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Nancy
(a story not to be told)
Lima, 1980
by Georg Aeberhard



PUEBLO JOVEN 1o DE MAYO, Lima, Peru, 1980
Credit/photograph Jiri Havrda

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For this day, being much frustrated and disappointed, I put down in my report: "Unfortunately, the local Unicef-Archive offers just one suitable picture..." At that moment I did not know that this "just one suitable picture" will cause me a conflict of conscience, the greatest one during the whole time of my research in Lima in its "pueblos juvenes", the shanty towns on its outskirts. The question was: Can a story of one child, so far nameless, be representative - if identified - for the misery of all the children in these mostly illegal settlements?

The photograph, in black and white, showed a seemingly ageless indio woman standing in front of a rudimentary shack built of reed mats. She carried a baby in her arms and three small girls were holding tight onto her skirt. On the back of the photograph, the following text was attached: "... Mother shown nursing is Margarita Bora Urqui who owns title to the land and to this little hut she put up herself. Out of every ten deaths in these squatters settlements, seven are believed to be children under age six." There was also a brief note as in regard where and when the picture was taken - the search seemed to become almost too easy for us. So in no hurry, and after a few more days occupied by further visits to other archives, now mostly to those of the local newspapers, we took off for Lima's Cono Sur together with my assistant Maria in her red, fairly well battered VW. The new settlement in Pamplona carried the name PUEBLO JOVEN 1o DE MAYO, meaning A Young Village of May 1st (the workers' day). As anticipated, after having shown the photograph to a few people in the area, we soon found the hut. It carried the sign MZ.B.7., no name. The door was padlocked, no one inside. People were watching us from certain distance, but nobody approached us with any additional information. Yet, there was something in the air. Now I realized that after having looked at the photograph, the neighbors were raising their eyebrows as if we were to know something. Nonetheless, while leaving, we were told that the owner of the hut, senora Margarita Urquia Bora, will be home tomorrow during the day.

The following day, which was Saturday, we set off early in order not to miss Margarita Bora Urqui and her daughters. When we arrived in front of the hut, this time the door was open. We called the obligatory "Holla, senora?!" and a girl of not more than 3 years of age, ran out to meet us,

whooping with unpretentious joy of her age. Soon, her mother's voice resounded from within the reed mats: "Nancy, come back! Wait!".

Nancy stopped in front of us and looked up, greeting us at the same time very bravely, almost school-like: "Buenos dias, senores..."

"Buenos dias, chichita," Maria and I responded while her mother stepped out. She greeted us almost imperceptibly. In her words, the question about our visit was already in the air: "Senor, senora...?"

We have started to explain ourselves, probably overdoing it with smiling too much to make goodwill. In the end, Maria pulled out the photograph from her bag. Senora Urquia Bora caught just a glimpse of the picture and instantly her eyes hardened. Maria's eyes met hers and I knew that something was wrong. No one was speaking now, there was palpable hostile silence reigning. It was the little girl who broke up this spleen: "Senora, senor – hay plata, platita para me..." Nancy was begging for money in her innocent, gentle way while her mother rebuked her instantly.

"Sorry, senora – something is not right?" asked Maria. "You are this woman here, no?"

"Si..." answered the indio woman with a shrug as if to signal that something not yet spoken of is not her fault. We did not understand. Then, Maria looked at me asking my permission to talk to the woman alone, somewhere aside and I nodded in agreement. The two women went a few steps further off down the sandy path and started to converse intimately. Though not an indio herself, Maria was astonishingly successful in gaining confidence with the indio immigrants. A moment later, I saw Maria holding Margarita by the shoulders but I was not permitted to watch them: Pulling at my sleeve, little Nancy demanded my attention. Now she did not ask for any change but instead started to show me around. Proudly she pointed at the little area in front of the hut: a sandy place of maybe two by two feet, boarded with stones about half a foot high - to call it a garden might be greatly exaggerated; there were either flowers nor plants, only some dry sticks. The hut itself was not larger than seven by seven and directly next to it there was the outhouse with a sheet of rusty corrugated iron for a door. I paid my admiration to the garden as the eyes of the little girl desired. She seemed to trust me somehow and even started to call me "gringhito". Nancy kept showing me this and that, nodding her head in self-recognition. Since Maria and Margarita were still talking, Maria now also taking notes from time to time,

I asked Nancy if I could take a picture of her.

"Sí, sí, señor, sí!" she responded with pure joy.

I went down to my knees to get on to the level with her infant eyes. And it was her idea to return into the shack, only to run out immediately afterwards towards me as if dancing. I pressed the camera release.

"Mucho carina..." I admired her duly.

Nancy bowed in front of me as if being on a stage. At that moment, I spotted the two rather large superficial scars: one on her right leg, the other on her left arm. She must have been burnt gravely at some point in her short life. I looked towards Nancy's mother and Maria. They were looking at us now. I stood up though Nancy was now getting at my camera. I shook my head, had to disappoint her. No, this was no Polaroid, no instant wonder-work.

