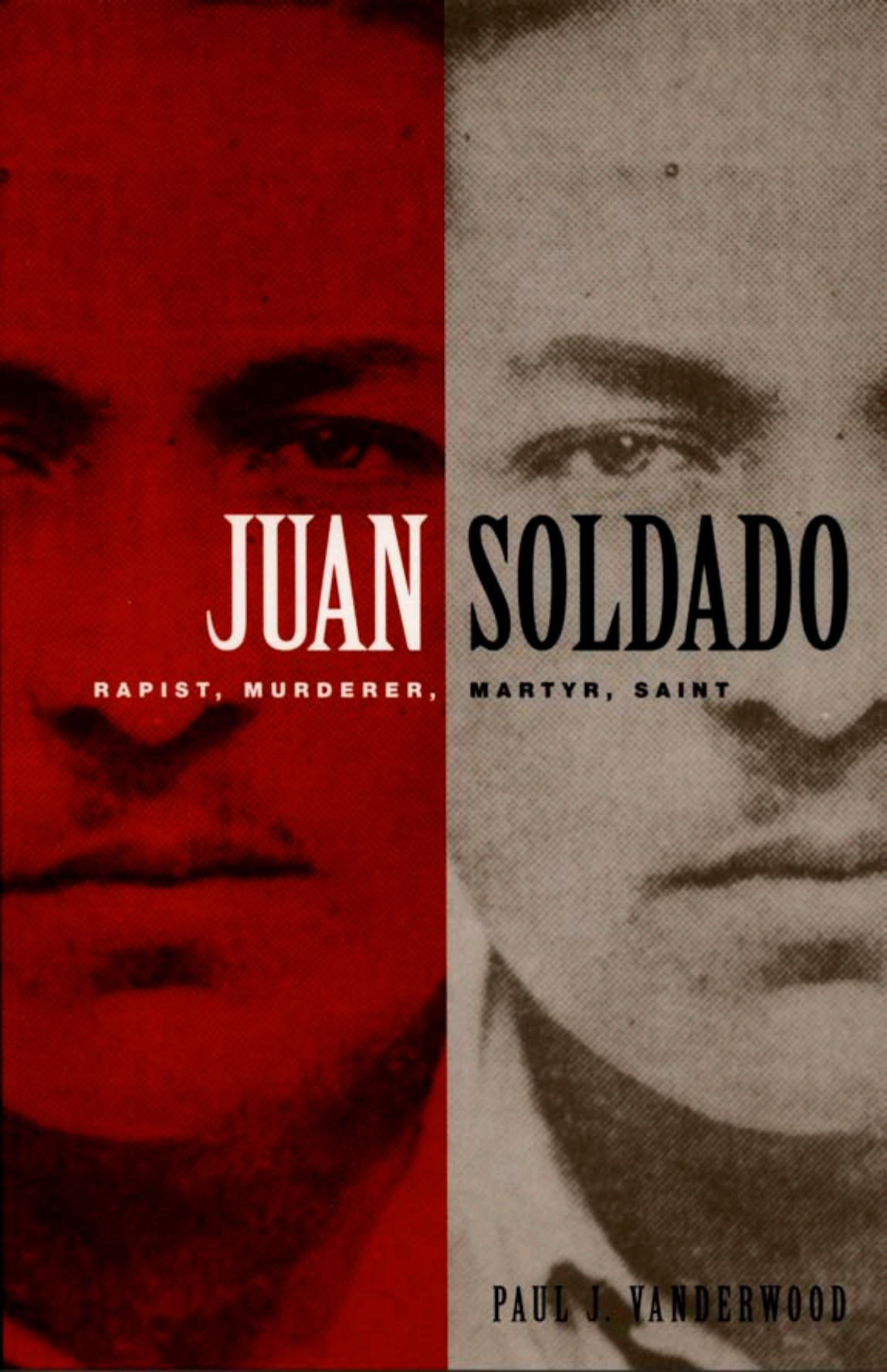

JUAN SOLDADO
RAPIST, MURDERER, MARTYR, SAINT
PAUL J. VANDERWOOD

JUAN SOLDADO

AMERICAN ENCOUNTERS / GLOBAL INTERACTIONS

A series edited by Gilbert M. Joseph and Emily S. Rosenberg

RAPIST,
MURDERER,
MARTYR,
SAINT

JUAN

Paul J. Vanderwood

SOLDADO

DUKE
UNIVERSITY
PRESS

DURHAM
AND LONDON
2004

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞
Designed by Rebecca Giménez. Typeset in Minion by Keystone Typesetting, Inc. Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data appear on the last printed page of this book.

For Glenn, fine friend and
dedicated fellow-voyager

American Encounters/Global Interactions

A series edited by Gilbert M. Joseph and Emily S. Rosenberg

This series aims to stimulate critical perspectives and fresh interpretive frameworks for scholarship on the history of the imposing global presence of the United States. Its primary concerns include the deployment and contestation of power, the construction and deconstruction of cultural and political borders, the fluid meanings of intercultural encounters, and the complex interplay between the global and the local. American Encounters seeks to strengthen dialogue and collaboration between historians of U.S. international relations and area studies specialists.

The series encourages scholarship based on multiarchival historical research. At the same time, it supports a recognition of the representational character of all stories about the past and promotes critical inquiry into issues of subjectivity and narrative. In the process, American Encounters strives to understand the context in which meanings related to nations, cultures, and political economy are continually produced, challenged, and reshaped.

