

# The Hidden Torture Cells of Bolivia

## REPORTAGE

BY ROBERT P. BAIRD



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**THEY WERE** about to let him go. After ten days of torture in a circuit of secret prisons, they were about to let him go. The first night they had taken him to the basement of the Interior Ministry and had beaten him with boards and rifle butts until he couldn't see, until he could no longer remember what they wanted or why he was there. The second night they had locked him in a cell on the third floor with a tiny window that looked down on the roof of the United Nations building next door. They had jammed needles under his fingernails and shocked his teeth and testicles with a cattle prod. The third night they had taken him to the Department of Political Order and beat him some more, as they would each successive night. Editing was his crime: the ministry's civilian agents had discovered his handwritten corrections in the margins of a subversive typescript. But ten days of what you might call enhanced interrogation techniques had satisfied the agents that Marcos Farfán was a naive student, a small fish, someone they could safely toss back. After all, they must have figured, how much could he really know? He was only sixteen.

On April 14, 1972, the thugs of Hugo Banzer Suárez, Bolivia's right-wing dictator, were about to let Marcos go, but then Damy Cuentas started talking. Cuentas was another small fish, another teenager. He too had spent his first night in the basement of the Interior Ministry, and he too had gotten the board-and-butt treatment. By the time the agents brought him up to the three-by-six-foot cell on the third floor, he was ready to promise anything to make the torture stop.

The agents took Cuentas up on the offer: the next day they cycled him through the city's prisons and told him to identify anyone he could. At the Department of Political Order, he spotted Marcos and said, "That's the guy who prints the newspaper." The revelation did not bode well. The newspaper was *Inti*, a broadsheet affiliated with the National Liberation Army (ELN), and the ELN was a revolution-minded organization founded by Che Guevara that held pride of place atop Banzer's enemies list.

On learning of Marcos's involvement with the ELN, three bloodthirsty paramilitaries from Santa Cruz took Marcos back to the ministry's basement. There he gasped to see his mother tied to a chair. The paramilitaries, known to everyone as the Eastern Trio, bound Marcos in an adjoining cell, out of sight but not out of earshot of his mother. The beatings commenced, with the Trio taking care to alternate so that each of their victims could hear the other scream. Hours later they untied Marcos and brought him back to see his bruised, bloodied, and now naked mother. While one of the Trio forced Marcos to watch, the other two beat his mother's breasts with a blackjack and shocked her nipples with a cattle prod.

Before that moment, Marcos had considered talking. He didn't know much, and most of what he did know Cuentas had probably already spilled. But when Marcos saw the Trio torture his mother, when he saw how they'd blackened and deformed her face, a strange sort of resolve took over. Call it a minor rebellion. In that moment death seemed the only possible outcome of all this pain, and Marcos decided that his last words were not going to be a recital of the few scant secrets he possessed.

Thirty-five years later, in 2007, Marcos returned to the basement of the ministry. Much had changed since his arrest. His mother and Banzer had died natural deaths. Bolivia claimed an openly socialist president in Evo Morales and was preparing to celebrate its twenty-fifth year of continuous democracy. What's more, Marcos was a deputy minister in the very agency—now called the Government Ministry—that had, half a lifetime before, tortured him nearly to death.

Marcos visited the ministry's basement not long after claiming the keys to his office. He didn't know what he'd find, but he knew not to expect much. Banzer had

spent the four years of his democratic term as president (1997–2001) doing what he could to hide the crimes of his seven years as dictator (1971–1978). Still, Marcos had to see. When he descended the stairs he found a basement utterly indistinguishable from government basements the world over. There were white walls, there were filing cabinets, there were fluorescent lights. There was no sign of the torture cells.

“THIS IS A part of Bolivian history that isn’t told very often,” Marcos says when we meet at a café in central La Paz in spring 2010. In pictures from his time in office, he has a thick, neatly trimmed moustache under wire-rimmed glasses and clean, round cheeks. Now, a few weeks after being nudged from the ministry as part of Evo’s postreelection housecleaning, a salt-and-pepper beard has filled in his face, the universal sign of the newly unemployed. (Later in the year, Marcos will return to his old position after a scandal claims his successor.) He wears a green nylon jacket over a pale blue button-up, and we sit upstairs so he can smoke gold-ringed cigarettes in a black plastic holder. From our table we look out over the statue-topped roundabout that punctuates the Prado like the point of an exclamation mark.

Marcos tells me he had an early start in politics. His father, a lawyer, and his mother, the daughter of Palestinian immigrants, met, fell in love, and married while working to establish the Bolivian Communist Party (PCB) in the early 1950s. During the first years of the party they hosted central committee meetings in their living room. Marcos was born in La Paz in 1955, just three years after the National Revolutionary Movement (MNR), a vaguely leftist coalition with broad middle-class support, chased the traditional oligarchies from power. One of his clearest boyhood memories is the image of newly enfranchised miners and farmers marching down the streets of his neighborhood with rifles on their shoulders and “Viva la revolución!” on their lips. Though his parents, as Communists, were officially proscribed by the more moderate MNR, Marcos recalls that “as a boy of five or six, it really influenced me to see a people who’d been under assault fighting back like that.”

The PCB split into pro-Soviet and pro-Chinese parties after a right-wing military coup in 1964, and Marcos’s mother joined a group of Communist intellectuals who felt alienated from both factions. Chafing against the restraint advocated by the orthodox parties, the dissenters argued that armed struggle was the only way to rebuff the rightists who had seized power. They could little guess that the world’s most famous revolutionary was on his way to test the same idea.