Maria came to me first, whispering she would tell me everything later on, we would better leave now and she added firmly: "You should leave some money with the senora".

"Yes, I would have done so at any case," I said while passing her discreetly the already prepared amount of Peruvian soles. The sum might be equal to a month worth earning, seen locally, yet for Europe or the US it would not be enough to cover a day of living. Here, these people were used to live only on a day to day basis.

Maria went quickly to Margarita who in the meantime was talking to a neighbor woman. I was surprised with what intensity and how long Maria embraced Margarita now. "Estas fuerte, sí," I caught Maria's last words after they separated. I approached them also and shook hands with Nancy's mother. She never raised her eyes up to mine, her hand felt dry, as if bloodless.

"Muchas gracias, señor gringo. Muchas gracias," she said.

"De nada, senora," I told her. "Hasta luego."

"Gringhito, gringhito!" Nancy came running, whooping "para te, para te!" She gave me one of those sticks from her garden.



Nancy, born 3.3.1977 (December 1981)

Credit/photograph Jiri Havrda

Back in the car, Maria hit several times the steering wheel with both hands. I better did not urge her to start to tell me the story. The indio settlers were approaching us, started peering inside the VW. You never knew what they might be up to: a gringo, or even just a white person from Lima itself, might raise a wave of primary hatred; there is a complete field of study as in regard to the racial and subsequently social status of the Peruvian indios who change from an "indigeno" to a "cholo" to a "Limeno" resp. gringo - just the name gringo runs through different meanings, depending on circumstances - most of them hostile, though; the process of this change lasts several generations.

In the meantime, Maria also became aware of the people staring at us and she started the car finally. We took off speechless. Once we reached the asphalted road, Maria speeded ahead, back to Lima.

"Shall we take a cup of coffee some place?" she asked when we have reached the Americana. "I think, I will be able to tell you the story then. I have taken notes."

"Sure, stop wherever you think might be OK, Maria," I encouraged her.

We found a bar finally, enough aside from the beach as well as from the road traffic and after we ordered coffee and a beer, Maria started to talk: "I do not think you might use this story for your film... But here it is," sighed Maria, shaking her head. "From those four girls on the photograph, only Nancy is left. She is the only one who survived the fire that broke out while her mother was working - can you imagine?! You got to know, it happened only ten months ago..."

"I noticed the scars on Nancy's legs and arms. I thought, something terrible must have happened there."

Maria pulled the photograph out her bag and still shaking her head started to explain: "This has to be Nancy, at that time... Her oldest sister brought her out of the hut after the fire broke out. And when she returned to get the two other girls, the roof crashed over her and buried them all underneath. Probably, the girls played with matches. Her mother was not at home. She was working, selling ice cream in front of a cinema like every evening. It happened at half past eight... You know how old was the oldest one who saved Nancy? Not yet seven years old. The other two kids were only five and one year old..."

Maria had to stop but she kept to stare at the picture on the table. Then we had to move it away because the waiter brought us the coffee and the beer.

We started to drink, speechless for quite a while. We lit our cigarettes almost at the same time, drew in the smoke very deeply. After a while Maria was able to continue: "Well, it is so typical... Mother alone with her kids... She is now 33 years old, left with only Nancy. She herself, she came to Lima when she was 12 years old; she comes from Pucallpa, the jungle area..."



Before 1980 (1979)

Credit/photograph by J.M. Spiegelmann

Maria sipped some more coffee, once again shook her head and picked up the line again, from time to time looking at her notes for help. I watched her, waiting for more to come.

"12 years old, Margarita was brought to Lima to so called "step-parents" but actually she worked for those people as a servant with no pay - that's common here, you got to know," stressed Maria. "And she worked for them until she was 26. Then she had her first child and her husband, - Vasques is the family name -, talked about having their own land, some animals, etcetera... But no sooner than her second child was born, her husband died in a traffic accident. Having found herself in this situation, she must have joined the immigrants, trying to profit from the policy of the leftist government which allocated land to the immigrant campesinos at that time."

I had to shake my head, waiting to hear what would come next.

"Then she married - or just lived with, I don't know - anyway, this other man, certain Flores, gave his name to Nancy and to the baby. But this "companion" Flores did not live with them and one day Margarita found him in his place with another woman, drunk. Since then, she has no more contact with this Flores..."



Children's cemetery in Lima, Pamplona

Credit/photograph Jiri Havrda

In the end we have shot a film with a girl by the name of Vilma from yet another settlement of Lima called Villa El Salvador, also a story of immigration and misery but with no tragic children's deaths in her family. But Nancy stays on my mind. Her story was not meant to be told but this "just one suitable picture" which was at the beginning of the project - for me - it is representative: The photograph of Nancy running out of the shack whooping with pure joy, hangs on the wall of our home.

Klokočná, March 2008