FAITH & DOUBT

I have no living sense of commerce with God. I envy those who have, for I know that the addition of such a sense would help me greatly.—*William James*

The art of faith is a constant dialogue with doubt.—*Bishop J. A. T. Robinson*

Thus it is not like a child that I believe in Christ and confess him. My hosanna has come forth from the crucible of doubt.
—*Fyodor Dostoyevsky*

Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief.—*Mark 9:24*

CONTENTS

PREFACE

When I first learned of Juan Soldado a decade ago, I reacted like most everyone else: "How is this possible?" How could it be that a confessed rapist-murderer who had been publicly executed for that horrible crime in 1938 had come to be venerated as a miracle-working saint at his grave site in Tijuana, Mexico, just across the border from my home in San Diego, California? It took many visits to the shrine which now covers Juan's grave, numerous conversations with those who believe in him (and some with those who do not), deep readings in religious and other literature, archival digging, interviews with priests, scholars, *curanderos*, and skeptics, and considerable personal pondering before I began to discern the contours of popular religiosity that I believe led to the devotion. This was not precisely a journey of self-discovery; I have always admired people of faith, perhaps in part because my own is less absolute. But my research did deepen my appreciation for the myriad creative ways in which humans seek to overcome obstacles in their lives and reach an accord with the Divine. Faith has the power to provide a person's passport to liberation.

JUAN LIVED AS Juan Castillo Morales. Beyond that, facts about his life are hard to establish. He was apparently born and raised in the pueblo of Ixtáltepec (then a town of twelve thousand people) deep in the Zápotec region of southern Mexico, although there is no record of his birth or baptism in the admittedly spotty parish records. Most families in Ixtáltepec farmed life-sustaining corn and beans, but capricious rains and fierce dry winds created a harsh life for them. They had rich traditions

and colorful festivities, but drinkable water was scarce, and sickness endemic. Whatever his history, we know that Juan must have finished primary school because literacy was a requirement for enlistment in the Mexican army, which he joined sometime before 1938. That year found him, at the age of twenty-four, stationed in Tijuana—far from home, family, and culture—where fate overtook him.

On 14 February Juan Castillo Morales confessed to the rape and murder of an eight-year-old girl, and the army summarily court-martialed and brutally executed him on 17 February. In the aftermath, curiosity led locals to the grave of the soldier. There they reported "signs"—blood seeped up from the ground; the soldier's *ánima* (his soul) cried out for revenge—which played into that rich tapestry of religiosity that had been nurtured in these believers since childhood. They sensed God's presence in their midst. They knew of God's grace and they felt it. They erected a shrine at the site, and today it is visited by a steady stream of believers, some just to insure Juan's comfort, or to seek inner peace, but most to ask him for a favor—health, a good marriage, the repair of a broken family, a baby, safe passage into the United States, rent money, decent grades in school, a passport, driver's license, or green card, an automobile, steady employment, peace of mind, to win the lottery, to get off drugs or drink or both, to bring a son home safely from the States, to release a father from jail—all of which perfectly reflect conditions in their mushrooming metropolis of more than two million people struggling to maintain some sort of balance. Petitions at all such shrines mirror such needs and conditions, but then all religion is suffused with material wants. Meanwhile migrants and the media have spread Juan's fame across Mexico, the United States, and beyond. But when I visited Ixtáltepec in search of his family roots, residents did not know that one of their sons had been proclaimed a *santo* far to the north. When told so, an elderly gentleman quietly concluded: "They must have seen some truth in him." Indeed they have.

People have canonized their own saints since early Christianity. The official Roman Catholic Church claims sole ownership of the procedure, but popular canonizations remain quite common, even for self-confessed criminals. In the case of Juan Soldado people began to doubt the evidence against him, or at least the speed and thoroughness of the proceedings which had condemned him. They wondered at the justice of the entire hurried process, including the ceremonial, deliberately cruel public ex-

ecution. Guilt to a good many witnesses mattered less than justice writ large. Some believed (as many do today) that those who die unjustly sit closest to God. Therefore, they have the ear of the Lord and are especially effective as intercessors. Devotion and petitions to Juan for personal help followed. Miracles occurred—or at least, prayers and petitions were answered—and the people proclaimed the soldier a saint. Such canonizations are the result of need, hope, aspiration, and faith. Roots of any particular devotion may be found tangled in a group of measurable realities—the politics, geography, economic conditions, social relations, and the so-called temper of the times—affecting devotees, who blend in their spiritual sensibilities to weigh, measure, and mediate these factors. Little in human experience can be explained only in material terms. There are always spiritual or religious dimensions which influence motivation and behavior.

Such is the case in the search for origins of the Juan Soldado devotion. International currents and national concerns buffeted the townspeople of Tijuana during the first part of the last century. The Depression had struck. Countrymen expelled from the neighboring United States settled in town, further straining already slim resources. The end of America's era of Prohibition had already curtailed tourism. Church and state were at war in Mexico; churches were closed, priests expelled. A new president had unleashed an unsettling radical reform program that mandated widespread land, labor, and educational reforms. Labor unions in Tijuana battled for control over workers. Moreover, the national government's moralization crusade had closed down the town's main source of gainful employment, the gambling casinos. Hundreds of heads of household had lost well-paying jobs and been thrust into catch-as-catch-can work. People adapted as best they could. Some even profited from the changes, but the stress in town was palpable. Then came the untoward rape and murder of the child. Tijuana erupted in riot and chaos.

For many, the young soldier's execution satisfied their lust for revenge. The town settled down, and people began to reflect upon what had befallen them and their community. Then came reports of wondrous happenings at the grave site and the beginnings of a devotion. Today petitions to Juan are written on scraps of paper, the backs of photos, ticket stubs, or scribbled on the walls of the shrine itself. Heartfelt and heartrending, uplifting and tragic, some funny and playful, others laden with anxiety and fear, they touch humanness. But are they answered?

Proof lies all around and inside the shrine. Its outer walls are covered with marble plaques giving thanks for miracles received. Inside lie such tokens as the crutches of the once lame who now walk, the symbolic eyeglasses of the blind who now see, the baby clothes of a child born to a couple formerly thought barren. Some have painted lovely pictures giving thanks, others donate homemade embroideries. A good many have hung necklaces around a portrait of the soldier, or the neck of his statue. A few admit that their requests have not yet been answered, but explain that Juan is busy and will answer them when he can.

