

Norman Lewis

**Eastern Bolivia:
The White Promised Land**

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EASTERN BOLIVIA: THE WHITE PROMISED LAND

by Norman Lewis

The Indians of Bolivia, already exploited by a military dictatorship, will have to take up more of the white man's burden if South Africans and Rhodesians accept an invitation to colonise the country. White South Africans, accustomed to the excesses of their own police, will find much that is familiar in Bolivia. Police used violence against a mass hunger strike in La Paz recently and broke into a newspaper office to arrest 800 people who were seeking sanctuary.

Copenhagen 1978

Norman Lewis, the author of this IWGIA Document, works as a free-lance journalist for The Sunday Times and The Observer. He is also the author of ten novels and five non-fictional works. He specializes in Latin American affairs, and is above all interested in the conditions of the Indians of that continent. One of his major investigations was published in The Sunday Times, February 23, 1969, under the title: "Genocide - From Fire and Sword to Arsenic and Bullet, Civilization Has Sent Six Million Indians to Extinction." Few publications have had greater international impact. In Britain it led to the foundation of SURVIVAL INTERNATIONAL.

His report on Eastern Bolivia: The White Promised Land, was first published in Observer Magazine, March 5, 1978. We wish to extend our most sincere thanks to Norman Lewis and to the editors of the Observer Magazine for their generous permission to publish this report as an IWGIA Document.

Copenhagen, May 1978

The International Secretariat of IWGIA

Dr. Guido Strauss, Bolivian Under Secretary for Immigration, caused a stir throughout Latin America last year when he announced his government's intention to encourage the entry into Bolivia "of a large and important numbers of white immigrants... especially from Namibia, Rhodesia and South Africa."

His statement was published by Bolivia's leading newspaper, PRESENCIA, which later revealed that 150,000 whites would be accommodated and that the scheme had been financed by a 150-million-dollar credit to Bolivia offered by the Federal German Republic.

Censorship in Bolivia fosters eagerness on the part of the Press to study and reflect the governmental viewpoint, but in this instance PRESENCIA seems to have been in a quandary as to the official line. A vigorous denial by one department of the plan's very existence, coincided with a wealth of confirmatory detail poured forth by another. "At the very time", wailed the newspaper, "when the Institute of Colonisation affirmed that they had no knowledge of such a project... Under Secretary Guido Strauss said that the immigration plan was a matter of top priority."

Confusion was worse confounded by publication of extracts from a confidential letter written by Strauss to his minister, General Juan Lechín Suárez, presumably smuggled out of the files to be copied. The letter was full of precise figures and facts. The white settlers would be admitted in stages, taking possibly as long as six years, although 30,000 families could be admitted in the first year if the financial



arrangements were settled by then. The exact areas to be taken over by the newcomers were listed, and the amount of land they would receive (800,000 hectares). Strauss noted that the cost of purchasing this land - which was to be given to settlers - and of building roads was 250 million dollars, and that this sum had been funded.

The letter breathed the sentiments of humanity, and warned of the holocaust that awaited South African whites once black majority rule became a fact. Mr Sean McBride, High Commissioner for Namibia at the UN, was quoted as having said that Namibian whites would have to abandon the country. "There is no doubt that the factors of a catastrophe are imminent", Dr Strauss wrote. Motives of national self-interest were also touched upon. Bolivia's economically under-developed, under-populated areas cried out for the drive and the technical skills of the energetic South Africans. He also made the claim that Britain, the US and France between them were ready to put up 2,000 million dollars to indemnify white Rhodesians, "who would be unable to resist the process of Africanisation".

Adverse reaction to this colonisation was to be expected, and was led by the Catholic Church, the only body in Bolivia prepared to stand up to the dictatorship. A conference of religious leaders was held last July and a declaration followed listing numerous objections to the plan. What clearly disturbed the Church was the prospect of apartheid in Bolivia. PRESENCIA was permitted to publish the criticisms. I quote from two paragraphs only:

"The South African immigrants, with their violently racial mentality, condemned even in their own countries, could import the principles of apartheid into those under-populated areas where they would form compact groups. Bolivia, as the South Africans write so often in their newspapers, is the richest of the Latin American countries, requiring only an advanced technology for the exploitation of its raw materials... "three-quarters of its population are illiterate natives". This is a

point of view echoed by the contemptuous remarks of some of our own authorities who say, "The Indians cost more to keep than animals. They have to be fed, and work less."

The well-meaning objections of the Church, and of so many liberal Bolivians, are as naive as they are creditable, since in some ways apartheid already exists in a purer and more extreme form in Bolivia than the version professed by the racists of South Africa. This, a visitor to the country quickly discovers.

