

The miners' fragile solidarity

Fistfights, group prayers, and fears of cannibalism. How 33 men forged a functioning brotherhood.

SPEAKING LAST WEEK from a hospital bed at the San José Mine, shift foreman Luis Urzúa—the man who kept the Chilean miners alive for two months—said his secret for keeping the men bonded and focused on survival was majority decision-making. “You just have to speak the truth and believe in democracy,” he said. The world’s most famous foreman was sitting with his arms folded across a thick chest, his eyes still hidden behind a pair of the black glasses that all the miners were given to protect their eyes from the effects of bright sunlight. Nurses, doctors, and psychologists rushed around him in a chaotic scene as he spoke about making tough decisions 2,000 feet below ground when all hope seemed lost. “Everything was voted on,” he said. “We were 33 men, so 16 plus one was a majority.”

Like a ship’s captain, 54-year-old Urzúa was the last to leave the mine in which he and his colleagues were trapped for 69 days. He was winched to the surface shortly before 10 p.m. local time on Oct. 13, amid extraordinary scenes of emotion and celebration across Chile. President Sebastián Piñera greeted him on the surface with tears in his eyes. “You’re not the same after this and neither are we,” Piñera told him. “We will never forget this.” The government hailed the men as models of solidarity.

But as the miners’ first accounts of life in the mine emerge, so does a more complex picture—of squabbles, disagreements, and even physical confrontation. In an interview shortly after his rescue, Richard Villaroel, another member of “Los 33,” said the mood inside the collapsed mine had swung wildly, from despair and division to euphoria and unity. The 23-year-old mechanic said the worst was the first 17 days—as the miners prepared for a lonely, drawn-out death by starvation before a probe from the surface punched through to their cavern. “We were waiting for death,” Villaroel said. “We were consuming ourselves—we were so skinny.” Some men were so despairing that they climbed into makeshift beds and would not get out.

But if the real story of what happened in the mine doesn’t quite match the sanitized version that was promulgated when the miners were still trapped deep below the Atacama Desert, their ability to endure may only be more impressive.

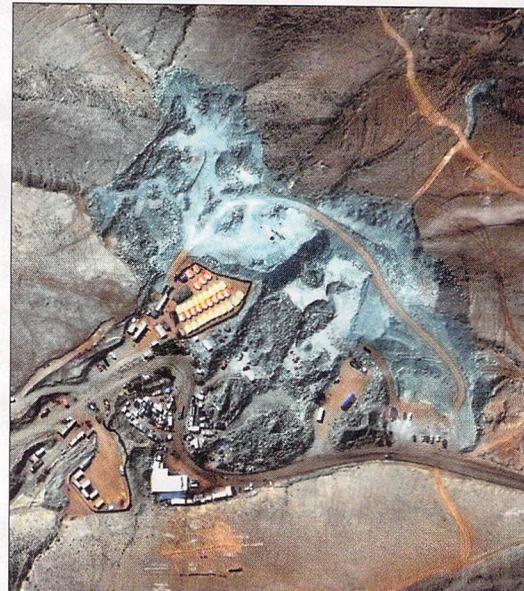
THE COLLAPSE of the mine occurred at lunchtime on Aug. 5. The miners had gathered for lunch in “the refuge”—a small but high-ceilinged space deep in the mine—when an estimated 700,000 tons of rock collapsed and sealed off the central section of the mine shaft above them. The collapse plunged them into darkness and kicked up thick clouds of dust.

Almost immediately, Urzúa sent men to investigate. Some drove a pickup, inching up a ramp. With the dust limiting visibility to less than a yard, they were unable to see the path and crashed. “We were trying to find out what we could do and what we could not,” Urzúa says. “Then we had to figure out the food.”

Temperatures in the mine—always high—settled at above 90 degrees Fahrenheit, with humidity at 90 percent or higher. As has become widely known, the daily food ration for each man was about half a spoonful of canned tuna. “We talked about it at the first meeting we had when we were trapped,” Villaroel says. “We all agreed that we would all share the food that was there. You just had to rough it. Every 24 hours eat a small piece of tuna. Nothing else.” There was water, but water intended to cool machinery. “It had a bad taste,” he said. “It had lots of oil, from the machines, but you had to drink it.”

From the beginning, Urzúa tried to instill in the men a philosophical acceptance of their fate. “Every day [he] told us to have strength,” Villaroel said. “If they find us they find us, if not, that’s that. Because the probes [drilling toward the men] were so far away, so we had no hope. Strength came by itself. I had never prayed before, but I learned to pray, to get close to God.”

Five days after the collapse, the dust finally settled, allowing the men to see more clearly that they were trapped in a space about 1,200 feet long that ran up the corkscrew-shaped shaft to another workshop. The space had several mining vehicles with battery and engine power. During those first days, electrician Edison Pena wired up



a generator and a series of lamps to provide between eight and 12 hours of light and thus a semblance of night and day. The men also divided the work they felt needed to be done. “We the mechanics were part of one group, we took care of the trucks,” Villaroel said. “Other people organized the food, rationed it.”

Subsisting on so little, the men’s bodies shriveled quickly. Villaroel lost more than 25 pounds. “We were getting eaten up, as we were working. We started to eat ourselves up and get skinnier and skinnier. That is called cannibalism, a sailor down there said. My body was eating itself up.”

