

NICARAGUA

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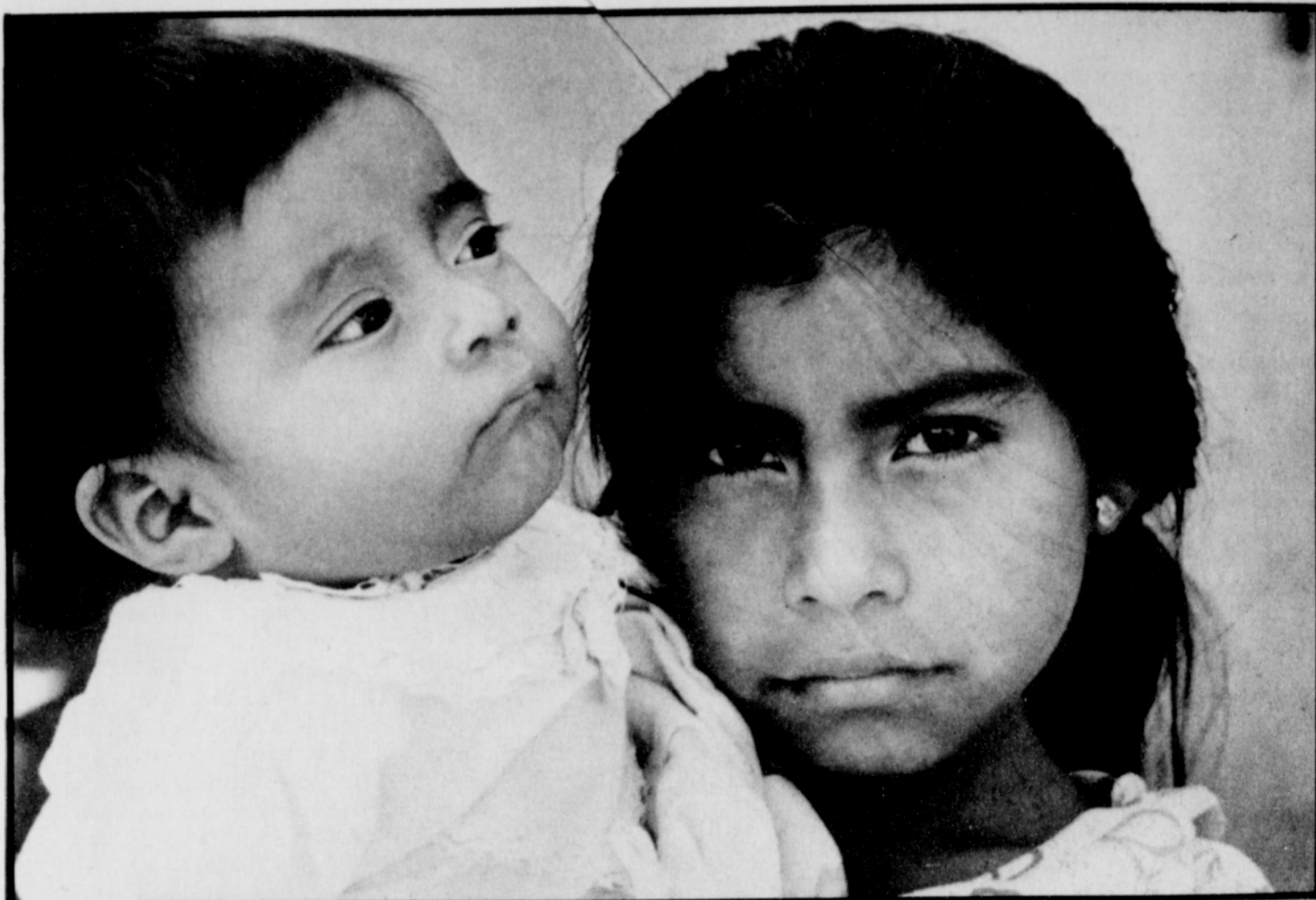
ing to hear every word of what is apparently a rare meeting with the Commandante.