* * *

La Paz, at 12,400 feet, is the highest capital in the world. The plane lands on the edge of a plateau high above it, engines screaming in reverse and wing-flaps clawing at the thin air. A few hundred yards from the runway's end, the abyss awaits. The city lying below is crammed into a monstrous crater. Here, in this hole in the earth, its original Spanish builders, who went there to mine gold, huddled out of reach of the terrible wind that whines like a persistent beggar at every turn. From the almost infernal vision beneath, one turns back to that of the flat world of the Altiplano; seemingly limitless in one direction, and almost all of it over 13,000 feet, and in the other confined by a string of Andean peaks, like so many icebergs stranded miraculously at the edge of a desert.

This is the homeland of the Aymara Indians, whose grandiose civilisation preceded that of the Incas. They have been forcibly Christianised, and enslaved over four centuries, and they are still fantastically exploited. But somehow they have survived. Now, with the Church turned benign, they are no longer compelled to carry priests in chairs on their backs, or scourged for persisting in their ancient worship of Pachamama, the mother-goddess, and Tío, the Devil, who is also, appropriately, god of the tin mines....

Bolivia is a poor country, its per capita income of about £200 a year putting it at the bottom of the league of South

American nations. Its adult literacy is about 30 per cent. Oil revenues have brought about some increase in prosperity in recent years, but this has been diverted to a small sector of the population and largely spent on non-essential consumer goods. Far from bringing comfort to the peasant majority, the new prosperity has in fact done the reverse, for while the prices of agricultural produce has been rigorously held down, almost everything else is imported and subject to the inflationary process.

* * *

National poverty and under-development formed the theme of Under Secretary Guido Strauss's argument in favour of mass immigration of whites from South African countries when I interviewed him in La Paz. He was communicative and direct, a man with a reputation for not mincing words. Occasionally he is indiscreet, and is widely quoted as having said in public, "They (the white immigrants) will certainly find our Indians no more stupid or lazy than their own blacks". He confirmed to me with enthusiasm all the details of the project so far published, whether or not they had been denied elsewhere, and added to these a little fresh data.

Bolivia, Dr Strauss explained, a country twice the size of Spain, had a population of five millions. Such people as it had were crowded into the semi-barren Altiplano and a number of upland valleys, leaving the vast and rich territory of the eastern provinces virtually unpopulated. Through lack of development of its agricultural wealth, the country was even obliged to import food. When, therefore, discreet international moves had been set afoot to discover possible areas of resettlement for whites whom it was believed would sooner or later be forced out of Rhodesia, Namibia and South Africa, Bolivia had recognised that its acceptance of such refugees might provide a partial solution to this problem.

Dr Strauss said that approaches had been made (through the German Federal Government) not only to Bolivia, but to

Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay and Venezuela. Brazil and Venezuela had agreed to accept a limited number of technicians.

Only Bolivia had been ready to take on immigrants of all classes en bloc. Dr Strauss said that any white settler would be given, free, a minimum of 50 hectares of first class agricultural land, and would also receive social, technical and economic assistance. Those who wished to engage in ranching would receive "very much more", together with ample low-cost labour.

Dr Strauss handed me a copy of the Bolivian immigration laws, which also stressed Bolivia's demographic predicament, and the inducements offered to immigrants who could contribute to its solution. Settlers from all countries would be welcomed with open arms, but, he said, a special and natural sympathy predisposed Bolivians in favour of persons of European origin, who shared with them a common heritage of culture and religion.

Asked how many immigrants from the South African countries had already arrived, Dr Strauss said that some "spontaneous" immigration had taken place. He believed that this trickle would soon become a flood, an inundation which could be expected as soon as black majority rule becomes a fact. The infrastructure, including the building of roads in areas where the colonialists were to be settled, was complete. Bolivia for them, Dr Strauss said, is a promised land.

One question remained. Forty-one Indian tribes, with a total population of about 120,000, are recorded as living in the nominal emptiness of Eastern Bolivia. Some of them occupy precisely those areas shown on Dr Strauss's map as designated for development. What was to become of them?

This was a question which Dr Strauss did not feel competent to reply to. If I wanted to know anything about Indians, and the nation's plans for them, he suggested that I should go and talk to the head of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, the largest of the group of North American evangelical

missionaries working in Bolivia. This I did.

* * *

The mildness of Mr Victor Halterman's personality came as a surprise after learning something of his formidable reputation as head of the Summer Institute of Linguistics. With the exception of Under Secretary Strauss, who was naturally obliged to keep his thoughts to himself, I never met a Bolivian who did not regard the Summer Institute of Linguistics as the base for operations of the CIA in Bolivia; possibly in South America itself.

Mr Halterman's reticence and modesty were reflected in his bare office in a ramshackle building. Shoved into a corner at the back of the cheap furniture stood a splendid object of carved wood and macaw's feathers, an Indian god, said the missionary, that had been joyously surrendered to him by some of his converts. The other decoration was a coloured photograph of a Chácobo Indian wearing handsome nosetusks, and a long gown of bark.