THERE IS NOTHING unique about the devotion to Juan Soldado, even if many (or most) of us have never seen or experienced such practice. Instead, there is a long, fascinating history behind these sorts of enthusiasms, which permeate the fabric of Christianity and other religions. One need not participate, or even believe, in such devotions to appreciate them. Because they are so human, they nudge us in unexpected ways. Strangeness may begin to feel familiar. Whatever your predilections in these matters, it is my pleasure to introduce you to Juan Soldado.

P. J. V.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My greatest gratification in writing this book came from my visits to the Juan Soldado shrine in Tijuana, where devotees so openly introduced me to the mysteries of their faith. They helped me to appreciate that there are many ways of knowing this world. I could not have understood the beliefs of these people without the help of many others—some of them disciples of Juan Soldado, most not—on both sides of the international border. It is impossible to mention everyone who contributed to the study, but many are thanked in the endnotes which accompany the text. A paucity of written documentation made the interviews especially rewarding. History colleagues in Tijuana lent me their enthusiasm and expertise. My former student and good friend Raúl Rodríguez González, who teaches and directs the library at Centro de Enseñanzas Técnicas y Científicas, led the way. José Armando Estrada, coordinator at the Consejo de Cultura y Arte, and José Gabriel Rivera Delgado, coordinator of the city's historical archive, ironed out the wrinkles in that part of the manuscript pertaining to Tijuana's past. José Saldaña Rico, radio personality, teacher, and an aficionado of local history long interested in the Juan Soldado story, introduced me to individuals directly involved in the events of 1938. David Ungerleider Kepler, a Jesuit priest with academic training in anthropology who is assistant to the rector at Tijuana's Universidad Iberoamericana, helped me to bridge the gap between Catholic theology and the practicalities of religious life in the city. Orlando Espín, director of the University of San Diego's Transborder Institute and member of its Theology and Religious Studies Department, guided me through the labyrinth of popular religion, while

archivists and researchers at the Instituto de Investigaciones Históricos of the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California (Tijuana) could not have been more cooperative in leading me to appropriate documentation. John Mraz, a highly regarded historian of Mexican photography, and Martin Nesvig, who recently earned his doctorate at Yale University, helped meet my research needs in Mexico City.

Duke University proved to be an uncommonly pleasant publisher with which to work, thanks to its acquisitions editor, Valerie Millholland, whose professionalism and encouragement are ceaseless. The mapmaking artistry of Melodie Tune, director of graphics at San Diego State University graphics department, speaks for itself. The gifted historian William A. Christian, Jr. made valuable comments on an early version of the manuscript. Ellen F. Smith proves that every writer needs a good editor. And no one can excise the glitches in page proofs more successfully than my longtime comrade Professor Carolyn Roy.

As always, my two dependable "friendly readers"—Rosalie Schwartz and Eric Van Young—weighed in with comments and criticisms, uncovered flaws, and offered me both expertise and earnestness. They know when to rein me in and when to cut me loose. No one could have had finer comrades on this long pilgrimage to Juan Soldado. My heartfelt thanks to them, as well as to other splendid San Diego friends—Glenn, Mike, Susan, and Carolyn—who joined me in various ways on the journey.

I

THE CRIME

1. Notions of Justice

Dread clutched Feliza Camacho. She had sent Olga, her eight-year-old daughter, to the corner grocery to buy meat for the family's Sunday dinner, and the child had not returned home. Such errands normally took only ten to fifteen minutes, but more than half an hour had passed, and winter's daylight was fast fading. Feliza thought that her next oldest daughter, Lilia, had accompanied her sister to the store, but when she noticed the four-year-old was playing in the living room, she told her to look out the window. Could she see Olga headed up the street? "No, mama." There was no sign of the youngster.

With her third child, an infant daughter, in her arms, Feliza rushed to the La Corona grocery, whose amiable proprietor, Mariano Mendivil, was a neighborhood friend. "Señor, have you seen Olga?" "Why yes, Feliza, she was here just a few minutes ago and bought some meat. She left smiling and happy as ever. I saw her skip over a puddle as she crossed the street, and then I turned to wait on another customer."

Through the store window the mother spotted a young uniformed soldier resting on a wall at the street crossing. Separate military and police headquarters in this small border town of Tijuana stood nearby, and soldiers frequented the vicinity. Feliza approached the soldier: "Did you see a little girl near here just a few moments ago?" "No, no, señora, I've seen no one. Perhaps she went over that way," and he pointed away from the military compound. Still, no trace of Olga.[1]

What went through the mother's mind? The streets were wet from earlier rain. Perhaps Olga had been hit by a car and taken to the local hospital. But that would have caused a commotion in the neighborhood.

Or did she aimlessly wander off to call on a friend, been invited inside a home and was overstaying her visit? Not likely, as she carried meat for dinner. Feliza shielded herself from darker thoughts. Ever since the sensational Lindbergh case six years earlier, parents throughout the United States and beyond feared kidnapping. Reverberations still made front-page news.[2]

Furthermore, within the last few years there had been an alarming series of yet-to-be-solved kidnappings and murders of both children and adults in and around San Diego, California, just fifteen miles north across the international boundary. In February 1931, Virginia Brooks, age ten, had left for Euclid School carrying her lunch, four books, and a bouquet of flowers for her teacher. A month later police discovered her ravished, strangled, and deteriorating body stuffed in a gunny sack on a lonely mesa near the city. On 19 April 1931, the nude body of nineteen-year-old Louise Teuber was found dangling from the limb of a tree at the foot of San Diego's Black Mountain; she had been garroted and then hanged. In 1933 a fiend tortured to death Dalbert Aposhian, seven years old. Officers recovered the boy's mutilated and dismembered body from San Diego Bay. A year later police stumbled upon the raped and otherwise battered body of Celta Cota, age sixteen, a model student at San Diego High School, under tangled bushes in the backyard of her home. In August 1936, an assailant raped and beat to death Ruth Muir, a forty-eight-year-old secretary at the YMCA in Riverside, California, and dumped her corpse in a glade in the San Diego suburb of La Jolla.[3]