Che Guevara arrived in Bolivia in late 1966 on the heels of a miserable expedition in the Congo. He still nursed a dream to launch a guerrilla war in his native

Argentina, but a stillborn uprising he'd plotted two years earlier had convinced him that conditions there were not yet ripe. What was needed was a central staging ground for revolutions across the continent. "Bolivia," he declared, "must be sacrificed so that the revolutions in the neighboring countries may begin."

Che entered the country on the passport of a bald Uruguayan businessman; to disguise himself he'd plucked each hair from his head with tweezers. After two nights in a La Paz hotel, he and his Cuban *guerrilleros* met their Bolivian comrades in the southeast of the country. They began training operations at the tin-roofed house near Ñancahuazu that would serve as their base camp. The insurrection got off to an impromptu start when a Bolivian army unit strayed too close. Two nights later, in the midst of celebrations around the campfire, Che christened the group the Ejército de Liberación Nacional de Bolivia.

Seven months later the exhibition of Che's corpse at a laundry in Vallegrande confirmed the dismal fate of the ELN's first and best chance at a continent-rousing insurgency. All the *guerrilleros* were dead or captured, except for five who slipped a cordon established by a battalion of US-trained Bolivian Army Rangers. With the belated assistance of the PCB, which had earlier refused to help Che, the three Cuban members of that contingent eventually made an overland escape to Chile. The two Bolivians, Guido "Inti" Peredo—namesake of Marcos's newspaper—and David "Darío" Adriazola, stayed behind to salvage whatever they could of their tattered, but now world-famous, revolutionary organization.

It was during this time—the spring and summer of 1968, when even the United States was flush with revolutionary fever—that Marcos's parents offered their La Paz apartment as a safe house for the two endangered ELNs. Inti came first and stayed for three days. Darío followed and stayed for three months. The apartment was small enough that Marcos's younger brother had to sleep with his parents to make room for the *guerrilleros*. Marcos recalls how deeply that time impressed him: "For three months, day and night, Darío and I shared a bedroom. He was in hiding and couldn't leave the apartment, and so he spent a lot of that time telling me what happened during the campaign, down to the smallest details. Of course, this had big effect on my ideological formation."

A year later, at the age of fourteen, Marcos joined a group that had taken up the banner of the ELN and dedicated themselves to continuing Che's guerrilla efforts. "At the time we were still very enthusiastic about the Cuban revolution," he says. "We still thought you could start [a revolution] with twelve people," as Che and Fidel Castro had done in Cuba.

But the new ELN fared even worse than its model. Inti and Darío were killed by police in separate incidents in 1969, leaving the group without any link to the discipline that Che had brought from Cuba. In September 1970 a group of eager but untrained ELN cadres, most of them college students, launched a guerrilla insurrection near Teoponte, a mining outpost north of La Paz. Marcos was scheduled to join the second wave of *guerrilleros*, but the defeat of the first wave was so disastrous—“a miasma of blood and wasted lives,” as one writer put it—that he never went.

“At root it was the wrong idea, to think you could start a guerrilla war in Bolivia with forty or forty-five people and take on a whole army,” Marcos says now. “We forgot the most important thing, which is that you have to work with the people . . . we thought armed struggle was the only path.” Carlos Soria, a historian and journalist who was active in Communist politics during the period, agrees: “It was stupidity, there’s no other word. . . . They didn’t realize that the fight wasn’t a military struggle, it was a political struggle.”

As Marcos reloads his *quellazaire* with another cigarette, I tell him that it’s difficult to imagine what it could have meant for a fifteen-year-old to play a part, however peripheral, in a guerrilla army. “During that time, if you were a kid my age, you either became a leftist *guerrillero*, or you got involved in drugs,” he says. “Those were the two options in my neighborhood, and a lot of the kids I knew went into drugs.” For all of his parents’ activism, he says, it was the allure of a certain vision of heroism, rather than any ideology or conviction, that led him to join the ELN: “There was a big dose of romanticism in it.” Later on, the convictions and ideology would follow, but even then, he says, the major attraction of the ELN was adventure. “We were a lot like all those kids in the States who looked up to Rambo.”

MARCOS’S ROMANTICISM MET reality at six in the morning on August 21, 1971, when he joined a group gathered at the city soccer stadium to pick through a cache of ancient Mauser rifles and rusting ammunition. It was the third day of a coordinated rebellion against the left-leaning dictatorship of General Juan José Torres, and reliable reports had it that rebel tanks and an eight-hundred-man Ranger division—the same that had captured Che—were bearing down on La Paz. Left-wing leaders put out a call for a civil defense of the capital and begged Torres to open the military’s arsenals to their volunteers. The president, who by this time retained just a single loyal army regiment at his back, refused: “If I give you arms, you will no longer need me!”

Marcos and other volunteers joined the loyalist soldiers who were trying to retake the Estado Mayor, Bolivia’s version of the Pentagon. All day the soldiers and

civilians fought side by side, and by evening they were close enough to victory that the complex had opened its gates to surrender. Just before 9:00 p.m., however, word spread that a unit of armored cavalry had evicted Torres from the Government Palace. The gates of the Estado Mayor closed before the loyalists could get inside. Six of the eight tanks that had conquered the palace soon arrived to defend the besieged military complex, and their .50-caliber machine guns instantly turned the battle.

When night fell Marcos and his friend Hipposito—“Hippie”—found themselves pinched between the oncoming tanks and the Estado Mayor. Bullets crisscrossed overhead, and before long Marcos was knocked to the ground. He felt a burning in his calf and watched it bleed. Hippie and some others lifted him out of the crossfire, bandaged his leg, and carried him through side streets toward the university’s school of medicine. When the pain got the better of him, they found a low wall where he could sit and rest. The others returned to the fight. Hippie stayed with Marcos.