The presence of these reminders of the Indians' uncivilised past came as a surprise, because, in the mood of the Pilgrim Fathers, most missionaries frown on all such things, banning personal adornments of all kinds, unless produced in a modern factory, as well as outlawing musical instruments, and jollifications of any kind in missionary compounds. Mr Halterman was more liberal in his outlook. Indians might dress up as they pleased, and even sing and dance, but only in a "folkloric" spirit, i.e. as long as such activities were stripped of any possibility of a hidden "superstitious significance".

Among the innumerable North American religious bodies devoted to the spiritual advancement of South America are three main missionary groups: the New Tribes Mission, the South American Mission, and the Summer Institute of Linguistics, all of whom concern themselves with the capture of

Indian souls. Of these the SIL is possibly the richest and most powerful, with 13 active posts throughout the country. Not only does it have the government's support, but one learns with surprise that it comes under the Ministry of Culture and Education, of which Mr Halterman is an official.

It may be in acknowledgement of this official co-operation that the biblical text that features most prominently in the SIL's well-produced promotional literature is Romans 13:1, offered in Spanish and eight Indian translations. The Institute's text is at variance both with that of the English Revised Version of the Bible, and its Spanish equivalent. "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers" becomes "Obey your legal superiors, because God has given them command", while the SIL quite remarkably re-translates "the powers that are ordained by God" as "There is no government on earth that God has not permitted to come to power". (Could General Banzer, who seized control of the country in 1971, have had a hand in this linguistic exercise ?)

Mr Halterman agreed that the SIL, as well as the two other evangelical missions, were religious fundamentalists, and therefore ready with a tooth and nail defence of every line of the Holy Writ, including the world's literal creation in six days, and Eve's origin as a rib from Adam's side.

Fundamentalists also believe that all the non-Christians of this world, including those who have never heard of the existence of the Christian faith, are doomed to spend eternity in hell. As the printed doctrinal statement of the New Tribes Mission - with whose theology Mr Halterman said he was in complete agreement - puts it: "We believe in the unending punishment of the unsaved." It is this belief that inspires so many missionaries to save souls at all costs, often with disregard for the converts' welfare in this world.

"We have a very limited medical programme", Mr Halderman said, and one could be sure he meant what he said. It is this indifference to anything but the act of conversion that

explains the almost incredible experience reported by the German anthropologist Jürgen Riester in an encounter with a missionary who in 1962 had been entrusted by the Bolivian government with the pacification of the Ayoreo Indians.

"The missionary allowed more than 150 Ayoreos to die in cold blood, after establishing contact with them. The Indians were dying of a respiratory disease accompanied by high fever, and the missionary held back medicine, using the following argument: "In any case they won't allow themselves to be converted. If I baptise them just before they die, they'll go straight to heaven."

Mr Halternman agreed that a certain number of Indians remained at large in the forest areas designated for future occupation by the white immigrants. It was a matter for regret, he thought, and he seemed to blame himself and his brother missionaries for incompetence in this matter. The Indians could be dangerous, he said, mentioning that only two days before, a member of an oil exploration team had been shot to death by arrows. However, there were still souls to be harvested, and he described with quiet relish the methods used to entice the occasional surviving Indian group from its natural environment so that this could be accomplished.

"When we learn of the presence of an uncontacted group" said the missionary, "we move into the area, build a strong shelter - say of logs - and cut paths radiating from it into the forest. We leave gifts along these paths - knives, axes, mirrors, the kind of things that Indians can't resist - and sometimes they leave gifts in exchange. After a while the relationship develops. Maybe they are mistrustful at first, but in the end they stop running away when we show, and we all get together and make friends."

But the trail of gifts leads inevitably to the mission compound, and here, often at the end of a long journey, far from the Indian's sources of food, his fish, his game, it comes abruptly to an end.

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Advertisement published in
NATURAL HISTORY MAGAZINE,
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THOSE DAYS ARE SADLY GONE EXCEPT — YES EXCEPT FOR ONE PLACE — THE VAST TEMPERATE ZONE OF VIRGIN LAND IN THE STATE OF SANTA CRUZ, BOLIVIA.

AREA TEEMS WITH ACTIVITY AND NEW WEALTH

The Bolivian frontier is bustling with activity: vast new farming areas are being opened up for coffee, soybeans, and corn; pasture lands are being developed as cattle ranches; new oil and gas discoveries are being made; mineral exploration is going forward; and plans are under way for a steel mill complex using natural gas for energy with estimated reserves of 40 billion tons of iron and manganese.

A REPORT BY THE BOLIVIAN — UTAH STATESMAN STUDY TEAM IN 1972 CONCLUDED: "... THE EASTERN PLAINS OF

According to the Wall Street Journal: Bolivia's economy shows strong elements of stability. (Feb. 8, 1977). "The inflation rate... is infinitesimal by Latin standards" (June 3, 1977) and "Consumer prices rose 4.6% from 1975 to 1976" (The Times, Dec. 13, 1977).

