

Missing for more than 8 years

By BOB GILES
Herald reporter

HOUSTON — An eight-and-one half year odyssey ended Nov. 17 when Ms. Martha Goriva, 36, was united with her 11-year old daughter, Katherine Melissa Lara, at the Harris County Detention Center, 3530 W. Dallas.

In the wake of the traumatic reunion, teary-eyed Ms. Goriva announced, "After eight years we will have Thanksgiving. Thank God! We also haven't had Christmas in eight years, but I continued to live with hope I would see my daughter again."

Mother, daughter and grandmother, Mrs. Violeta Goriva, departed from Houston at the expense of Continental Airlines on Nov. 18 for home in Our Lady of Mt. Carmel parish in New Brunswick, N.J. As Ms. Goriva put it: "The lights will be on again at the Goriva home."

The mother-daughter reunion began

Reunion of mother and daughter in Houston brightens the holidays

Nov. 17, at 9 a.m., in 310th (Family) District Court, with The Honorable Allen J. Daggett, presiding judge. Listening to testimonies from Ms. Goriva, Melissa, and her paternal aunt and uncle, Judge Daggett ruled in favor of Ms. Goriva, giving her legal custody of her daughter. Ms. Goriva's legal counselor was Attorney-at-Law Pamela R. Julian, who represented the mother without fees.

Also instrumental in the mother-daughter reunion was Mark R. Miller, founder of the American Association for Lost Children and a 1989 Jefferson Award recipient. He had this to say: "I held back my

tears. I tried to be the stronger one. To be used by God is just wonderful. I believe everybody should be loving and caring for one another."

Miller added, "This is the longest missing child we have found in the two-year existence of the association."

The missing years of Melissa was anticlimactic to the stormy relationship between Erwing Lara, 34, and Ms. Goriva, who resumed her maiden name following the divorce Nov. 17, 1982. Migrating from South America in 1969, Ms. Goriva became an American citizen in 1980. "He came from Guatemala and never became

a citizen," she said as tears dried on her cheeks.

She painstakingly recalled, "I met him in John Jay High School in Brooklyn, N.Y. I used to hate him in high school and I ended up his girlfriend. I couldn't stand him; he was always hanging out. I graduated in June, 1974. Thanks to me he graduated also."

"He mistreated me before we married," she continued her painful memories. "I was crazy to marry him. I was crazy and stupid to marry him. He was jealous and crazy."

Ms. Goriva openly admitted, "Marriage was the only way to get out of (her parents' house) the house."

So, the couple exchanged marriage vows in St. Michael's Church in Brooklyn on Aug. 24, 1974. Lara worked as a

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Wins legal custody at hearing

Melissa: home to N.J. for Thanksgiving

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machinist and she was a homemaker in a rented house.

A month after she was married, Ms. Goriva's parents moved to Houston for better employment. The family included the parents and a younger sister and brother.

Drunk or sober, Ms. Goriva disclosed, her husband continuously physically abused her. In the aftermath of these "beatings" she sought refuge twice with her parents in Houston.

The Goriva family of Houston moved back east in 1978 and settled in New Brunswick, N.J.

Melissa was born Aug. 28, 1978, in a New Jersey Hospital, Ms. Goriva reported. She gave birth to her first and only child by Cesarean section. "I had complications with her birth," she recalled, "and was in the hospital 13 days. I came out of the hospital on Sept. 13. The day I came out of the hospital he went to see his girlfriend."

She continued to relate her turbulent life with Lara. "One night he wanted to go with his brothers to a game. I announced I want to go and he commanded, 'No, you stay in the house.' Instead I went to my mother's house."

Ms. Goriva interjected, "He always put his family and friends before me and his daughter."

And the physical abuse continued. "I couldn't handle it," she said. "He treated me like dirt. I stopped having a relationship with him when the physical abuse got worse."

The marriage soured and she filed for a divorce in Nov. 1, 1980. "Melissa and I stayed with my mother three weeks," she disclosed. "My lawyer wrote him a letter



Reunion of three generations took place Nov. 17, in Houston, when Mrs. Violeta Goriva, grandmother; Miss Katherine Melissa Lara, 11, daughter and granddaughter; and Ms. Martha Goriva, mother, following District Judge Allen J. Daggett's decision, awarding Ms. Goriva legal custody of Melissa, who was missing more than eight years. The trio left Houston for home Nov. 18.

and stated I needed the house. So, he took everything but the bed to his mother's house." She took up housekeeping in the rented home with her young daughter and her maternal uncle, Albert Velasco, 34. Her husband was ordered by the courts to pay her \$15 a week child support and granted rights to visit the baby. "I was getting welfare and I couldn't make it on \$15 child support from him, so to college — when I decided to go to college — Jersey City State College in Jersey City." She commuted from New Brunswick to the Jersey City by bus, a 30-minute trip. "The quietly wept. 'I was going to kill myself,'

state paid the tuition and I attended college three years, studying liberal arts."

The divorce proceedings lingered on and on, "because he was working in Hackensack, N.J. and living with his mother in Queens, N.Y." However, he faithfully picked Melissa up Friday evenings and returned her to her mother Monday mornings.

The visitation rights were violated. "On Easter Sunday in April, 1981, he came by the house and announced, 'I'm taking Melissa to a birthday party. I will come back later. That Monday I waited at the window, but they didn't come.' She

she openly confessed. "I called his house, work. Not a card, letter or picture in all those years."

Sandwiched between visitations to law enforcement agencies and filing a missing child report with the local police and FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation), Ms. Goriva received a threatening letter from her estranged spouse. "If you ever touch my daughter I will kill you."

In 1983 Ms. Goriva moved in with her parents. "I quit college the same year and went to work in a bank to get off welfare," she disclosed.

She went on: "I searched for my daughter in New York, but he took her to Guatemala. His family sold their home in Queens and moved to Houston."

Although Melissa was recorded by computer in law enforcement agencies missing persons files, it was Melissa's erratic public school records that prompted a counselor's suspicion. The school counselor, in turn, notified the Texas Department of Public Safety in Austin, which challenged the data through the Missing Persons Clearing House and the New Jersey State Police. DPS notified Miller of the American Association for Lost Children Nov. 10; the New Jersey State Police notified Ms. Goriva immediately of their findings and Miller. "The mother was awarded custody of Melissa," Miller explained. Interfering with a child's custody has been a federal offense since 1984. Law enforcement agencies had a warrant for Lara's arrest."

Melissa's mother and grandmother flew to Houston Nov. 12 and were the guests of American Association for Lost Children.

Through her tears Ms. Goriva declared, "This is a new life for me. My daughter is going to be with me and I have a reason to live." She vehemently disclosed, "I will never remarry."

Ms. Goriva added, "I will enroll Melissa in a Catholic school back home and I hope to resume my college studies."

Paradoxically, Ms. Goriva's divorce was granted Nov. 17, 1982, ending a stormy marriage and she resumed legal custody of her daughter, Melissa, Nov. 17, 1989.

Interested persons can make tax-deductible contributions to American Association for Lost Children, P.O. Box 41154, Houston, Texas 77241.