The teenagers knew that to be caught in the open at daybreak meant nothing good, so they started moving as soon as the pain in Marcos’s calf abated. The medical school, though just a few blocks away, was too far for limping, but the priests at a nearby church agreed to take him in. “They removed the bullet,” Marcos says, showing me the finger-length scar on his calf. “I don’t know if it was a doctor or a priest, but somebody at the church removed the bullet.”

Colonel Hugo Banzer Suárez claimed the presidency the next day. Though he’d been in jail at the start of the coup, he now stood at the head of a strange new alliance that joined the MNR with the fascist Bolivian Socialist Phalanx (FSB), its traditional archenemy, as well as with the military. The slight colonel, nicknamed Shorty by his peers, climbed a podium in a brown suit, red tie, and desert boots. He wore his hair combed forward to hide an incipient bald spot. Standing in front of the Government Palace he announced in deep tones his intention “to save Bolivia from anarchy, territorial dissolution, and Communism.”

When a journalist asked Banzer how he could justify the casualties of the coup—nearly a thousand when all was said and done—the urbane colonel took the occasion to misquote *Don Quixote*: “Liberty is worth the loss of life.” Exactly what Banzer meant by this was yet to be seen, but a hint could be found in an incident from the final days of the coup: when a remnant of the pro-Torres resistance holed up in the university’s central tower to make a last stand with their WW II–vintage rifles, Banzer ordered an air force P-51 to strafe the tower, killing five students and wounding twenty-five.

Banzer consolidated power quickly. Immediately after the coup he closed down the universities in La Paz, Santa Cruz, and Trinidad to stamp out any remaining

student agitation. He jailed hundreds of political prisoners, including many of the politicians who had served under Torres. In November he instituted the death penalty for assassination, parricide, and “terrorism in any of its forms.” The same month, his interior minister declared that Torres had secretly been the leader of the ELN dating back to the days of Che, and that Torres’s predecessor was the group’s mastermind. (Never mind that the ELN’s disastrous antigovernment campaign at Teoponte had spanned the presidencies of both men.) Official warnings of “vast terrorist plots,” nearly all of them attributed to the ELN, became as regular as the repressive security measures that inevitably followed.

If the ferocity of Banzer’s rebellion surprised many, the coup itself did not. June Nash, an American anthropologist doing fieldwork in the country at the time, told me that Torres’s overthrow “was long awaited; it was expected.” During his nine months in office, the general had kicked the Peace Corps out of the country, established a popular assembly, and signed aid agreements with the Soviet bloc worth more than what the United States had supplied in the previous twelve years. Though Bolivia’s central location on the continent gave Torres’s overtures to the Soviet Union a whiff of geopolitical significance, they mostly just annoyed the Americans. A cable from US Ambassador Ernest Siracusa argued for the “real possibility” that Bolivia could become “another Communist foothold in Latin America and at a very cheap price,” but he also admitted that “while there is much that we do not like about . . . the Bolivian version of ‘Leftist-revolutionary-nationalism’ . . . we do not believe that this political posture by Bolivia . . . represents a clear and present danger to the United States.” “The temptation is great,” Siracusa added, “in the face of the basic unimportance of Bolivia and the insults and ingratitude we have suffered here to say ‘to hell with you’ and simply pick up stakes and depart.”

Of course, American policymakers knew more than one way to say “to hell with you,” and so it was not surprising that rumors of US involvement in Banzer’s coup began almost as soon as the fighting did. The colonel’s American ties were deep and well-known: he had trained at the Armored Cavalry School in Texas and the School of the Americas in Panama, and he’d acquired political connections and English fluency during a stint as military attaché in Washington. What’s more, the CIA’s public role in the suppression of Che’s insurrection had generated permanent (and, as it happens, well-founded) suspicions about clandestine American activity in the country. That tinder found its spark in a *Washington Post* report that a US Air Force major had conferred with the plotters and lent them his long-range radio at a crucial moment during the three-day coup. The State Department denied the report immediately and said that the United States had played no part in the rebellion.

No further evidence of the major's involvement has come to light, but recently declassified documents attest that the Nixon administration approved nearly half a million dollars for Torres's opponents in full knowledge that it would be used to pay for the coup. In June 1971, after the American embassy in La Paz had alerted Washington to the possibility that Torres would expel American military units stationed there, Henry Kissinger told Richard Nixon, "We are having a major problem in Bolivia."

"I got that," Nixon replied. "What do you want to do about that?"

"I've told [CIA Deputy Director of Plans Thomas] Karamessines to crank up an operation, posthaste. Even [Siracusa], who's been a softy, is now saying that we must start playing with the military there or the thing is going to go down the drain."

"What does Karamessines think we need?" the president asked. "A coup?"

At Kissinger's request, the CIA prepared to supply the MNR-military opposition with \$410,000 for organization and propaganda. "The purpose of this program," the CIA explained, "would be to create a viable opposition capable of exerting pressure against President Juan José Torres's drift to the left." When Siracusa saw the proposal, however, he recognized immediately that "\$410,000 is coup money." At a meeting of the oversight committee tasked to consider the proposal, a State Department official had the same thought. "What we are actually organizing is a coup in itself, isn't it?" he said.