ENTERPRISING PEOPLE WANTED

Bolivia is looking for enterprising people to help develop its resources. There is a generous tax incentive program for agricultural enterprises and there are boundless new business opportunities in supplies and services to the burgeoning activity and population. Santa Cruz is well served by both State and foreign banks, including the First National Bank of Boston and the Bank of America.

The State of Santa Cruz is Bolivia's richest and biggest, with a population of around 700,000 and a third of the country's area. The population of Santa Cruz is growing at twice the rate of the rest of Bolivia, which has a total population of 4.7 million. Santa Cruz is estimated to have 65 million acres of useable land, but only 2 million are being farmed. The land is the real wealth of Santa Cruz, and this is where the opportunities are greatest.

"As far as the eye can see, it's one vast area of potential farm

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Buying undeveloped land in Santa Cruz affords you the opportunity of being a modern day pioneer helping to solve the Earth's growing food problem while profiting from her rich talent and enterprise. Furthermore, with good land management, you can also preserve much of the native fauna and flora. For the least active, it provides the basis for an appreciating investment with the added possibility of recreational use for second home development, camping, hunting and nature study.

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land broken open by stands of virgin timber." Wall Street Journal, (3 June, 1976).

VIRGIN LANDS

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The undeveloped land can be immediately cleared for agriculture, or just partially cleared, and in either case farmed individually or leased to a tenant. Alternatively the land can be left in its natural state for recreational use and value growth. A small site can be cleared for a house. Construction of a simple but adequate dwelling costs less than \$5 per square foot.

ACCESS TO SUPPLIES & MARKETS

All of the lands selected by Anglo Bolivian Land and Cattle Company are alongside or near major road projects or existing railroads and have adequate road access.

LAND VALUES INCREASING

In the past, prime undeveloped land in Santa Cruz has appreciated between 15 to 20 percent annually. There is, of course, no guarantee that this rate of increase in value will continue. Developed land generally has a far greater appreciation, and the major opportunity is in improving the undeveloped land.

It must be remembered, though, that this is a frontier. The weather is generally quite mild, but it does sometimes get hot in the summer, and even down to the low fifties (Fahrenheit) during the winter. There are insects that bite. The roads can occasionally be muddy during the rainy season and dusty during the dry. Transportation is mostly by four wheel drive vehicles and trucks.

FERTILE SOIL — ABUNDANT GAME

But this land has its own rewards. The soil is fertile, and the forest is populated by a wide variety of game animals and birds: the collared and white tipped peccary, white tailed and brocket deer, tree turkeys, penguin, grouse and dove. Most of the other species are protected under Bolivian law including the jaguar, puma, ocelot, margay, brown capuchins, grey fox, coat and parrots. The bird life is prolific.

Once you're in Santa Cruz, you'll probably want to explore the rest of fascinating Bolivia, the thriving capital of La Paz, the untouched colonial city of Sucre, the famous mining center of Potosi, once the largest city in the Western Hemisphere, the delightful flowering city of Cochabamba, the beautiful Lake Titicaca, and many virtually unexplored Inca archaeological sites.

MODERN FRONTIER OPPORTUNITY

During the days of the American frontier, the pioneer was offered a quarter of a square mile — 160 acres — under the Homestead Act for clearing and planting the land, and building a suitable dwelling. Today, in the State of Santa Cruz, you can purchase and secure clear title to a 160 acre homestead for just \$2,950, with a low down payment of \$295 and the balance payable over two years with 6 percent interest on the unpaid balance. This works out to monthly payments of \$17.67, with a total of \$169.11 in interest over the two year period. Larger tracts, up to a solid square mile — 640 acres, are priced at \$9,950 with \$995 down and the balance in three years with 6 percent interest on the unpaid balance, making a monthly payment of \$272.43, with a total of \$852.42 in interest over the three year period. Naturally, these tracts can be purchased for cash, or prepaid at any time without penalty.

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All of these activities are centered around the City of Santa Cruz de la Sierra, the booming capital of the State of Santa Cruz and Bolivia's second largest city. Santa Cruz de la Sierra was founded over 400 years ago, but it was connected to the outside world by little more than an ox cart trail until a paved road was completed in 1955. Then oil and natural gas were discovered, making Bolivia more than self sufficient in petroleum (gasoline is just 40 cents a gallon in Santa Cruz). The oil and gas discoveries were followed by the boom in cotton. Today, Santa Cruz is a major producer of oil, natural gas, cotton, sugar, rice, corn, wheat and cattle. There is a petroleum refinery, 18 cotton gins, 5 wheat mill extraction plants, 4 sugar mills and a burgeoning rubber industry. There are plans for a cement mill, a can-making factory, a paper mill, and a major textile plant.

