

AN EIGHT DAY WEEK IN NICARAGUA

PART 2

by David A. Horowitz



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On the way to Matagalpa, Enrique, our guide and translator, tells a joke he heard on Sandinista radio the night before. A study was done of the behavior of Nicaraguan men at 3:00 a.m., he reports: one percent went to the bathroom, one percent got something to eat, and ninety-eight percent went home!" At the co-op Barrie had asked if women shared in the work load.

Women preferred to do needlework as a means of supplementing the co-op's income, our host had said. Although women certainly were capable of doing field work, and had complete equality in co-op decisions, he had explained, Nicaraguan people still felt more comfortable with traditional divisions of labor tasks.

Wednesday morning in Matagalpa we make our way to the Cafe of the Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs of the Revolution on the central square of town. We meet with Circlos, an Arizona born farm organizer for UNA — the main organization of Nicaraguan farmers. Circlos is immersed in the idealism of the revolutionary struggle — and his sense of commitment and justice is catching. He tells of the government's desire to give land to peasants to bring about the development of cash exports, but also to provide incentives for Nicaraguans to defend the Revolution against potential contra actions. Circlos explains that the government is trying to teach farmers to sell to the government at fixed prices instead of testing the private market at speculative prices. When Steve asks if it is realistic for peasants to sacrifice short-term cash for hypothetical longrun benefit, Circlos responds that political education is slowly teaching the country's workers and farmers that their fate is intertwined. Steve, who has made many trips to the People's Republic of China, is not so sure a "mixed" economy can work when private market incentives still operate.

We leave off several boxes of school supplies and San Francisco T-shirts with Circlos. The supplies will go to a town partially destroyed by a recent contra raid on the Honduras border, he explains. He tells our group leaders, however, that he has a special use for the T-shirts. Donated by Last Gasp Enterprises in San Francisco, the shirts feature cartoon portraits of "Couch Potato" and "Zippy the Pinhead." Circlos explains that the shirts will become the uniforms of Matagalpa's two baseball teams. We all have the feeling that a fascinating plateau of intercultural exchange has just been consummated.

Following our meeting with Circlos we swing by municipal headquarters to pick up a man who Enrique describes as the "jeffe" (chief) of the town, the ranking Sandinista party official. Emiliano, our driver, has been trying to find diesel fuel for the past two days. We now approach a gas station and the attendant shakes his head negatively at Emiliano's request. But the "jeffe" is in the adjoining car, and a mere look from him suddenly opens the pumps to our Tour-Nica cruiser. At the restaurant for lunch, same scenario. There is another group of Americans ahead of us. To my amazement, they are barely seated at a large table when they mysteriously begin to rise from their seats and leave the table at our disposal. I can't help but wonder what it would be like to be on the other side of this convenient power arrangement. What would it be like to run a

cafe that is not favored by the party leadership, I speculate. The shrimp and garlic lunch is delicious.