On the morning of August 19, a few hours before the rebellion began in Santa Cruz, a National Security Council staff member wrote a memo to Kissinger that began, "With the probability that a coup attempt is about to get under way in Bolivia, I think you should be aware of a recent development which may create problems for us." The memo warned that CIA operatives in La Paz had recently handed over a still-classified quantity of cash to the coup plotters in order to "cement relations" with the United States. This support was consistent with the decision of the oversight committee, but the direct transfer was a tradecraft blunder: both the State Department and the CIA worried that the plotters "would now be in a position to claim US support." (Those worries must have seemed quaint once the coup succeeded, since Banzer would receive grant and aid packages from the United States worth more than \$50 million in his first five months in office.)

David Dewhurst, the current lieutenant governor of Texas, was a twenty-five-year-old CIA case officer in La Paz at the time of the coup. Citing confidentiality agreements, he generally refuses to talk about his time in the CIA, but in 2002 he told the *Texas Monthly* that his responsibilities involved "keep[ing] in touch with



certain groups and foreign embassies,” as well as “monitor[ing] certain terrorist and other foreign targets.” In 1998 he told the *Dallas Morning News* that he “never saw any evidence of US government involvement” in the coup, a statement he repeated when I contacted him about the declassified documents. “We knew [the coup] was coming,” he told the *News*. “The whole city knew it was coming. When it came, we closed the doors and kept a low profile.” Siracusa, the ambassador who had long and loudly complained about the Bolivians’ willingness to believe rumors of CIA meddling, was on a motorcycle vacation in Nova Scotia when Banzer’s coup began.

THE EVENING OF April 3, 1972, not twenty-four hours before Nixon approved \$20 million in additional support for the Banzer regime, Marcos stopped by his mother’s house to visit. (His parents had divorced a few years earlier.) The government’s stringent campaign against the ELN had forced him underground, though his youth allowed him a certain amount of freedom to move about La Paz. Most days he spent in safe houses run by the ELN and their associates. He and his friends whiled their time exercising, trading gossip, and arguing about Mao Tse-tung and the dialectic. Nights he slept on the floor of a bookstore after the shopkeeper locked up.

As they ate dinner, a radio newsbreak announced that Loyola Guzmán, a friend of Marcos’s mother and one of the original members of the ELN, had been arrested earlier in the day. (Che had personally deputized her to organize an urban support network for his *guerrilleros*, and she’d once tried to escape an interrogation by leaping from the third floor of the Interior Ministry.) Guzmán’s arrest was not entirely surprising: even though she was only peripherally involved in the organization at the time, Banzer had already declared a domestic war on anyone affiliated with the “terrorists” of the ELN. Still, the news was disturbing, and by the time they finished talking it through it was too late and too dangerous for Marcos to head back to the bookstore.

They say trouble comes in threes, and the truism certainly held for Marcos: At three in the morning, the Eastern Trio and other government agents arrived at the house in a convoy of three unmarked cars. Over the howling complaints of his mother, the agents dragged Marcos from the house and carried him off to the basement of the Interior Ministry. In the confusion and fear of those first hours, he could hardly be sure of anything. He guessed, though, that the agents had somehow discovered his work on *Inti*, which he and several other young ELNers printed on a clandestine printing press twenty miles outside La Paz. He was wrong.

An hour before the Eastern Trio crossed the threshold of Marcos’s mother’s house, agents in their convoy had arrested Delfina Burgoa, a professor in her late

sixties, on accusations of having hosted ELNos in her house. Well-known in leftist circles, Burgoa was for many years associated with the Bolivian Commission on Human Rights. She was the wife of a famous Indianist, and in March 1967, near the start of the ELN offensive, her son had delivered a suitcase full of medication to Che's *guerrilleros* at Ñancahuazu.

Among the papers the agents discovered in Burgoa's house was a corrected typescript of a book her son had recently published. When pressed, Burgoa admitted that some of the handwritten corrections on the typescript belonged to Marcos. She was taken to the ministry, where agents locked her in wooden stocks, broke three ribs, burned her skin with cigarettes, and hit her in the head until she fell unconscious. The chief of intelligence, who usually left the dirty work to his inferiors, took a special interest in her case and beat her with his own fists. She would not leave government custody alive.

Marcos says he hadn't much cared for the book but had been happy to do a favor for Burgoa, who'd asked him to help her son. It was this favor that had earned him the attention of the Eastern Trio. "I was so young," he says of that first arrest. "This was something new, terrifying, unimaginable—it was completely unknown. So many punches, so much beating. The effect is to stun you, so that you lose your sense of the objective. The point of the torture is to make you talk. They want you to give up your associates. But you lose your sense of things. You don't know if it's a dream, a nightmare, or the truth. I think this is where the psychological defense mechanisms come into play. You don't hear anything that's happening around you. You don't see anything. You don't even see blood—everything is shut down, it's as if you have a red scarf wrapped around your face. That night in the ministry with my mother was the worst. It's a sensation that you can't really recall, you know? Memory—or rather, forgetting—is something you use, something you need to avoid the moments that are most painful in your life. There are parts of it that are just white to me. . . . But you remember moments of it, snapshots."

The brutality that Marcos and Burgoa suffered at the hands of the Bolivian government was, by that time, routine. Interrogations were directed by military officers and carried out by civilians who had learned their trade from the prosecutors of Argentina's "dirty war." Beating—with fists, belts, hoses, planks, and rifle butts—remained the preferred form of torture, but government agents seemed to take a special pleasure in forcing needles under fingernails and applying electrical shocks to sensitive skin. Other times they flooded a curbed cell in the ministry basement and charged it with a live wire.

