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The Sandinistas' Sister-in-Arms

By Art Harris

NEW YORK, Oct. 3—She walks down the stairs in Gloria Vanderbilt jeans and a green cashmere sweater. The cheekbones are high, with a wisp of blue shadow about dark brown eyes. Her nails are lacquered pearl and her voice is husky from inhaling too many Marlboros and exhaling revolution.

She smiles.

You can see how her charm could become the flirtation that left a Nicaraguan general with his throat slit in her bedroom.

Ever since Nora Astorga, Nicaragua's deputy foreign minister, lured a top Somoza general to her home in 1978 and left his corpse behind, vanishing into the jungle to carry a rifle for the Sandinistas, she has become the stuff of legend.

To the left, she is a hero who risked her life to swap a life of privilege and motherhood for an AK-47 in order to save her country. To the right, she is viewed as a ruthless femme fatale, Freud's worst macho nightmare. As one joke bandied about Managua put it, "There is one question you don't ask Nora Astorga: 'Your place or mine?'"

She hears the joke and smiles.

But it does not surprise her as she stretches out on a couch in the rambling Westchester County home of Nicaragua's U.N. ambassador and sips strong café negro. Far worse was said about the twice-divorced mother of five when the White House rejected her last April as Nicaragua's ambassador to the United States.

"I don't see myself as a calculating monster," says Astorga, 35, comparing herself to Judith of bib-

Nora Astorga: The Ardor of A Revolutionary

lical fame who murdered King Holofernes after he subjugated the Jews.

No matter whose version is preferred, the allusion to Judith evokes the incredible horror of man's betrayal by a woman. Classical paintings conjure the parable with gory scenes of Judith holding a severed head aloft, dripping blood, mocking man's weakness and raising the ultimate question: Is all fair in love and war? And is it fair for a woman to fight on both battlefields at once?

Last night, after a long day on the front lines of the public relations offensive Nicaragua is staging at the United Nations and throughout the city; it was poker-faced junta coordinator, Daniel Ortega, who held down the official receiving line at a trendy New York Athletic Club reception hosted by lawyer Michael Kennedy.

But across the room, a swelling crowd of women talked about Astorga beneath ceiling murals of men wrestling, boxing and running track. A piano player was singing, "I Love You Just the Way You Are."

"Oh, God," said Susan Horowitz, a political activist who champions liberal causes. "To try to get the guy to bed, and then kill him! Fantastic. It's like a western. That's my dream, to do that to Reagan, George Bush, go right down the line. I've got to meet this Mata Hari."

Among the crowd were celebrities like Abbie Hoffman, actor-producer Michael Douglas, Mike Wallace, Shana Alexander, judges and rabbis, doctors and lawyers. None sparked Freudian debate like Astorga.

"From a purely esthetic standpoint," sniffed one investment banker, "I'd say she's not worth getting killed for."

"I think she's great looking," snapped his wife, eyeing the crowd build-up. "I'd say the women are more interested in her than the men."

"That's because they all want to do what she did," he replied.

Nearby, Horowitz, a stunning, intelligent-looking woman with long brown hair accompanied by husband David Horowitz, president of MTV, was chiding feminists for denying they use sexuality to get what they want. "I know I do," she said.

"So many women on the left deny they'd ever use their sexuality because they assume it's not in keeping with women's liberation," she went on. "But I know a lot who use their looks and wiles, even though they'd never march into the Wonder Woman foundation and say, 'Hey, I got this guy to do something for me because I gave him the hint I'd do something for him in return.'"

She saw Astorga as an inspiration for the New Woman. "She's the most exciting modern female revolutionary around. I love it."

Under fire by CIA-backed contras and President Reagan for unfair elections, exporting revolution and other assorted ills, Nicaragua is fighting back here with a war of words.

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Astorga ranks number three in Managua's foreign ministry. But with Miguel D'Escoto, the bespectacled foreign minister, off selling Sandinismo abroad, and vice minister Victor Tinoco busy as a special representative to the U.N. Security Council, Astorga usually winds up running the show.

"The United States treats undeveloped countries like little children," she says, striding through the U.N. delegates' lounge, waving, kissing and shaking hands with admirers. "Their attitude is, 'If you behave, I'll give you some candy. If not, I'll spank you.'"

Her pitch appears to sell well at the U.N. Had she not personally lobbied dozens of crucial nonaligned nations under U.S. pressure to vote for anyone but Nicaragua, her country would still be out in left field on the General Assembly floor, not in the influential Security Council, say fellow diplomats.

"There came a point when we put in our heavy artillery and sent in D'Escoto and Nora, one on one," says

Nicaraguan diplomat Alejandro Bendana, 34. "She's warm, friendly and honest. She disarms people. She speaks fluent English and [disabuses] Americans from the perception that Nicaraguans speak Russian and eat babies for breakfast."

Indeed, clutching the day's list of nations to lobby, she fixes the pint-sized ambassador from Tanzania with a magic smile, locks eyeballs and makes the pitch. Moments later, he stands up beaming—all five feet of him—walking tall.

"She's clever, intelligent and very professional," says Augusto Ramirez, Colombia's dapper minister of foreign affairs. "She does her job quite well."

It is a coordinated attack. Ortega yesterday at the U.N. blistered President Reagan for dispatching guns and butter to antigovernment contras, vowing to fight any invasion. He pleaded his case on and off camera, at breakfast with reporters, at network lunches, at private, elegant soirees with powerful businessmen like Edgar Bronfman and Richard Manoff.

Nora, "Norita" to friends, was usually nearby. She tried not to upstage, but sometimes couldn't help it. It is Nora whom most feminists want to meet: the archetype herself, a living, breathing, left-wing Dirty Harriet in the Age of Eastwood.