The Muir case developed a Tijuana angle in the spring of 1937 with the arrest of Charles Harvey, alias Adam Windbush. San Diego police booked Harvey, a popular twenty-six-year-old crooner of cowboy songs on a Tijuana radio station, for robbery and possible kidnapping involving three young women who had been assaulted two years earlier at a gate to the international exposition then being held at the city's Balboa Park. Police labeled him the "Kiss Thief," who sweet-talked and then kissed his victims before he stole their pocketbooks. If any of the girls had claimed bodily injury, he could have been charged under the new Lindbergh Kidnapping Act, which mandated either death or life imprisonment. Harvey was already under a $10,000 bond pending trial for attempted assault on a housewife in Chula Vista, a major suburb between San Diego and Tijuana. Police had also questioned him in connection with the rape-murders of Ruth Muir and Celta Cota. With these sorts of sordid, spec-

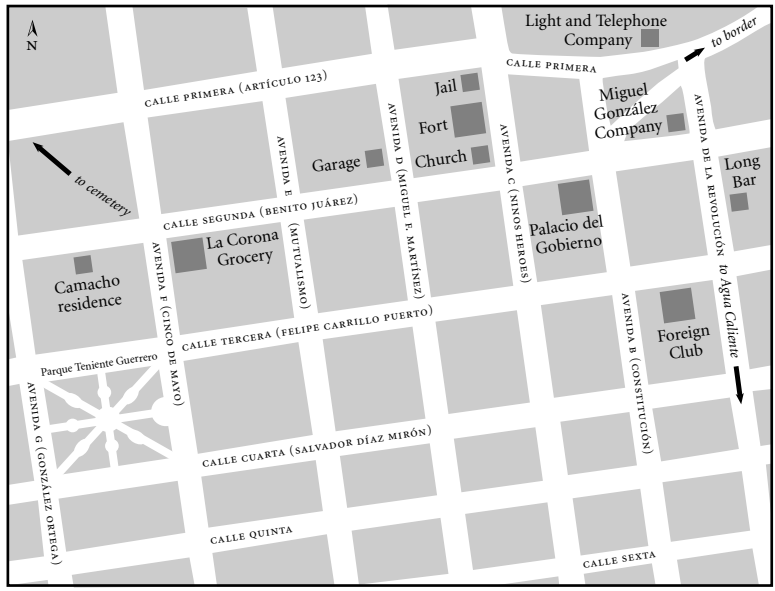
tacular incidents capturing public attention throughout the region, no wonder that Feliza Camacho's thoughts turned ominous.[4] Had Olga suffered a similar fate? Was there a maniac on the loose? The newspapers that would soon cover the Camacho case drew no direct connections between the unsolved murders and Olga's disappearance but noted the similarities.

Feliza contacted her husband, Aurelio, who was at work tending bar in the Foreign Club, one of the town's most famous casinos. Aurelio rushed home, and he and Feliza spent an hour going house to house in their neighborhood, knocking on doors, talking with acquaintances, searching for news of Olga. No one offered a clue. The child had just vanished.

At 7:30 P.M. the distraught parents called local police for help. Tijuana had only a handful of paid policemen, five or six officers whose salaries came from public donations. In these sorts of emergencies, military personnel reinforced them. Word of the missing child spread through the town of hardly ten thousand inhabitants, and while some folks hastened to console the anxious parents in their home, Aurelio's labor union associates joined the authorities and other Camacho family members in the search. Roadblocks sealed off exits from the city, principally north to the border, but also east in the direction of Tecate, and south toward Ensenada. The main hospital and several clinics yielded no evidence about the girl's whereabouts, nor did a search covering several blocks around Olga's home and the grocery store (see map 1)—the last two places she had been seen. Late that evening rain fell, and as night stretched toward dawn, a February chill hovering in the low forties set in. No leads concerning Olga developed. As implications of the disappearance filtered more deeply into the community's consciousness, residents locked windows and doors and checked on their own children more regularly for fear that a sexual predator was at large in the community.

Dawn broke at 6:45 A.M. with a partially overcast sky that Monday, 14 February 1938. Increasing numbers of volunteers arrived, and the search expanded. People poked here, there, and everywhere—in thick bushes, inside buildings, and in automobiles and trucks parked on the streets. Nothing, absolutely nothing. Police and military authorities huddled to devise a strategy. Everything depended upon the discovery of some tidbit, any hint, concerning the disappearance and whereabouts of Olga. About noon their luck changed.

Señora María B. de Romero, affectionately known in the neighbor-



Map 1. Central Tijuana, 1938

hood as "Meimi," lived across Second Street from the Camachos. She had spent much of the previous evening with Feliza and Aurelio, comforting them. She assured them that search parties would find Olga and bring her back home. Shortly before noon on Monday, however, she experienced a powerful vision in which the Virgin Mary Herself appeared to her, revealed the child's face, and told Meimi to look for Olga in a deserted building: "I had a vision," she later said. "It told me that Olga would be found in an abandoned building. She would be found ill-treated." The vision guided Meimi to a vacant, weather-beaten, one-car wooden garage on the backside of a neighbor's property that abutted the military and police compounds and lay within two blocks of the Camacho home. Meimi did not attempt to enter the structure; instead, she gazed with apprehension between two warped boards of the exterior and saw on the wet ground inside, the bloody hand of a child, palm down, stretching from beneath a filthy sheet of cardboard that covered the rest of the body.

"I have found her. I have found her," she wailed as she stumbled toward the Camacho home. Searchers intercepted her. "Over there. In the garage," she said, and then fainted.