The State of Santa Cruz has an average income of \$20 million from oil royalties and has used this money wisely to encourage the industries and services needed for full rapid development. Santa Cruz de la Sierra has grown more than five fold from 42,476 in 1950 to 255,588 in 1976, and is expected to reach over 800,000 by the turn of the century.

This is still a frontier city, yet according to the New York Times of 4 December 1974: "Unlike any other Bolivian city, Santa Cruz has a large and growing middle class..." Speaking of Santa Cruz, the Financial Times of London said: "The Cucenos are renowned for their independent mentality. The old world colonnaded streets echo to a cowboy philosophy of free enterprise and survival of the fittest. This is a place where people can get things done." "People who want to 'get things done' have been coming to the State of Santa Cruz. First there was the Japanese immigration from Okinawa, and today 30 miles north of Santa Cruz de la Sierra is the prosperous agricultural colony centered around the new Bolivian town of Ovinawa. Then in the 1960's the first large wave of English speaking Menonites arrived, mostly from Manitoba, Canada and later more from Paraguay and Mexico. This well known religious farming group, generally called Pennsylvania Dutch in the United States, were seeking rich farming lands in a country where they could live in peace with a minimum of governmental interference in their community affairs. They came to Santa Cruz, Bolivia!

Today there are about 11,000 Menonites in various farming communities. They are virtually self sufficient, raising their own fruits and vegetables, dairy products, poultry, beef and pork, plus large acreages devoted to cash crops, mostly soy beans, wheat and corn.

The Bolivian Government has indicated a willingness to accept European farmers from Rhodesia, Namibia and South Africa to settle in its unpopulated areas, and this new immigration is just beginning. While the foreign immigration has been going on, many industrious Bolivians from other areas have also settled in Santa Cruz.

"We have to break their dependency on us next", Mr Halterman said. "Naturally they want to go on receiving all those desirable things we've been giving them, and sometimes it comes as a surprise when we explain that from now on if they want to possess them they must work for money. We don't employ them, but we can usually fix them up with something to do on the local farms. They settle down to it when they realise that there's no going back."

"Something to do" on a local farm is only too often indistinguishable from slavery. Mr Halterman, whether he knows it or not, is the first human link in the chain of a process that eventually reduces the Indians to the lamentable condition of all those we saw in Bolivia, and there are many hundreds of missionaries like Mr Halterman all over South America, striving with zeal and with devotion to save souls whose bodies are condemned to grinding labour in an alien culture.

* * *

While the North American missionaries have become - often officially - the servants of such right-wing military dictatorships as that of Bolivia, opposition in the name of Human Rights is frequently organised by Catholic priests and members of the religious orders. Their efforts, although at best hardly more than an attempt to alleviate harshness and cultivate compassion, involve them in some risk, and shortly before we arrived in La Paz gunmen murdered two assistants of a priest who had been troublesome. We were told that such gunmen could be hired to assassinate someone of small importance for as low a fee as 100 pesos (rather less than £3).

A number of our informants were churchmen of a staunchly liberal kind, but it is not possible to mention them by name, or even identify the organisations to which they belong. One of them described the current Banzer regime as a confident and therefore fairly mild form of Fascism. Unlike Chile,

which had lost all self-respect, it valued its good name. When, in January 1974, the peasants in Cochabamba showed too spirited a resistance to its authority it had not been above sending in planes and tanks and killing a hundred or so, but for the moment it had fallen like a digesting crocodile into a kind of watchful inactivity.

In the meanwhile, the Church had cautiously involved itself in the formation of peasant groups that could by-pass the fraudulent government-rigged trades unions. He expected that eventually the crocodile would show that it was far from asleep. Future repression, he thought, was certain.

It was a priest who introduced us to some of the facts of the situation of the abundant labour promised by Dr Strauss to the new white immigrants, as and when they arrive, and he took us to see cane-cutters at work on an estate near Santa Cruz. Some 40-50,000 migrant workers are brought in to deal with the cotton harvesting and the cane-cutting. These are all Indians, the majority from the Altiplano. Of the two groups, the cotton pickers seem marginally the worse off, being housed in dreadful barracoons in which they sleep packed in rows, sexes mixed, 30 or 40 to a hut.

The working day is from just before dawn until dark. Altiplano Indians, accustomed to the cold, clear air of the high plateau, suffered dreadfully, the priest said, in the heat of the tropics, and also from the incessant attacks of insects unknown in the highlands, but which made life unbearable to them here. It was difficult to estimate how much a worker earned, but allowing for loss of working time through bad weather the priest estimated that this might average out at 50p a day. But this was far from being the take-home wage. Various deductions had to be made, including the contractor's cut.

All the estates employed agents who scoured the country in their search for suitable labour. The plantation owners paid them 50p to £2.50 for every man, plus a percentage de-

ducted from the worker's pay.