Physical torture was only the start: “They made permanent psychological war against you,” Marcos says. “Every night they’d come, bang on your door at three in the morning, and say, ‘Get your things ready.’ And so you got your blanket and your clothes, and you spent a sleepless night waiting for them to take you to another part of the prison, or another prison altogether, but they never came. Or maybe they did. But you never knew, you never knew if they were going to take you to another torture place or if they were going to take you to another prison just to move you around.” Prisoners were held incommunicado and subjected to mock executions. It was not rare for them to discover that their parents, siblings, and children had been arrested and abused on their account.

A woman accused of ELN affiliation told a Peruvian newspaper that after she’d been beaten so badly she could hardly respond, three of the ministry’s civilian agents raped her. “But my case wasn’t the worst,” she told the paper. She knew a pregnant woman who’d miscarried after a series of beatings. Another woman said that “the light of day was the only rest” for the female prisoners at Achocalla, “because when night came, we had to be ready for a new torment—whoever wanted could take his turn. Rape was one of their favorite activities.”

In November 1972, Banzer announced—yet again—the existence of an “open conspiracy to overthrow the government” and declared a national state of siege. The proclamation made official what had already been true in fact: citizens and foreigners accused of terrorist activities could be detained indefinitely. (Habeas corpus had been ignored since the coup.) Widely accepted estimates would later put the total number of political prisoners at fifteen thousand, while another nineteen thousand were chased into foreign exile. The cells under the Interior Ministry and the prison at Achocalla were just two nodes of a countrywide network of detention facilities and security houses operated by the government. Others included a concentration camp in the jungle near Madidi, converted colonial-era catacombs in La Paz, and an island prison in the middle of Lake Titicaca. (The latter was shut down after an extraordinary jailbreak that began during a soccer game between prisoners and guards.)

Torture, rape, and indefinite detention were not the worst of it, of course. More than two hundred political prisoners were killed by the government during the seven years of Banzer’s rule, including Loyola Guzmán’s husband and Delfina Burgoa. Still more were murdered by death squads affiliated with the FSB, who took it as their mission to make good on Banzer’s promise to kill twenty left-wing “anarchists” for every right-wing nationalist who died. The interior minister praised the

squads as “part of a praiseworthy patriotic initiative of citizens’ groups, supported by the government.”

The case of José Carlos Trujillo typified the lot of many ELNos. For three months Carlos was held at a prison in Santa Cruz, where his mother was allowed to see him for five minutes each week. One day in February 1972 she arrived with a member of the Red Cross and was told, cryptically, that her son’s problem had been “solved.” A few days later, a telegram from the Ministry of the Interior declared, “Your son has been set free,” and described how he had been taken in a jeep and released on the Santa Cruz–Cochabamba highway. Later, Carlos’s mother would learn that her son had indeed been picked up at the Santa Cruz jail. A witness present at the event said that Carlos guessed his fate when told that their destination was the country house of Banzer’s cousins. He pleaded for a chance to flee, and so his captors, laughing, pulled over eight miles out of Santa Cruz, gave him and another prisoner unloaded pistols, and told them to run. The agents peppered their prisoners’ backs with bullets before either could take four steps. The corpses were loaded back in the jeep, and, as the plan had likely been all along, they were buried at the Banzer estate.

ON THE GROUNDS of his La Paz residence, Banzer kept a menagerie of exotic animals that included a giant tortoise. Every morning, according to someone who worked in the household, the dictator would sit atop the carapace, sip his coffee, and read the day’s newspapers while the tortoise hunkered below. Banzer’s handling of Bolivia was not dissimilar. His government’s repression all but eliminated the traditional left: labor leaders were exiled, union elections were rigged, and for a long time the universities were simply shut down. More than a quarter of Bolivia’s working journalists were exiled during the seven years of the dictator’s rule; most of the rest parroted the official line.

Banzer proved especially adept at exploiting his enemies for his own purposes, and he put the doctrine of national security—which he’d learned at the School of the Americas—to hyperactive use. Soria, the journalist, argued that the Teoponte incarnation of the ELN erred in providing a useful pretext for Banzer’s repression. But he also insisted, like others I spoke to, that the regime was not averse to manufacturing crises when necessary.

Eventually the US government recognized that Banzer’s regular invocation of terrorism was a sham. In fall 1973 the dictator announced that a wave of arrests was designed to thwart “a vast conspiracy against the nation itself.” But the US embassy

in La Paz reported to Washington a “more credible” reason for the arrests: “the [government] is about to announce a series of economic measures to improve the fiscal situation; and because these measures will have an immediate impact on the cost of living without a commensurate increase in wages, it was anticipated that the labor sector would react negatively. Therefore, to head off the possibility of widespread strikes and other labor agitation, the [government] moved to pick up labor leaders throughout the country.”

What was life like for nonleftists under Banzer? It depends on whom you asked. Five months after the colonel’s coup, Siracusa told his superiors, “Memories of a year ago are like a bad dream. It may be our imagination, but it appears to us that the man in the street walks with his head higher and without fear. Christmas shopping was brisk, and La Paz enjoyed a holiday spirit.” Frances Grant, the head of the Inter-American Association for Democracy and Freedom, reported that by July 1972, “Banzer had gained an extraordinary degree of popular response following the chaos and national dismemberment which had reached a perilous limit under Torres.”