Soldiers and police hurried to the scene. (They never explained how they had overlooked the garage in their seventeen-hour search.) They hurled open the garage doors, saw the hand, gently removed the cardboard, and recoiled in horror. There lay Olga, her throat slashed open a full five inches by a piece of glass or a dull hunting knife, so savagely that she was nearly decapitated. A knotted rope encircled what remained of her gashed neck. Her torn, bloody dress had been pulled over her head, her undergarments removed. The child's body was badly scratched, and two deep, ragged gashes on her right arm indicated she had put up a desperate fight before her assailant subdued her. Blood had crusted around a large wound to her head.

Police agent Israel González broke up the crowd gathering at the site. And now the authorities began to find clues to the killing. Droplets of blood led from the scene to a nearby stable where the Fourteenth Cavalry Regiment had until recently kept its horses. In one of the stalls, as police moved some hay and manure to one side, they uncovered a sizable blotch of blood. At this point, General Manuel Contreras, chief of military operations in Tijuana, assumed control of the investigation. He possessed a take-charge personality, and a hint of threat edged his voice as he ordered local authorities to stand clear while the army took command.

Informed of the horrific find, Feliza crumpled in hysterical sobs on the floor of her home. Aurelio collapsed onto a chair in anguish. Police carried the girl's disfigured body to the surgical amphitheater of the Military and Civil Hospital, where Dr. Severano Osornio Camareña, the town's coroner, a military doctor educated in France, performed an autopsy. Dr. Osornio announced around 4 P.M. that strangulation and a sharp blow to the head had caused death and that Olga had been raped after being killed. Furthermore, he had found six reddish hairs, a piece of straw, and a few strands of gray cloth clutched in one hand of the child, along with human skin beneath her fingernails. Forensic experts could analyze such evidence.

Meanwhile, police and military personnel cordoned off and combed the presumed murder site for further physical evidence. They discovered a reddish material smeared on a fence abutting the garage. Some thought it blood, but General Contreras ruled it red paint. They found the clear print of a man's boot heel with a diamond-shaped design in its center pressed into the wet ground near the garage. The cardboard which covered the child was too wet and soggy to reveal a fingerprint, but then

another break: a small package of meat had been tossed on the roof of a nearby shed used to store hay behind the military headquarters. A well-defined bloody thumb print lay on the discolored white wrapping paper.

As potentially incriminating evidence accumulated, Tijuana's police chief, Luis Viñals Carsi (who was also an army captain), contacted the more technically advanced San Diego Police Department. Cooperation between the two forces had ebbed and flowed over the years (and still does), but on this occasion the San Diegans sent Sgt. Edward A. Dieckman of the homicide squad, along with William Menke and Walter R. Scott of the department's identification bureau, to assist in the investigation. A former schoolteacher now dedicated to upgrading technology and training for the city's police force, Scott had pieced together a rudimentary photographic laboratory in which photos of fingerprints or footprints could be enlarged.

Before the San Diegans arrived early that evening of 14 February, police had interrogated the purportedly last person (besides the killer or killers) to see Olga alive: the owner of La Corona sundry store, Mariano Mendivil, who repeated in more detail the same story he had told the dead girl's mother. The child had bounced into the shop smiling, chatting, and in a good mood. He had sold her a slice of raw meat for a few pesos, and she had left in the direction of her home. He watched her cross the street, no one else seemed to be around, and then he had turned to serve another customer. And yes, the package now in possession of the authorities contained the meat that he had sold to Olga. He said he knew nothing else of the tragedy, and the police seemed to believe him. They probably had also questioned the customer.

About this time, the investigation might have turned to the parents of the victim for details about her life at home and events leading up to her disappearance, but the authorities declined to question them. Perhaps they believed Feliza and Aurelio too distraught to undergo interrogation. Indeed, Feliza was under a doctor's care. At any rate, no officials ever questioned the parents about the ordeal, then or later. Had they done so, they might have learned of the soldier whom Feliza insisted she saw leaning on a wall near La Corona in the early moments of her frantic search for her daughter. She could have described that army man to them.

But the police and military pursued a different tack. By two in the afternoon they had rounded up five young men said to have been at or

near the scene where the murder and rape had apparently occurred. Three of the five were civilians who had spent the night shielded against the cold and rain, sleeping in hay in the old horse stalls at the backside of the military post. The *cuartel* (garrison) itself had been moved the preceding year to heights on the southern edge of town. While General Contreras and his staff still maintained their headquarters in a large rented house adjoining the old site, the distinctive stone building which had been the military post became the *comandancia* for the Tijuana police. With its turrets and parapets the structure resembled a movie set, like one of those remote desert outposts manned by the French Foreign Legion in *Beau Geste*. Commonly called "The Fort," it had been erected in 1915 on high ground along the Tijuana River to warn off foreign filibusters who had territorial designs on Baja California. An expanding town center had gradually surrounded The Fort with residences and small stores, but it still stood as a stern symbol of authority, and now became the nerve center for investigation of the murder and rape of Olga Camacho.

Besides the three young men who had sought refuge in the stalls from the night's cold, authorities arrested two soldiers said to have been in or around military headquarters about 6 P.M. or so, the Sunday evening that Olga disappeared. There had been speculation from the beginning that a soldier, or soldiers, might have been involved in the rape and slaying. At this point Baja California's federal police inspector, Jesús Medina Ríos, reviewed for eager newspaper reporters those clues that he hoped could lead to a quick solution of the crime: identification of the red hairs or woolen fibers found in Olga's hand; finding and analyzing additional fingerprints on the package of meat the girl had carried; identification of the heel print; a confession by one of the five in custody; or the discovery of blood on the clothes of a suspect.

Interrogators held the suspects incommunicado. Late that afternoon investigators announced that they had found nothing that would definitely link any of the detainees to the crime. Then around 7 P.M., after a final brusque questioning, police exonerated the three civilians as youths only in search of a place to sleep on a cold, wet night. They also absolved one of the soldiers. His mother provided an alibi for him: the boy, off duty that Sunday, had been home with her all afternoon and evening, and they could prove it.