Added Commandante Ortega: "She typifies the new Nicaraguan woman, in this case professional Nicaraguan women who played a very active role

in the struggle against the Somoza dictatorship and now in defense of the revolution. She upholds very highly the concept of democratic conquest."

With Ortega and company, she was scheduled to attend the dinner here tonight for Contradora ministers that Nicaragua desperately wants to keep in their corner after signing key regional peace accords that red-faced U.S. diplomats predicted would never be signed and that they are now trying to torpedo.

And she was with Ortega today when he toured restored Lower East Side tenements. CBS will feature her on a "60 Minutes" episode this Sunday. And she was served up for interviews by public relations counsel retained to sell the Sandinistas to America.

The firm, Agendas International, aims to whet media appetites for information on the woman behind the myth and keeps her schedule flexible so other reporters may dine out on the general's bones.

Such strategies are "the only defense" Nicaragua has against Reagan media domination, said an account executive.

Astorga fires up another Marlboro. Judith dressed up in her best gown, put on perfume and went to Holofernes' tent," she says. "Then she got him drunk and killed him. Do you know what the Bible says? 'Praise Judith because she saved her people.' Except for the CIA, most people see me as a courageous woman who did what should have been done."

On a wall behind her in the ambassadorial residence in Westchester hang photographs: one of Sandinista martyr Augusto Cesar Sandino, gunned down by National Guard troops in 1934; another of the assassin who got even with the first Somoza in 1956; more of children carrying guns to war. Outside, two boys race about in a play gunfight. The smell of beef stew wafts in from the kitchen.

"I never felt guilty," she says, her eyes downcast as she works to explain: "The plan was to kidnap him, but he fought back and had to be killed . . . It was something you had to do [for] revolutionary justice. He had killed so many. He was a monster."

Her journey from high society girl to guerrilla fighter began before Astorga was aware it was happening. She was born into wealth in a small town named Villa Somoza. Now it is called Villa Sandino.

Her father was a lumber exporter. She grew up on his farm and in Managua, the oldest of four children whose grandfather, a rich landowner, was once defense minister under Somoza.

When Astorga was 9, the dictator bounced her on his knee and gave her 20 cordobas.

"I wondered why did I have things and others had nothing to eat," she says. "So I asked my teacher, 'Why is it?' And she said, 'Because God wanted it that way. [But] you have an obligation to give to them.'"

She went to mass, visited hospitals and did charity work. Otherwise, she spent her time at parties.

Like most teen-agers, she had political fights with her father. "All I knew was that the country was poor, women were getting raped, and there was nothing to eat. So I figured Somoza was no good. My father would say, 'No, it's not like that.'"

When she clung to her stubborn ways, he dispatched her to Catholic University in Washington, D.C., "to save me from my thoughts."

One day, a professor wrote off Nicaragua in a class as another "banana republic." And she discovered racism. "To a lot of people, I was a 'spic.'" She saw blacks riot after Martin Luther King Jr. She says: "I was living life like any other teen-ager, and that reminded me that I didn't belong here, but in Nicaragua."

She went home, only to fall back into Managua's high society fast-track.

Next came law school. A fellow student told her one day, "You're a beautiful young lady, but now I hear you're only interested in having fun. Let me ask you one question: Are you happy with yourself?"

"That was it," says Astorga. "I wasn't, but I didn't know what to do about it."

The student was a member of the Frente Sandinista Liberacion Nacional (FSLN), a revolutionary group founded in 1961. Astorga signed on to the fledgling illegal group and soon got her first job: find a safe house for Oscar Turcios, an underground member who became her political mentor.

Her code name was Maria. He went by Eduardo. She found a house and played courier; she fetched food, ran messages, cut his hair. He taught her about revolution.

She got married, against Turcios' advice, to a fellow student member, Jorge Jenkins, now Nicaragua's ambassador to Sweden.

She nursed Ché Guevara fantasies.

"I wanted to be a hero," she reflects, "do something great, something big, go to the mountains, do dramatic things. I wanted to fight."

Oscar said no. She had a perfect cover: a blossoming law student from a top family. She could do things for the FSLN others could not.

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Astorga stunned her parents by taking part in student strikes on campus. She helped take over a church, fasting to protest political prisoners. Her mother showed up and called her a "disgrace" to the family.

Soon she was the mother of two. She graduated from law school, studied in Europe for a year with her husband, then found work as a lawyer for a construction firm.

She struggled with indecision over "whether to be a revolutionary full time or a mother and a wife." Then, in 1973, Turcios was captured by National Guard troops. Six hours later, he was dead, a bullet in his head.

"They tried to say he was killed in a jeep wreck, but it was coldblooded murder," she says. Astorga then burrowed into her family. "I left my political life. I became dependent on my husband." But she wasn't happy. "I filed for divorce to survive as a person. That was the end of part of my life."

She worked as a courier for the FSLN, zipping between Managua and San José, Costa Rica. Her boss, Enrique Pereira, whose firm did \$40 million in construction work a year, asked her about it.

"I'm a messenger for the Sandinistas," she told him. He laughed it off and never brought it up again.

One day, Pereira dispatched her to negotiate a contract with the number two man in the National Guard, Reynaldo Pérez-Vega. She only knew him by his reputation on the left as "El Perro" (the dog), a short, stocky man who raped, tortured and shot political enemies at will, and was an indefatigable womanizer.

(At the time of American refusal to accredit her as ambassador, a series of leaks from officials portrayed him also as a CIA "asset," supplying fake passports to agents.)

Left, Nora Astorga in New York; inset, with Eden Pastora in 1978



By Karen DeYoung—The Washington Post