There were other drawbacks. The migrant worker would be forced to buy his supplies from the estate's stores, where prices could be three or four times those normally charged. Jürgen Riester noted in his work on the Indians of Eastern Bolivia that a kilo of salt might be charged up in this way at 12 times its market price, and a bottle of rum at 20 times normal cost. Thus the average daily wage could be reduced from 50p to 20p, or less. Worst of all, said the priest, almost all migrant workers were debt-slaves, and the debts they had been induced to incur went on mounting up every year, so that they were bound for life to a particular employer; their children, who would inherit the debt, would be bound to him, too.

The cane-cutters we visited were on a sugar estate about 20 miles from the city. They were Chiriguano Indians, from Abapó Izozog - one of the two principal areas designated for the new white settlements. These men worked a 15-hour day, starting at 3 am, by moonlight or the light of kerosene flares, except on Sunday, when 13 hours were worked. The two free hours on Sunday were dedicated to a visit by lorry to buy supplies at the estate owner's shop in Montero, the nearest village. They were paid about 50p a day.

Although their contracts stipulated that water, firewood and medicines would be provided free, there was no wood, two inches of a muddy brown liquid in the bottom of one only of the two wells, and the only medicine given was aspirin, used impartially in the treatment of enteritis, tuberculosis (from which many of them suffer), and snake-bite. Every woman over the age of 18 had lost her front teeth as a result of poor nutrition, leaving the gums blue and hideously swollen.

A contractor hung about, keeping his eye on us; a sleek and smirking young man in a big sombrero, a digital watch strapped on his wrist and a transistor to his ear. Part of

his duties would be to keep a look out for cane-cutters who were obviously not long for this world and ship them off back to their villages where they could die out of sight. All these cane-cutters were debt-slaves. It should be stressed that the estate was not specially singled out for this investigation, but was chosen at random, largely because it was easily reached from the main road. It was almost certainly no better nor any worse than the rest.

The current fight championed by the Church on such estates is for the elimination of the contractor and the abolition of a system by which 20 per cent of wages are withheld until the end of the harvest to prevent desertion. Even when, despite this precaution, workers do cut and run, they may be brought back by the police as absconding debtors. Little objection is seen from above to controlling labour by brute force: a mentality inherited from the days before 1962, when estates were bought and sold with their workers.

In 1972, at the time of the cotton boom and the trebling of cotton prices on the world market, workers were forcibly prevented from leaving the cotton fields, and troops sent to the Altiplano to recruit labour, while in Santa Cruz schools were closed so that the children might be free to help out.

The following news-clipping from EXCELSIOR, dated 23 June 1977, gives some idea of labour conditions that can still exist in odd corners.

SLAVE CAMP DENOUNCED IN BOLIVIA: La Paz, 22nd June. The unusual case of a slave camp's existence was denounced here today. The denunciation was received in the labour office of the town of Oruro against the owners of the Sacacasa estate alleging this to be a slave camp. Apart from harsh treatment received by both adults and children, they are forced to work from 6 am to 6 pm for a daily wage of 10 pesos (25p). The slaves are threatened with firearms and brutal floggings to compel them to submit to this exploitation.

* * *

The migrant workers I have described are classified as Indians integrated into the national society. They have, in

some cases, been in painful contact with white people for several centuries. They dress as whites, are nominally Catholics, and often no longer speak an Indian language. The Chiriguano cane-cutters were descendants of those who survived the wholesale exterminations of the great rubber boom of the 19th century, when Indians who were dragged from their villages to become rubber tappers had no more than a two-year expectation of life, and could expect punishment which might include the amputation of a limb for failure to produce the expected quota of rubber.

There exists a class of even cheaper and more defenceless labour. These are "non-integrated" Indians, who have only recently been driven or enticed from the jungle. They are at the bottom of the pyramid of enslavement.

On 16 October 1977, two days before our arrival in Santa Cruz, PRESENCIA published an account of the kind of misadventure that can befall a forest Indian - in this case one of a band of refugees who escaped from a mission compound - who happens to follow a road and arrive at the end of it, dazzled, bewildered, and quite unable to make himself understood, in the streets of a boom city.

This Indian, an Ayoreo named Cañe, was washing his clothes in the River Piraf, a few yards from the Santa Cruz main railway station, when he heard screams coming from a parked car in which two men were attacking a girl. Cañe ran to the girl's aid, and the two men drove off, but soon returned with a police car. In this, after a thorough beating, Cañe was taken to the police station, where, being unable to give any account of himself in Spanish, and in the absence of an interpreter, one of the policemen simply drew his gun and shot him through the head. The bullet entered the right side of the head, low down, behind the ear, and exited, astonishingly, without damage to the brain.

What is unusual about this story, besides Cañe's miraculous escape that got him into the newspapers, was that he was then taken to hospital. In Latin America it is unusual for

an ambulance ever to be sent for an Indian.