That left only one person detained for further questioning, a twenty-

four-year-old private named Juan Castillo Morales, a light-skinned *soldado raso* (lowest of the low in military ranks) of medium build, with dark, wavy hair and a hint of mustache along his upper lip. He had been born and raised in the small pueblo of Ixtáltepec, far to the south in the Tehuántepec region of the state of Oaxaca, a zone renowned for its Zápotec influence, although Juan's physical features were clearly mestizo. In fact, foreign invasion, colonization, and commerce had since the 1860s brought considerable racial diversity to the area.

Precisely how and why the authorities identified the private as their prime (indeed only) suspect virtually from the start is not known. The official record, such as exists, contains nary a hint. Sources of the period do not state precisely when police arrested him or whether he was in uniform. Feliza Camacho now says (but did not report at the time of the investigation) that she is sure Castillo Morales was the soldier she saw leaning on the wall near La Corona grocery, the person she had queried about her daughter's whereabouts. Others who witnessed the events of 1938 say today that Juan had been on guard duty at the comandancia earlier that fateful day and therefore needed to be questioned, but no contemporary accounts verify that point. Newspapers reported at the time, and witnesses to these happenings say now, that police knew Castillo Morales as someone who had made sexual advances toward young girls, perhaps even fondled some of them, although neither the authorities nor offended parties ever brought charges against him. It was simply rumored that he had the habit, and, therefore, the soldier's alleged sexual proclivities drew suspicions upon him. It was said that from the start of the investigation, police had identified known pedophiles, and that individuals in the crowd outside the comandancia had leaked word to interrogators that Castillo Morales had such sexual leanings. At this juncture, interrogators questioned Juan carefully on this point, and he vigorously denied any such inclinations or behavior, just as he steadfastly proclaimed his innocence of any involvement in the murder and rape of Olga Camacho.[5]

Interrogation and Confession

José Carmareña took notes at the initial interrogation of the suspect, which lasted past midnight. Carmareña had learned stenography and typing at Hoover High School in San Diego. Through his father's close

personal relationship with the territorial governor, Lt. Col. Rudolfo Sánchez Taboada (the elder Carmareño was an army general), José had been appointed the personal secretary of Tijuana's *delegado*, Manuel Quiróz. Delegados—chief executive officers of major towns in the territory, Tijuana, Mexicali, and Ensenada—were appointees of the governor; no one was elected to any political office in the territory at that time. While beholden to the governors who named them, delegados held substantial local power of their own. Camareña tells his own story of the day he encountered Juan Castillo Morales:

> Here I was, twenty-one years old and sent by the delegado to go to the interrogation and prepare a brief, called an *acta*, which could be used as the first step in court proceedings against a suspect. We were in a passageway of the comandancia, seated on wooden benches, and the Agente del Ministerio Público del Fuero Común [the municipal prosecutor], Moisés Oliva, was doing the main questioning in conjunction with the inspector general of police, the police commander, and several military officers. [In their function, agentes resemble district attorneys, weighing evidence and deciding whether or not it is sufficient to forward a case to judicial channels.]
>
> The crowd outside was in an uproar. It now numbered at least a thousand, and the mob grew more and more impatient with the investigation, which it considered unnecessary, or at any rate too slow, and quite possibly headed for an official cover-up. They demanded that the police turn over the suspect to them so that they could lynch him. As their anger and frustration mounted, they began to pelt the comandancia with anything loose that they could get their hands on. We could hear projectiles hitting the walls: rocks, large chunks of wood, clumps of dirt, metal cans, and glass bottles. Windows were shattering around us. We didn't know what would happen if the crowd got inside the compound. Agente Oliva was so intimidated by the mob that he could hardly interrogate the prisoner. His mind was not on the job but on the crowd outside. He rushed his questions.
>
> "Let's get this over with. Where were you on Sunday evening?"
>
> "Around the military compound."
>
> "What were you doing there?"
>
> "Just walking around."
>
> "Where were you headed?"

"Nowhere."

"Did you know Olga Camacho?"

"NO!"

"Did you get close to her?"

"I saw the girl, but I never got close to her."

"Did you speak to her?"

"No."

Castillo Morales had a great many lies and contradictions in his testimony. He would say one thing, and the mob outside would start yelling and screaming and threaten to break in, and he would change his mind. He was very confused under rough questioning by Oliva along with Contreras and police. He was highly nervous and could not concentrate. Almost all the questions could be answered "yes" or "no," but Castillo Morales could not afford to say "yes" to any of the questions, because if he did, it was the end of his life. The mob outside would finish him off. So he said "no." Or if he said "yes" one time, he would say "no" the next.

There were no democratic forms in the entire questioning process. Castillo Morales had no lawyer, no defender, no representation. The entire proceeding was marked by speed, the need to quell the mob. Everything was hurried. They [the authorities] just wanted to get him out of there, out of jail, out of the city. The feeling was that whether he did it or did not do it to her [Olga], it didn't matter, because he had done it to other girls. So that must be him; he is the presumed killer.

My typewritten acta was very jumbled and virtually useless for anything legal. There was no clear statement in it. It was only two pages long. Castillo Morales denied doing anything wrong. He denied raping and murdering the little girl. Castillo Morales denied everything. In my mind he was 75 percent guilty and 25 percent not.[6]

In the early hours of the interrogation, Castillo Morales understandably was under enormous pressure, not only from the point-blank questions and the nature of the crime of which he was being accused (if only by inference), but by the din of the tumult outside the walls of the headquarters, the shouts of a crowd that literally wanted his neck and was at the point of breaking into the compound. His interrogators tried all the tricks of their trade, one moment promising leniency if he confessed, the next threatening him with the harshest punishment if he did not.

Without a moment of relaxation, nothing to eat, no break for a smoke (the accused was a cigarette smoker—some said he also enjoyed marijuana and was influenced by the drug when he committed the crime), the suspect vigorously and steadfastly maintained his innocence.