Did the men fear cannibalism of the other type? When asked about this, Villaroel

paused before answering: "At that moment no one talked about it. But once [help came] it became a topic of joking, but only once it was over, once they found us. But at the time there was no talk of cannibalism."

WHEN THE PROBE finally reached the men, euphoria swept the mine. The world outside, meanwhile, almost immediately began gathering details about the surprisingly structured life that the miners had developed.

Each day in the mine began at about 7:30, when Pena's makeshift lighting rig flickered to life, casting a weak light on the men's refuge. Once food could be delivered to the miners through a 5-inch-wide communications shaft, breakfasts began arriving from above at around 8:30 in 9-foot-long



Clockwise from top: An aerial view of the mine; the rescue capsule; families rejoice.

metal tubes that the miners referred to as "pigeons." The food would take over an hour to arrive, with deliveries every 20 to 30 minutes. At the bottom of the mine, three men were tasked with receiving the "pigeons," unpacking bottled water, hot sandwiches, and morning medicines, then stuffing the latest letters and messages into the torpedo-shaped tube before it slowly was lifted out of sight.

After breakfast, the men cleaned their living area. They had created a designated bathroom area and garbage areas, and they even separated recyclable materials. Experts at the surface marveled at their discipline. "These men are not tourists who went cave visiting. They know how to take care of their environment," said Dr. Andre

Larena, a Chilean navy commander who coordinated medical aid at the rescue site. "They regularly spent 10 to 12 hours down there in the heat and humidity, and that's what they're doing. That's what psychologists are reinforcing: This is a long shift—a very long shift—but still a shift."

Breakfast was also followed by morning showers, which required the men to climb aboard a mining vehicle that rumbled 300 yards up the tunnel to a natural waterfall, where they could shower, shampoo, and clean off the ubiquitous rust-colored mud. Morning chores followed.

About 10 days after their first contact with rescuers, the miners sent up a list of the work responsibilities that each man had assumed. "We have three groups—'Refuge,' 'the Ramp,' and '105,'" wrote Omar Reygadas in a letter to his family. "I am head of Refuge." The 105 group was so named because it maintained an area of the mine 105 feet above sea level. The leaders of all three groups reported directly to Urzúa.

Every day, 19-year-old Jimmy Sanchez roamed the caverns with a hand-held device, measuring oxygen and CO₂ levels and then sending his readings to the surface. One group used mornings to reinforce the mine walls and divert streams of water that seeped into the refuge. Other men scanned the perimeter of the group's living quarters for signs of another rockfall. Some worked with long picks to pry loose rocks that threatened to fall from the ceiling.

Food deliveries and meals still occupied much of the day. The delivery of lunch alone took an hour and a half, and when the men finished that meal, they would have a general meeting and begin group prayers. The prayers were organized under the leadership of Jose Henriquez, who was named the group's "official" pastor. Once the group's basic needs were met, the men also chose to fill new cultural and bureaucratic positions. Victor Segovia was named the official group biographer, and he took responsibility for writing daily accounts of the men's predicament. Victor Zamora was recognized as the group's official poet: His rhymed verses of hope, gratitude, and humor became some of the miners' most-read messages to the world awaiting their rescue.

BUT THERE WERE divisions as well. Once the miners realized they would be saved, Villaroel says, they signed a "blood pact" to not reveal all that happened during their weeks in seclusion. "What happens in the mine, stays in the mine," said Dario Segovia, a 48-year-old drill operator, in a cryptic press-conference comment.

Despite the pact, several cracks have developed in the official version of steadfast solidarity among "Los 33." The earliest suggestion of divisions came in the first video the miners sent up: Only 28 were featured. The other five—Juan Aguilar, Raúl Bustos, José Henriquez, Juan Illanes, and Villaroel—were nowhere to be seen. Where were they? The authorities offered no explanation. José Villaroel, Richard's father, said the mechanic had been upset at colleagues who "showed off" for the camera. When relatives sent down cameras for each miner, Villaroel was among a small group who refused to use his.

Another miner, Osman Araya, told his brother Rodrigo that three groups had formed and that there were squabbles over space and work practices. Daniel Sanderson, a miner on the surface, said he received a letter from one of the trapped men describing disagreements that escalated into physical confrontations. "They broke into three groups because they were fighting. There were fistfights," said Sanderson. Asked to describe the nature of the conflicts, Sanderson replied: "That's part of the pact."

The Spanish newspaper *El País* reported that the five missing from the video had been working for a separate subcontractor and had formed their own group dynamic—living apart from the others and plotting their own escape strategy involving tunnels. The division ended when the subcontractor boss, who was on the surface, ordered the five to integrate.

AN EARLY TEST of the miners' pact will be whether the men equally share income from the interview fees, book royalties, and movie deals that are likely to flood in. The miners have reportedly agreed to sign a contract promising to pool the bonanza. But with some men likely to be offered far more than others—notably Urzúa and Mario Sepúlveda, a natural showman—there may be pressure from families to make individual deals.

Last week, while still attired in dressing gowns and slippers, the miners could glimpse the attention their story has generated by peering out of their hospital windows at the throngs of journalists below. The 33 may even have heard the estimates that 1 billion people worldwide had watched their televised rescue.

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