Marvine Howe, a *New York Times* correspondent, had a different view. Reporting from Bolivia in December 1973, she allowed that political pressure from international organizations had somewhat tempered the government’s initial enthusiasm for torture. But she also said that “virtually all the fundamental laws protecting human rights are regularly violated. . . . The repression reach[es] not only political militants, but also their families and friends.” What she saw in Banzer’s Bolivia, Howe wrote to me recently, reminded her of the African anticolonial struggles that she’d previously reported on. “The general atmosphere in Bolivia was like that of a people in resistance against a foreign colonial power . . . only less forthright,” she said. “It was a mood of widespread distrust and discontent with the injustices of everyday life, with the educated activists known as leftists versus the military-civilian power elite, who were discreetly backed by the foreign power, this time the US. The majority of the population passively accepted authoritarian rule until a son or daughter or relative rebelled and was jailed or until they took to the *maquis*, i.e., joined the National Liberation Army. At that time there was a kind of Robin Hood aura around militants of the ELN.”

The only open resistance to the regime came from the religious left, which included Methodists and a small but determined segment of the Catholic Church. Inspired by liberation theology and the spirit of Vatican II, this latter group consisted mostly of foreign-born priests, brothers, and nuns but also of a few high-profile Bolivian clergy. Under the leadership of the archbishop of La Paz, they

organized around the Commission for Peace and Justice, a papally mandated organization whose regular protests against Banzer's repression made it the target of one of the most notorious legacies of the period.

The so-called Banzer plan was a ruthless strategy to deal with dissident clergy, and right-wing security services across Latin America clambered to copy it. Banzer considered himself a pillar of orthodox piety, and he retained significant support among Bolivia's Catholics. His plan to deal with Church resistance therefore recommended that propaganda efforts "should not attack the Church as an institution"; rather, they should accuse the associates of the Commission of complicity with the outlawed ELN. The plan noted that the CIA had agreed to turn over information on American priests in Bolivia, including their personal documentation, addresses, friendships, and contacts abroad. Most chilling, it recommended that priests should not be arrested at their houses—"since this generates a lot of publicity"—but should be arrested "preferably in the countryside, in quiet streets, or late at night." Agents were encouraged to use subcontracted taxis or unmarked radio-equipped VW Beetles for arrests. "As soon as the arrest of a priest has taken place," the plan instructed, "the ministry should try to insert in his briefcase, and if possible in his room, subversive propaganda and a weapon (preferably a high-caliber pistol)."

American neglect of the abuses in Bolivia became more difficult after a former nun from the United States named Mary Harding was arrested in November 1972. Harding had come to Bolivia as a Maryknoll sister, but after several years of teaching and factory work left her feeling desperate in the face of Bolivia's poverty, she quit the order and joined the ELN. A few months before her arrest she wrote to an American friend, "You can't imagine what it's like down here. . . . There's such fear everywhere—and there's reason for fear everywhere." After her arrest, Harding was taken to the Interior Ministry, where she was stripped, beaten, and forced to sign a confession. "I was kept in a little closet about two by three yards with nothing in it," she told the *Washington Post*. "I suffered a broken coccyx—that's the tailbone—and it was very hard to sit down. They handcuffed my right arm to my left leg so I had to sit down all the time." Pressure from several American senators, diplomats, and human rights groups secured Harding's release and deportation in January 1973. Shortly after she returned to the States, an op-ed in the *New York Times* declared that Bolivia had become "a terrifying place for those concerned with social justice and political freedom," and that Banzer's government was "in practice, a totalitarian, anti-Communist military dictatorship."

THE EASTERN TRIO kept Marcos at the ministry for a week with his mother before returning him to the Department of Political Order. “Each day the beatings got less intense,” he says, “because they almost certainly believed that I’d told them everything. The same was true of my mother. But—thank God—we didn’t know very much. The ELN had a military structure, with cells that were unknown to each other. There was a very strong degree of compartmentalization, so it was difficult for any one person to reveal too much.” By that point, however, “my mother was a rag doll. She was surely going to die.”

For once, however, Marcos and his mother found a bit of luck. During the 1970s, as several people took pains to remind me, the political parties of the left and right drew from the same small pool of white, educated, middle- and upper-class Bolivians. The sisters Marcela and Elena Ossia, both friends of Marcos’s mother, were a good example: Elena married an important Bolivian Communist, while Marcela married a high-ranking official in the Banzer regime. On hearing that her friend had been imprisoned, Marcela went to the interior minister and protested: “She’s a friend of mine. She may be a Communist, a Red, whatever you say, but she’s a friend of the family and you cannot kill her.” Marcela’s empathy impressed the minister. He allowed Marcos’s mother to be taken home and sentenced her to six months of house arrest. Several months later, acting in her capacity as head of the National Youth Council, Marcela secured Marcos’s release as well.

Marcos fled through Argentina to Chile, where he stayed a few months before moving on to Cuba. Two years later, he was back in a Bolivian prison. Though Castro’s government had offered him the choice to stay and complete his education, Marcos says he felt a responsibility to his country. He entered Bolivia illegally in March 1974 and joined the national directorate of the ELN and the Revolutionary Coordinating Junta (JCR), an umbrella group of South American organizations that announced, “There is no other viable strategy in Latin America than the strategy of revolutionary war.” Marcos says now, however, that his own ideas had already begun to change: “We no longer had our original dogmatic idea that mechanically repeated, ‘Armed struggle is the route to socialism.’ It was absurd, no? To create socialism is a huge effort. A lot of Latin American youth were guided by that dogma—‘a rifle and socialism’—but any kind of political change, democratic or otherwise, requires the participation of the people.”