This happened on 9 October, and on 20 October, learning that Cañe and the rest of his fugitive groups were still to be seen on a piece of waste-ground outside the Brazil Station, we found an interpreter and went in a taxi to talk to him. The taxi-driver had some reason to know just where the Ayoreos were to be found, because he mentioned that the Ayoreo women had been driven by starvation to prostitute themselves for 5 pesos (13p) per visit. He himself had had intercourse with one of them several days before, copulation having taken place at dusk, in the open, by the side of the well-illuminated and busy road. He now awaited with anxiety the possible appearance of dread symptoms.

We found approximately 20 Ayoreos on waste land by the side of the new dual carriageway. Cañe was among them, and we examined the still raw wound in the back of his head. He told us that a number of ribs had been broken in the beating he had been given, and that an attempt had been made to break both his wrists, using a device kept at the police station for that purpose.

Cañe, a magnificently strong young man, had put up such resistance to this that the policeman had had to give up his efforts, and then in frustration had drawn his gun and shot him instead.

The Ayoreos are the proudest of the tribes of Bolivia, making a fetish of manly strength and courage, particularly as demonstrated in their hunting of the jaguar. To acquire status in the tribe and marry well, an Ayoreo must be prepared to tackle a jaguar at close quarters, in such a way that the maximum amount of scarring is left by the encounter on his limbs and his torso.

For these Ayoreos the days of hunting the jaguar in the Gran Chaco were at an end. They had gone through the mission, been deprived of their skills and been taught the power of money. As a last resort, since food had to be bought, they

sold their women. Cañe remembered being taken by a missionary as a boy from the Chaco. Since then he had slaved for farmers, being paid with an occasional cast-off garment or a little rice. In the end, he and his companions could stand the life no longer, and had just wandered away following the road through the jungle, and then a railway track until they reached Santa Cruz.

We learned that the mission from which the Ayoreos had decamped was a South American mission station in the jungle some 20 kilometres from the village of Pailón, and deciding to see for ourselves what were the conditions that could have caused this apparently hopeless, headlong flight into nowhere, we visited the mission on 22 October, in the company of three Germans, one of whom spoke Ayoreo.

The scene, when we arrived in the camp, was a depressing-ly familiar one: the swollen bellies, pulpy, inflated flesh, toothless gums and chronic sores of malnutrition, the slow, listless movements, the eyes emptied by apathy. Here, 275 Ayoreos, a substantial proportion of the survivors of the tribe, had been rounded up with their jaguar-scarred chief, who presented himself, grotesque in his dignity, wearing a motor-cycle crash-helmet. We inspected a deep cleft in his forehead where he had attempted to commit suicide, using an axe.

The only signs of food we saw was a bone completely covered by a black furry layer of putrefaction, being passed round to be gnawed, and a cooked tortoise being shared among a group. With our arrival a commotion began, led by some weeping women, and we soon learned the reason. Here in the tropics, at the height of the dry season, the water supply had been cut off by the missionary in punishment for some offence. The Indians, several of them ill, and with sick children in the camp, had been without water for two days.

We saw the missionary, Mr Depue, a lean shaven-headed man of somewhat austere presence, who confirmed that he had

ordered a collective punishment he believed most likely to be effective to deal with a case in which two or three children had broken into a store and stolen petrol. There was to be no more water until the culprits were found, and brought into his compound, there to be publicly thrashed.

The situation was a difficult one because, as Mr Depue explained, in all the years he had spent as a missionary, he had never heard of a single instance of an Indian punishing a child, which was to say that the conception of corrective chastisement seemed to be beyond their grasp. Mr Depue spoke of this aversion to punishment as of some genetic defect inherited by the whole race. It had now come to be a trial of strength, and he could only hope that the deadlock would soon be resolved. He took up an "it-hurts-me-as-much-as-it-hurts-them" attitude; assuring us that he had decided to share the general discomfort by ordering the water supply to the mission house to be cut off as well. It occurred to us that he might have prudently arranged for a reserve, because we happened to arrive when the missionary and his family were at lunch, and both water and soft drinks appeared to be in reasonable supply.

Mr Depue happened to have read the newspaper's account of Cañe's misfortunes, and remembered that he himself had "brought him in", during a pacification drive in the Chaco. Three or four youngsters, including Cañe, had become separated in the panic from their tribe. "I kept out of sight and sent Ayoreo-speaking Indians to offer them a better life, and to persuade them to come in, and they did."

* * *

It was by chance on our way back from this expedition that we saw our first "criada" - a Chiquitano Indian girl who had been "adopted" by a white family, and happened to serve us in her foster-parents' bar. The "criada" system is far from being exclusively Bolivian, and exists under different names in backward rural areas in most Latin American countries

where there are groups of depressed and exploited Indians.