Cabezas is interested in how the students in the room first heard about Nicaragua. Matthew and Fred explain that since their father Steve is political, they learned about the Revolution back in 1979. Aren't there any students here who are not the sons of this man, Cabezas asks, turning toward Steve. We hear of the usual associations of Nicaragua with bananas and coffee, Carmen Miranda, colonial subservience. We are trying to build our own culture, Cabezas explains. All we ever knew here was what you brought — baseball, Coca Cola and rock 'n roll.

I ask if I can tell a short story. My grandfather was a socialist immigrant from Poland who worked in the sweatshops of New York City at the turn of the century as a presser. I begin. He hated the bosses and was a founding member of the garment workers union. But his son, my uncle, who happened to be named Sam, lied about his age to join the Marines in the mid-1920s. And my uncle Sam was sent to Nicaragua! When my grandfather found out, he vowed that his son would never set foot in his house again. No son of his was going to serve the capitalist imperialists. I was brought up on this story, I explain, and say that was how I first heard of Nicaragua. Cabezas pauses. He seems genuinely moved. "That's a beautiful story," he says quietly.

Our host calls for more questions. "Say anything you want," he implores. "Tell me I'm ugly, anything." "You're ugly," Matthew shoots back. Everybody laughs. But the truth is that the man is so utterly captivating he literally disarms the critical capacity of his listeners. When he is talking of political freedoms in Nicaragua he is cleverly evasive: "If you walked down the streets of your country naked you'd be arrested pretty fast." Enrique tells us that the translator has edited out some of the Commandante's earthiness. He had actually said "If you walked down the streets of your country naked with your balls hanging out..." But the editing does not detract from what appears to be a magnificent performance by a man who seems to have invented charisma. Someone asks if he has made a lot of money from the book. Yes, he responds, but he has donated all but ten thousand dollars to orphanages. He needs the ten thousand dollars, he explains, for his Marlboros. Dick, who has been to Cuba, admonishes that the Commandante should follow Fidel's example and give up smoking. I add that Jesse Helms, a horrendous enemy of the Nicaraguan people, is the spokesman for the tobacco interests in the U.S. Senate. Yes, Cabezas responds, that was the first thing the Washington Post asked him when they did a profile a couple of years back. Is there going to be a movie of the book, someone asks? Yes, he answers, he just spent a week with the scriptwriter and is anxious to see how it will all come out. He is not sure what to expect. Will he play himself? No, he answers, he has too many other things to do. Enrique has told us that Cabezas may be the next mayor of Managua. Cabezas mentions that Warren Beatty is up for the movie roll.

I have a final question. I mention that several of our group had visited the Museum of the History of the Revolution on that very afternoon. The museum provides a wonderful photographic record, I observe. But I found an historical mistake that I wanted to bring to his attention, I continue. There is a photograph showing a delegation of U.S. officials visiting Nicaragua in the late 1920s. The caption under the photo describes the mission as consisting of "agents of American imperialism." But one of the visitors was Senator Burt Wheeler of Montana, a Democrat who was a great opponent of U.S. imperialism and who was instrumental in forcing the eventual withdrawal of the Marines from Nicaragua, I point out. "Please write this down for me," Cabezas responds. "This error will be corrected." He then goes on to explain how important it is for Americans to realize that Americans themselves have opposed their country's imperialism. Cabezas makes the exact point my remarks were addressed to. It is also the same point made in my article on the U.S. and Nicaragua in the 1920s. People of goodwill are not helpless. Politics is a way of organizing to change what may at first seem inevitable. Beyond guilt and hopelessness must come responsibility and courage. Cabezas leaves us with sentiments of this kind. However much the showman I perceive him to be, and however much he may slide by the difficult questions surrounding the Nicaraguan Revolution, he is a living example of an indi-