With the investigation concentrated on Castillo Morales, police had gone to search his house in Colonia Morelos, near the cuartel (see map 2 in chapter 5). The majority of military personnel lived there in rented dwellings. The police purportedly found the suspect's blood-stained clothing soaking in a wash bin—some said inside the house, others outside (one of the discrepancies later noted in retellings of the events). Police also reported that they had found some of Olga's bloody clothing at the house. They later decided that the garments belonged to the soldier's common-law wife, the kind of contradiction that develops when those in search of answers jump too quickly to conclusions.

THE COMMON-LAW wife is a mysterious presence in this story. Unnamed in any newspaper, apparently never interviewed by the press, around 8 or 9 P.M. that day she suddenly assumes center stage, as would an unforeseen and unannounced ghost, delivers damning evidence, and then disappears for good, at least from historical accounts. This unidentified woman repeated for the agents what Juan had told her about his blood-stained garments. He explained that he had been cut up in a fight, hence the blood. She said her husband was mentally unhinged, but we do not know if she was speaking of the moment he returned home in blood-spattered clothing or of a more general state of mind. The woman was then taken to the comandancia, where under police guidance she confronted her husband with the evidence and denounced him.

Whether authorities might have coerced the woman into confronting her husband or offered her a bounty, or she testified voluntarily—there are many incentives for betrayal—did not seem to occur to the accused. Her presence with the clothing was the last calamitous stroke for Juan Castillo Morales, who lowered his head into his hands and sobbed that he had done the deed. When Olga had left the store, La Corona, he had hit her on the head with a rock. She began to bleed profusely. He then lifted her in his arms and carried his victim to the stable area at the rear of the military compound. There he raped, then killed her and carried her to the garage, where he cut her throat with a piece of glass. Police theorized that he had tried to stem the flow of blood from the initial head wound by

raising the girl's skirt and wrapping it around her head, which explained the lack of a substantial blood trail anywhere at the site.

Following the confession, the soldier asked to be protected from the raging crowd outside, which was shouting for his head. Contreras assured him that his fate lay with the law, not the mob.

Later that night the officials invited newspaper reporters to interview the confessed rapist-murderer, who in more protected surroundings, away from the raging crowd, seemed to the journalists to be unrepentant and nonchalant about his crimes. Reporters must have been provided access to the prisoner with a proviso that they not reveal the location at which the prisoner was being held, and the newspapers kept that promise. The *Los Angeles Examiner* headed its story "Smiling Mexican Private tells *Examiner,* 'Yes, I did it.' " The report continued (omitting the full surname as English-language newspapers frequently did with Hispanics): "Morales appeared unperturbed by threats of a howling, vengeful mob, which sacked and burned the headquarters. Closely guarded in a secret hiding place, Morales shrugged and half-smiled when questioned by *The Examiner* concerning the crime: 'Oh, yes, I did it . . . I did not do anything to the little girl after she was dead, though [contradicting the findings of the medical examiner]. Everything I did was while she was alive. But I did it. I have done something like this before.' "[7] The *San Diego Evening Tribune* stated: "With calm unconcern, he [the suspect] told a reporter for the *Evening Tribune,* 'I killed the little girl to cover up my lust,' and repeated that he had 'first attacked her criminally and then killed her.' "[8]

Investigators went to extraordinary lengths to have the confession publicized by the press, as it was the heart of their case against him. Confessions extracted by police were as suspect then to the general public as they are now. It has been common police practice to announce a confession as justification for the imprisonment and then execution of a prisoner. Confessions have a way of putting an end to further investigation; they can relieve the prosecution of the need to stitch together a case based on hard evidence and sufficient motives. Suspects who confess are presumed guilty; a confession is the gemstone in officialdom's bag of evidence, sometimes all that prosecutors have to go on. Once announced, confessions carry immense weight, because they make it appear that the suspect has been self-judged and convicted.

Those who question the procedures that authorities followed in the Juan Castillo Morales case usually turn first to the confession. At this

point it is doubtful that anything can be proved one way or the other about its legitimacy. All confessions carry blemishes and hairline cracks. Yet, at this point police seemed to have in hand what Inspector Medina Ríos had said earlier was what they needed for a quick solution to the crime: a confession from one of the suspects and the discovery of blood on his clothes. Pieces for the government's case seemed to be falling into place.

EARLY THAT EVENING (now it was about twenty-four hours after Olga's death) the San Diego detectives returned to their station with the wrapping paper that bore the bloody fingerprint and other bits of evidence surrounding the case. They had agreed to make blow-ups of the print, which was thought to be the one piece of physical evidence which could positively identify the killer. Tijuana police were to pick up the prints at Scott's refurbished laboratory the next day, Tuesday, 15 February. As the San Diego department still lacked a real forensic laboratory, it would have needed to send the hairs and any other sort of such evidence to the FBI in Washington, or to the state facility in Sacramento, or perhaps to a testing room in Los Angeles. As there does not seem to be any report on these matters in police files, the results of any such investigation are not known. Even more advanced laboratories could not have tested the blood samples for anything more than blood type; DNA testing was still in the distant future, and the hair samples could only be determined as animal or human, and if human, the results might indicate the person's race.[9]

Fingerprints (other than the one found on the wrapping paper) might have been lifted, if well formed on a dry surface, such as a piece of glass, but it is not known if police searched for such evidence in the Camacho murder case. Moreover, in contrast to reports of investigative procedures normally followed on these occasions, there is no indication that officials ever fingerprinted Juan Castillo Morales, typed his blood and hair (even as authorities could best deduce it at the time), or matched his fingerprints with those on his military service record, which should have been on file in Mexico City. There was nothing scientific about this investigation.

As it turned out, none of this mattered. Whatever thoughts the authorities might have had about developing proof through a photographic blow-up of a bloody thumbprint or by matching the wearing pattern of the heel print with those of the suspect's shoes or in an overall way

following judicial procedures codified in civil law, they were soon challenged and hurried along by angry, unruly, threatening crowds of determined townspeople who numbered into the thousands (one newspaper estimated the crowd at four thousand, but this was most likely exaggerated). The mob demanded that the soldier in custody be released to them for their style of justice or they would storm the comandancia and take him by force. Authorities who resisted also would be hanged.