In the hope that they will receive some education, and an economically brighter future, Indians give their children away to white families. The little Indian - usually a girl - becomes a Cinderella no prince will ever discover. She will be put to unpaid drudgery from the age of four or five, be traditionally available for the sexual needs of the sons of the family, and will not be able to marry, although she will be allowed to have children, who in their turn will become "criadas".

Our German friends knew this girl well, but having lived for some years in Bolivia, and become accustomed to its institutions, they were not horrified, as we were, that such barely disguised forms of slavery could exist.

A "criada", they informed us, could be lent or given away. They had no rights of any kind: rural untouchables of Latin America, whose existence went unnoticed. There was no saying how many there were in Bolivia, they said. In some parts of the eastern provinces almost every farm kept one.

* * *

Santa Cruz is a boom town, a little dizzy with quick profits, and displaying its wealth as best it can. It has a new Holiday Inn, full of American oilmen in baseball caps, and possesses no fewer than four ring-roads. Among its leading citizens are Germans, the most successful and affluent of the foreigners in Bolivia. There are about 300,000 of them, and it is said that President Banzer, who is a descendant of one of the older German families, came to power through a military coup financed by the German colony.

The powerful Dr Strauss, in control of immigration, comes of German forebears, and Teutonic surnames are scattered liberally through the lists of directors of the country's leading enterprises. Near Abapó Izozog, immediately adjoining the nominally empty area (save for a few thousand Indians) that Dr Strauss proposes to people with Rhodesians,

South-West African whites of German descent and refugees from South Africa, the Germans occupy a colony about the size of Holland. They have founded other vast colonies at Ascención de Guarayos in the centre of the country, and at Rurrenahaque, in the north, and have sunk fortunes into building roads and costly irrigation schemes.

A high percentage of German immigrants arriving since the war, we were told by our German contacts, had remained loyal to Nazi political philosophy, and recently neo-Nazi groups had also emerged. The Bolivian government appears indifferent to this phenomenon, and has pushed its neutrality to the lengths of resisting the extradition of at least one war criminal. Neo-Nazi journals imported from Germany, and such militaristic publications as Soldaten-Zeitung, find avid readers.

Our own brief experience of martial nostalgia was to be warned at the hotel of an impending dinner for some 300 Germans, to raise funds for the German school (the best in Eastern Bolivia). With some embarrassment it was hinted that many of the guests were ex. or actual, Nazis and that we might find some of their old wartime drinking songs offensive. We listened to the clamour but kept out of the way. Most extraordinary of all, to us, was to be assured that German Jews in Bolivia had sunk their differences with their old Aryan persecutors, and now fraternised at such gatherings, joining to chorus the "Horst Wessel" along with the rest; a case of cultural solidarity in an alien background overcoming even racial prejudice.

Our final conclusion was that Dr Strauss's justification for the plan to bring in whites from the South African countries - i.e. economic necessity - was not quite the whole story. Bolivia is potentially one of the richest of South American countries, since apart from other largely untapped timber resources in the east, aerial surveys have indicated that the Amazon Basin it shares with Brazil

contains one of the most valuable and diverse mineral profiles in the world. It is also among the weakest of these countries, with a population of five millions, many of whom are illiterate and subjugated Indians, contributing little to the country's muscle. With these human resources it must be ready to defend the thousand miles of frontier it also shares with Brazil, which has 110 millions, and is now on the verge of superpower status.

At the moment, Brazil is fully engaged in gobbling up its own resources, but it can be imagined that sooner or later it might turn its eyes westwards with renewed appetite and in a mood for expansion. Brazilian roads have either been built or resurfaced by Army engineers to take the heaviest tanks. One such road points to the heart of Bolivia through Corumbá, after which, crossing the frontier, it dwindles to dirt. Also, through foreclosures, Brazilian banks already own much land along Bolivia's eastern borders.

Almost imperceptibly, Bolivia has been a country bleeding to death. In a series of wars fought and lost over the past century it has seen its territory whittled away by victorious neighbours: first the nitrate-rich Atacama Desert and the port of Antofagasta to Chile; then the Acre Territory to Brazil; then three quarters of the Chaco to Paraguay. Always these losses have been the result of its failure to fill "empty" spaces occupied by the Indians, who do not count.

Seeing into the future with Dr Strauss's eyes one might be tempted to agree with him that, from his viewpoint, and that of the Bolivian government, the problem of filling this territorial vacuum is urgent. Strauss has to have his immigrants, and sooner or later he will probably get them, as the intransigence of the South African whites stokes up fuel for the fire tomorrow.

Together with the powerful German-Dutch minority already in place, these newcomers could transform Bolivia into a

strong, white-dominated, ultra-right, anti-Communist state in the heart of Latin America. This vigorous transformation would discourage the future covetousness of neighbouring states, and it would delight the United States by laying forever the ghost of Che Guevara - himself once attracted to empty spaces in Bolivia.

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