In September 1974 Marcos was arrested with three other ELNers, including Inti’s youngest brother, Antonio Peredo. They were taken to the former women’s prison at Achocalla. “The fact that I’m alive now is something of a miracle,” he says. “That

second time I knew that they were going to kill me, because it had happened to so many of my friends. But then the Church appeared in the middle of everything and kept them from disappearing us—if not, [the government] certainly would have disappeared us.” When I ask Marcos how his second imprisonment differed from his first, he says, “The first time I was held for being a militant, for working on the newspaper, but when I came back I was in charge of Cochabamba. I was a member of the national directorate [of the ELN], and so they were much rougher on me that second time, you know?”

Marcos and the other ELNos were held incommunicado at Achocalla for more than three years, with occasional visits to the Department of Political Order in La Paz. Every day at four in the afternoon, a Willys jeep with the same four soldiers would arrive at the station for the day’s torture. “It was a very hard time. I would hear the rumble of the jeep and piss myself a little out of panic, because I knew they were coming to give it to me bad.” His captors eased his tortures only after they suspected that he was starting to go permanently insane. With his hands in handcuffs and his feet bound by a rope, he was forced to eat off the ground: “The guards were also hungry, so they’d eat our food and slip whatever was left under the door. You had to lick it up like a dog, because you didn’t have hands to eat with.” When federal agents from Argentina arrived to interrogate Marcos about his contacts in the JCR, they used a form of water torture called the “submarine.” “You’d be handcuffed, and they’d put your head in a barrel of water. When you started kicking, they’d take you out and ask you another question.”

SHORTLY AFTER EVO Morales was inaugurated in 2007, his new government minister announced plans to remodel the ministry building. The minister himself had suffered at the hands of the dictators, but when Marcos told his new boss about the events that had taken place in the basement three and a half decades earlier, the minister could hardly believe it. Marcos was almost certain that the cells had been destroyed or renovated, but he told the construction crew to look for evidence of earlier renovations. Before long one of the men tapped his hammer on the wall and discovered what sounded like an empty space beyond. With the minister’s permission, Marcos told the crew to punch a hole in the wall.

On the other side of the wall Marcos and the construction workers discovered a damp, dark hollow. Switching on their flashlights they found seven cells in the space of a thousand square feet. One tunnel connected the basement to a government building across the avenue; another exited to street level. The cells were built



of thick clay bricks, and the doors between them were jagged and scarred. Bare wood joists supported the ceiling, and iron pipes crawled around corners overhead. Three decades of debris, including bullets, dynamite, political documents, and bone fragments, covered the floors.

After forensic experts collected and catalogued the organic remains, the ministry invited the president and a small contingent of reporters to tour the cells. Evo wore the nearest approximation of a traditional suit that he will tolerate: black slacks, white shirt, no tie, and a mandarin-collared jacket embroidered with pre-Hispanic motifs. While the media and construction workers looked on, the government minister led the president through what the Bolivian media would soon christen “the catacombs of horror.”

After the tour, the politicians held a press conference. “This is the cemetery of those who fought for their homeland, of those who fought for their people,” Evo declared. “When they told me that documents and bones were found in this excavation, I was surprised. . . . We have to investigate them. If it’s proven that there are human bones, then the thugs of the dictatorships will have to pay.” Evo didn’t limit his criticism to the dictators, blaming the “neoliberal governments” of the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s for hiding the evidence: “They knew about the existence [of the cells]. They were also complicit [because] they participated in the coups.” He also took a swipe at his present-day political opponents: “Almost all of the parties of the right participated in coups d’etat. If [my] government had not come along, this would never have been uncovered and no one would have investigated it.”

This may be true, but more than a year after the discovery of the cells, the investigations launched by Evo’s government have produced few results. Ana Urquieta, until her death in June 2010 the director of ASOFAMD, an advocacy group that is a partner in the excavations, told me that Argentine forensic experts have so far found only animal remains among the bone fragments. What’s more, a reparations law passed in 2004, which set aside half a million dollars for victims of the dictatorships, has yet to pay out a peso. (The current government blames this on the strict standard of proof required by the law.)

Potentially the most important of the government’s initiatives was an effort by the country’s chief prosecutor to force the military to open its archives, believed by some to include a documentary record of the dictators’ crimes. The military has so far refused to allow access to the archives, despite a ruling by Bolivia’s Supreme Court and an order by Evo, who, as president, is also commander in chief of the armed services. Antonio Peredo, who is now a prominent senator in Evo’s MAS

party, told me that he's sure any incriminating documents were destroyed long ago and that the military is holding out simply to show that they can. "In a country with a military that has governed for so long, the military does what it wants." A MAS supporter who asked not to be named put it more bluntly: "Evo is scared of the military."

Peredo told me that when reporters were first shown the cells, "not a single one of them had any clue that something like this had happened in our country." Marcos concurs but says that in this the journalists are merely representative of the vast majority of the Bolivian public. "Nobody had any idea. For the public it was a surprise that Bolivia was a place where so much torture had happened." If they remember anything, he adds, it's the assassinations of Luis Espinal, a Jesuit and a journalist, and Marcelo Quiroga Santa Cruz, a writer and politician, which took place under the rule of the narcodictator Luis García Meza. But what happened during Banzer's regime is completely obscured. "The reality is that we're with another generation now," Marcos says. "Many people have forgotten, many people can't believe it, and there are people in the new generation who just don't know about it. People will talk about the military dictatorships, but they don't have any idea what the dictatorships did to political prisoners." As Soria put it, "A river of blood separates us from those years."

I asked Carlos Mesa, the center-right president of Bolivia from 2003 to 2005, who signed the reparations bill into law, why his country didn't have the same commitment to commemoration that you find, say, in Chile or Argentina. He said that while "it is certainly true that the dictatorship exercised terrible violence and cut short civil liberties, we didn't have an episode equivalent to what you saw under Pinochet or Videlas, or in the case of Uruguay." He cites the paradox that Bolivia was both one of the few Latin American countries to elect a former dictator to office in free elections (Banzer, in 1997) and the first Latin American country to convict a dictator for his crimes (García Meza, in 1993). "It's been thirty years since the last dictator. With the exception of Marcelo Quiroga Santa Cruz, and two or three others like him," Mesa says, "Bolivia has turned the page on the dictatorships."

We know how easy it is for even avowedly democratic governments to commit terrible crimes, and we can consider that what Marcos says of an individual mind might be true of a country as well: "Memory—or rather, forgetting—is something you use, something you need to avoid the moments that are most painful in your life." It seems fair to wonder, though, whether it is just to turn a page that few people have read.

I RECEIVED SEVERAL tentative approvals to visit the cells beneath the Government Ministry, but inevitably the commitments evaporated. The ministry's excuses changed like the weather: they were too busy with a transportation strike; the min-

ister would need time to consider the proposal; there would be no one to guide me. Finally, after Marcos called on my behalf, the ministry seemed to relent, but when I showed up for my appointment, an official in a gray suit and five uniformed policemen made it clear that a visit would be impossible.

So I decided to visit Achocalla, the former prison where Marcos, Antonio Peredo, and Delfina Burgoa had been held. Along with Chuck Sturtevant, a documentary filmmaker who'd been helping me during my stay in Bolivia, I brought two women who'd been held at Achocalla under Banzer: Loyola Guzmán, the former ELNa and recently a constitutional assemblywoman for MAS, and Lourdes Koya, another former ELNa who is today an architect and the director of an advocacy group for women imprisoned under the dictatorships.

Chuck and I met the women outside the Cine 16 de Julio, a two-screen movie theater on the Prado showing *Avatar* and what seems safe to presume will be Mel Gibson's last major motion picture. Koya came first, wearing large black sunglasses, gray wool pants, and a blue windbreaker. Guzmán arrived a few minutes later in a calf-length skirt, red fleece, and hoop earrings. She kept her long silver hair tied back in a bun.

It had been raining all week, but that morning the sun brightened thick cumulus clouds that hung low in the sky. Shoeshine boys protecting their middle-class dignity behind face masks worked the sidewalks, and city employees in zebra costumes stopped cars for pedestrians in the streets. Men in suits shared benches with momentarily hatless *cholitas* who were taking a break from their popcorn and fruit juice sales.

The history of the dictatorships may not be alive in the minds of most Bolivians, but if you know where to look, monuments to the period can be found everywhere. The Cine 16 de Julio is the theater where Luis Espinal saw a movie the night he was kidnapped, tortured, and killed. Across the street is the Hotel Copacabana, where Che Guevara hid out during his two days in La Paz. Our hired minivan carried us past the university tower that was strafed during Banzer's coup, and, a few minutes later, the impenetrable pink Government Ministry. Passing south out of the city we saw the ledge where Marcos took a bullet in the calf. Koya pointed out a small park where an oval stone counts as one of the country's few official memorials to the victims of the dictatorships.

From La Paz we drove down into the Valle de la Luna, a jagged landscape of banded hoodoos. We turned off the paved road where the El Alto plateau sharpens to a knife edge and buries itself at the junction of two valleys. Soon we were climbing a series of steep gravel switchbacks, which caused Koya to look out the window and shiver:

“I don’t like heights.” Before long we emerged into the Achocalla valley, a broad green fan, like a gingko leaf cut out of the plateau’s rim.

During the dictatorships only prisoners and guards lived in the valley, but now it is sufficiently populated to constitute a municipality. The houses are sparsely distributed, and most have pigs and chickens in their yards. We watched a woman lead a shaggy ewe and a pair of small children toward a lake at the center of town. A four-car convoy dragging green and white streamers through the thin air passed us in the other direction. A megaphone atop the lead car announced the streamers’ candidate for the upcoming elections.

I told the women about our troubles getting into the ministry, and they weren’t surprised. Koya echoed a point made by Carlos Mesa: “MAS thinks history began when *it* did.” Guzmán, who is considerably more quiet and careful in her opinions than Koya, said that Evo identifies with the coca growers, Indians, and even the military far more than he does with the leftists of her era. But Koya insisted that “this government more than any other has the obligation to make amends, because our companions, people who were imprisoned with us, are now working for the government.” Nevertheless, she recognized that “people change when they get power. They get amnesia when they move to the other side of the desk.”

Though they’ve both been back to Achocalla since the ’70s, Koya and Guzmán still had doubts about the best way to find the Stone House. Finally they spotted the whitewashed church, one of the few buildings that existed during the Banzer years and the site, according to the women, of many gruesome tortures. From the church they were able to trace an imaginary line up the valley and direct our driver to where the Stone House should be.

On the walls of the ministry cells a construction worker found carved into the clay: “There is no beginning without an end, but you will pay me back.” Banzer did not pay anyone back; he lived out his life in the good graces of his country, and when he died the government promoted a monthlong period of mourning. But standing in front of the Stone House, a former railroad depot whose corrugated metal roof is dull in the sun, we were at least able to see how one of the dictator’s beginnings had ended.

When Koya and Guzmán were imprisoned, the Stone House held forty women in four cells. Another dozen were kept in two freestanding cells across the street. There were no bathrooms, no glass in the windows, and many rats. The women cooked for themselves and the guards on a small patio behind the prison. Now the patio is paved, glass panes are installed, and the hand-hewn blocks of the depot are painted purple. What was once a torture prison is now an elementary school. **N**