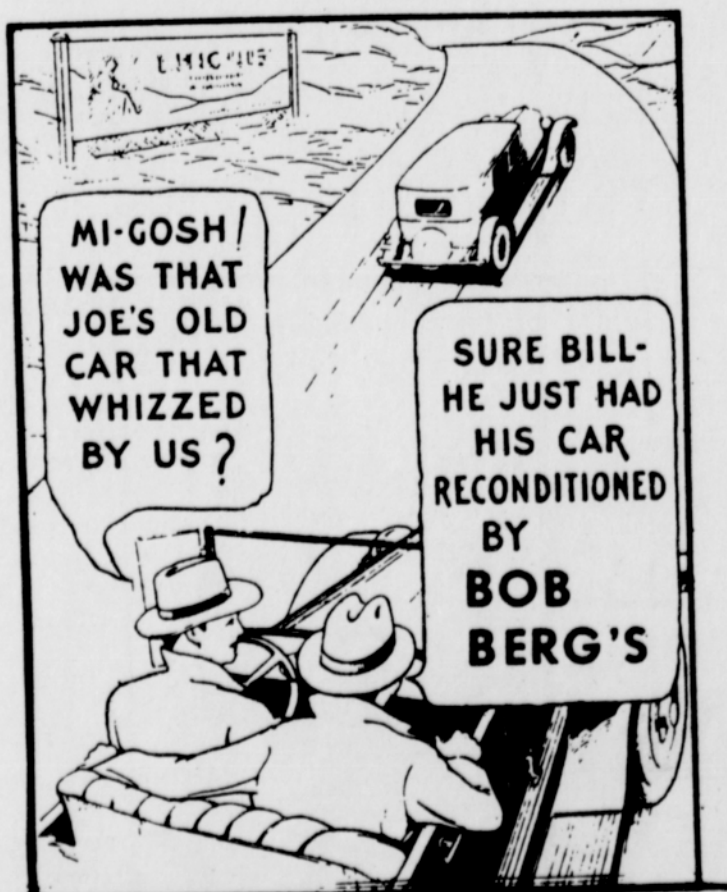
Our afternoon meeting is with Dr. Carlos Arguello, a true hero of the Revolution. Just at the point when Sandinista supplies were dwindling, Arguello hijacked an airplane from Costa Rica and returned to Managua with a full arsenal. When Larry opens the formalities by extending the group's recognition of Arguello's heroism, the former dentist says that he did what any man in his place would have. As Director of International Relations for the Matagalpa district, the center of coffee production, Arguello talked about the dignity of the people that accompanied the "triumph of the Revolution." He is a simple man, soft-spoken, not given to hyperbole. Like most of the officials and leaders we have met, there is a profound sincerity to his approach. He discusses U.S. policies with detachment and cool objectivity. But he does say that if Ronald Reagan ever came to Nicaragua and met the people he is trying to destroy, he would "understand" the Nicaraguan Revolution. I wonder, but it is certainly gracious sentiment. Genuinely offered, I ponder to myself, or a clever guise to win our affection and allegiance? I decide it does not matter. What counts is something else Arguello says: thank you for your gifts, he tells us; but more important than your material gifts is your friendship and solidarity with the Nicaraguan people. I figure that if somebody is writing these speeches I want to meet this person. Arguello's presence makes a deep impression. On the way out of the government offices a poster on a bulletin board shows the pictures of eight western European medical, educational and engineering professionals.

"These People Were Killed Because They Cared About The Poor," the heading blares. The copy describes the assassination of all eight by contra commandos.

After the Arguello session we each take a half hour to explore Matagalpa, like Esteli, an historic center of revolutionary activity. I wander into the Cathedral, a magnificent white-washed structure overlooking the central square. Its stained glass and statuary harks back to the epic of Spanish colonialism. I note how immaculately kept up the church appears — an undeniable sign of the importance religion plays in the lives of the Nicaraguan people — ninety percent Roman Catholic. All through our trip Sandinista officials explain that a Nicaraguan Revolution would be literally impossible without preservation of the people's right to practice religion. I take home a colorful print by Attamirano. It depicts Jesus as a Nicaraguan peasant being led to crucifixion by Somacista riflemen.

We spend the night in an old German resort, the Black Forrest, high in the mountains. As we board the Tour-Nica bus at 3:30 in the morning, the sound of screeching and roaring monkeys comes out of the jungle. As we pass through Matagalpa again, Enrique points to the school that Carlos Fonseca attended. The man who would become the spiritual mentor of the Sandinista Revolution was born to a cleaning woman who worked in the house of Somoza's manager of operations. Fonseca and his mother eventually moved into the mansion where the young boy's education was supervised by his powerful father. Fonseca immersed himself in Marxist politics while attending university in Mexico City. When he returned to Nicaragua he took up the cause of national revolution against the regime his father helped run. Time after time Fonseca was bailed out of trouble by his forgiving father. Finally, Somoza literally called for the revolutionary's head, and Fonseca was gunned down by the dictator's thugs. Like John the Baptist, Fonseca's head was brought to Somoza to assure the leader that his foremost nemesis was destroyed. Politics, blood and passion mix freely in Nicaraguan history.

Our destination in this early departure is the American Embassy in Managua. By 7:30 we are on the street in front of the massive structure. A construction crew is building an interior, security-conscious electronic wall to buttress the diplomatic corps against potential hostility. We are there to join Americans in Nicaragua in the weekly vigil protesting the contra war that occurs every Thursday morning between 7:30 and 8:00. For exactly one half hour the Sandinista government closes off the Pan American highway in front of the embassy so the Americans may protest. As we circle slowly in front of the entrance, perhaps one hundred and twenty-five of us, Sandinista police, young men in military fatigues, protect the American government from its own citizens. We meet a middleaged California woman named Betty who tells us she came to Nicaragua on a tour several months ago. When she visited the music conservatory and the staff discovered that she taught classical piano at a conservatory in San Francisco, they begged her to stay to help. She has been there ever since, she beams. Betty shows us the



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