PHOTOGRAPHS BY BART DANIELSON

vidual who has combined intellect, passion and action. He admits that it is easy to get used to the kind of luxuries he was deprived of in the mountains. But Cabezas' honest admission of self-indulgence only seems to add to the believability of the man. I leave the two and a half hour session feeling I have been "snowed" by a performer of tremendous talent but somehow thoroughly enjoying the performance. I am cautious about the Sandinista Revolution, sensing replicas of entrenched privilege where perhaps there should not be. At the same time the whole meeting has been so incredibly extraordinary that I leave with a veritable high, buzzing with the excitement of this passionate country with so many levels to its complex reality. I leave a written note with Enrique to pass on which outlines for the Commandante Burt Wheeler's crusade against Wall Street imperialism in the twenties.

On Friday morning we leave for Corinto. We are an official delegation of the Portland-Corinto Sister Cities Association, and we are bringing boxes of medical and school supplies donated by concerned Oregonians. As we unpack our load at the main square of this dusty and bedraggled port town, a middle-aged man approaches me and begins speaking in English. "Are you from the American base?" he asks. I am totally confused. He talks very fast, says he is a newspaperman, that things are not very good here in Corinto. Look at the harbor, he continues. There used to be ships from all over the world. Now there are only eastern bloc vessels. Don't believe what they tell you, he concludes as I tear myself away to run to our awaiting bus. I begin to wonder what it is about me that attracts Nicaraguan's discontents.

We present our load of school supplies to the regional education office, a row of one-storey stucco cubicles opening to a pleasant courtyard. All around the headquarters are posters and signs extolling the virtues of dignity and literacy. Our videocamera records the formal presentation of supplies, the acceptance speeches, the handshakes. I imagine that it is not easy to accept gifts from a people whose government is out to destroy your society. But the Nicaraguan officials, led by a woman who evokes both strength and empathy, are extremely gracious and their appreciation seems genuine and heartfelt. I come away with the inescapable feeling that these bureaucrats really care about the edu-

cation of the children and adults in their care. Later we visit the hospital where we bring a microscope and medical supplies.

Our next stop is the port. Enrique has arranged for permission to enter the restricted area where CIA commandos destroyed several key oil storage tanks in 1984. The burnt out and dented tanks still stand. The mayor of Corinto, a moustached, athletic-looking and well-trimmed man of thirty-one, explains that CIA commandos based in El Salvador came by boat across the Gulf of Fonseca and fired on the tanks in a middle of the night raid. The attack was witnessed by an old woman bringing refreshments to sell to the nightworkers. A couple of workers received burns from the ensuing explosion. This occurred at the time the CIA was mining Corinto harbor. As we tour the site, we are in the company of several Sandinista soldiers, young men in their teens who are curious about us and our camera equipment. The major jokes that if they pose for our group the soldiers will wind up on the cover of Newsweek. He tells us that the only other Americans to view this site were a small delegation of Congressmen who came back to Corinto just before one of the contra votes.

Back in town we go to lunch at one of the nicer cafes. We are escorted to a back room which is fully air-conditioned. The mayor, the regional medical director and the political representative of the central government in Managua all sit at the head of the table with Enrique. While the head table sips the whisky from the International Store and the group works on Victoria (state owned) beer and Milcha, an energizing Nicaraguan grape soda, I slip from the gathering to find the restroom. As I look up toward a table in the rear, I see Dick seated with some strangers. One of them beckons me to join them and offers me some rum. Dick explains that I am now seated with two Cuban merchant seamen and a Panamanian ship's engineer. The Cuban who offered me the drink has spent time in Canada and the Panamanian had an aunt who taught him English. We manage to communicate in one of those zany bilingual exchanges that occur in international settings. The Cuban wishes to make a toast. "Life is too short to fight," he proposes. "Life is not about fighting. It is about dancing, drinking and fucking." We salute international peace. I like this man. "We are waiting for the girls," he goes on, "but the

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