The Mob

Tijuana had swirled in rumors, suppositions, spontaneous outbursts of anger, and a general commotion since the initial disappearance of Olga Camacho and through the ensuing search for the child. But the town had never been a calm, well-run community of inhabitants living a simple life. Just the opposite: at least since the 1920s and the advent of Prohibition across the border, it had courted the reputation of a wide open, riproaring tourist mecca where anything went and the good times rolled. Moreover, the grinding worldwide Depression, the end of Prohibition, and the Mexican government's determination to curtail gambling had bred side effects which only further agitated the community. The Depression caused the United States to deport Mexican workers, thousands of whom then settled in Tijuana to await better times to the north. The sudden spurt of population placed substantial stress on already limited public services and employment possibilities. The resumption of the sale of alcohol in the United States hurt the local cantinas and nightclubs and forced their owners to seek other types of livelihood. Those with capital and foresight furiously competed for new opportunities in real estate and business. Others with scant financial assets relied on their ingenuity and wits to forge a new start, and in doing so frequently stepped on each others' toes. Closure of the gambling casinos, by far the town's largest source of employment, meant that several thousand unionized employees lost well-paying work. The labor unions bitterly fought the government to keep the establishments open and forcefully agitated for the job security of their membership. In this roiling atmosphere, the Camacho affair exacerbated frustrations and gave the already disgruntled a new venue (some say a pretext) for venting their wrath and parading their discontent.[10]

At first the crowds milling in the streets around the comandancia only demanded to know the names of those in custody. Photos of the throng show many in business suits and neckties, or at least dress jackets. They must have come to The Fort directly from work that Monday, 14 February, or perhaps from extending their condolences to the Camacho family. Not a faceless crowd of anonymous people: according to witnesses the participants knew each other through work, union affiliation, baseball games, civic celebrations, and social activities. Predominantly male, it exhibited most ages and walks of life, and remained cohesive and focused in the current crisis. It wanted justice, quick and certain, for Olga's killer.

When authorities remained tight-lipped about the progress of the investigation, the crowd became suspicious, and some turned surly. Was the military out to protect one of its own, a practice well known to Mexican tradition? Would the military spirit the suspect out of town and take him to a distant army base where he could be shielded from view and eventually allowed to drift into anonymity? This would not have been the first time, or the last, that the army placed its reputation ahead of justice.

When in early evening the crowd realized that the inquiry had become centered on one prime suspect, the gathering turned ugly. "Produce the murderer within half an hour or suffer," they roared.[11] Call it revenge or retribution, they wanted to assure themselves, needed to see with their own eyes, that Olga's killer met his fate *their* way, not the military's way. Police and the military urged patience, but the mob demanded its due.

Spontaneous lynchings by an angered public, of course, are not peculiar to Mexico, even at this late date. Tijuanenses storming The Fort likely remembered the infamous Brooke Hart case that brought far-flung notoriety to the San Francisco Bay area in late 1933. On 12 November of that year, Thomas H. Thurmond and Jack Holmes had kidnapped and murdered Hart, the twenty-two-year-old son of a wealthy San Jose merchant. They dumped his body into the bay, but demanded a $40,000 ransom from the young victim's father. Police soon apprehended the pair, who admitted their crime and were incarcerated in the San Jose jail pending trial. On 26 November, a mob pulled the prisoners from jail and hanged them in the name of sure justice. In fact, at the time of the troubles in Tijuana, the U.S. Senate had just deliberated an anti-lynching bill which would have allowed the federal government to prosecute state officials who willfully failed to prevent lynchings. The legislation took aim at

Southern local authorities who all too frequently looked the other way when white citizens' groups ignored the law and lynched blacks accused of violating the social codes of a community dominated by whites. Enemies of the bill launched a filibuster, and proponents could not garner sufficient votes to break it. The Senate shelved the measure until further notice.[12]

Only seven months before the Camacho murder, a mob two thousand strong had tried to lynch twenty-two-year-old Albert Dyer, suspected of ravishing and murdering three little girls in a public park in Inglewood, California. The crowd swarmed around the city jail and demanded to know if Dyer were there. A police captain responded that the suspect had been moved to a Los Angeles lockup, and when the throng demanded evidence, he opened the doors and allowed a committee of three protesters to search the jail. They found nothing, and the mob dispersed.

Meanwhile, Dyer had indeed been moved to Los Angeles police headquarters, where he underwent rigorous questioning. A Works Progress Administration worker from the East Coast of the United States and a married man, the prisoner had been a street-crossing guard at the school the girls attended. Police first suspected him while they were uncovering the bodies at the crime site. Dyer stood nearby, politely asking spectators not to smoke at such a tragic scene. Then he sobbed uncontrollably as police carried off the victims. Authorities thought his behavior off and brought him in for questioning. Under interrogation, contradictions developed in Dyer's alibi, although he maintained his innocence. Only when the officers suggested that he stand on the steps of the Inglewood City Hall and explain the contradictions to an enraged citizenry did Dyer break down: "I did it. I killed them," he shouted. In his confession he explained how over time he had become infatuated with the girls, two sisters ages seven and five, and their eight-year-old schoolmate. One afternoon he met them in a park, chatted with them, and offered them a soda. Then, one by one, he led them up a secluded canyon in the park. First he strangled and raped the eight-year-old. Then he returned to the park for one of the sisters, murdered her, and then went back for his last victim.[13] Echoes of the Dyer episode—the hounding mob, the tactics used in gaining a confession—reverberate through the case of Juan Castillo Morales.

Nor have the lynchings stopped. In an eerie echo to the rampage in Tijuana, sixty years later the same sort of fury erupted in central Mexico: