



Literary Landscapes

Literary Landscapes is a monthly column by Indra Wussow, a writer, translator and director of the Sylt Foundation.

The plight of migrants and refugees is a much-discussed topic worldwide at present; not only in the arts, such as in Mike van Graan's acclaimed new play, *When Swallows Cry*. While the tensions and clashes inherent in migration are more relevant now than ever, these are not new issues. The psychological and emotional effects of leaving behind a home, and the sense of identity and community linked to it, during desperate times can last for decades. In Chile, Indra Wussow finds people still desperately dealing with the aftermath.

Erika was only four years old when her parents decided to leave Germany in 1961 to start a new life on the other side of the world.

The defeat of the German Third Reich had made them homeless before, had led them to become refugees in what was later known as West Germany. Unwanted by its population, they settled in a small town in Westfalia and found hope in one of the religious splinter groups that had become popular in those troubled times. The group gave support and a sense of belonging in the uncertainty of the Cold War conflict. It eased their feelings of being unwanted and left alone with their trauma and fear.

The sect that Erika's family had joined would later become notorious for torture and oppression. The organisation would come to link former Nazi Germany elites and their infamous torture practices with Germany's lost refugees, the Chilean dictatorship and its victims.

When Erika's parents first joined the sect, they were charmed by their infamous leader, Paul Schäfer's, doctrine of supporting each other and helping to create a better world. The 1950s in Germany were difficult years marked by silence and a moral bigotry behind which violence and crime could flourish. The charismatic Paul Schäfer was a paedophile whose wrongdoing had been eclipsed by the boys' shame and the injustice of the social climate. In 1961, however, it became clear that Schäfer had to leave Germany, and with him he took the boys that he had raped and his followers, unaware of this dark side of the leader they adored.

It is still not fully known how this low-ranking youth welfare worker and preacher managed to form such close

ties with high-ranking politicians and government officials in both Germany and Chile. The Chilean ambassador offered Schäfer and his group a place to stay in a remote forest area in central Chile. This place would become the Colonia Dignidad (Colony of Dignity), infamous for its oppression, slave labour and torture.

When Erika, her family and 500 others arrived, they would be helping the local people; building hospitals and schools. They arrived to nothing but forest, and making the land arable meant working at least twelve hours a day, seven days a week. The reality of the coming years would instead tell a sad story of dispossession, abuse and brainwashing.

One and a half hours from Chile's capital city of Santiago, my journey comes to a stop in front of a boom gate in the middle of a huge forest. It looks as if it is taken directly out of one of Grimm's fairy tales.

This is the entrance to the former Colonia Dignidad, now a hotel called Villa Bavaria (the Bavarian Village). I was curious to find out how such an evil place could become a destination for tourists to relax, enjoy the landscape, and savour some kind of German food and lifestyle.

Behind the boom gate are watchtowers, and barbed wire still surrounds the huge property at the foot of the mighty Andes mountains, telling the story of imprisonment. The inhabitants had no chance to escape the system. If they tried, they were caught and tortured with electroshock therapy and sedated with psychiatric drugs. This all runs through my mind as I drive toward the main village, which reminds me of the false idyll of Hitler's Berghof; a beautiful scene that cannot hide its hideousness.



It is a Sunday evening and the only other occupants of the hotel are a Chilean family. The children play outside while their parents enjoy the peace of the place. I find it shocking to hear that they do not know the history of this place and just happened to choose Villa Bavaria for a weekend's retreat. I wonder how one cannot see the tragedies that unfolded here.

Still stuck in the 1960s, the entire place seems like an anachronism. The inhabitants of the village today are former members of the sect and their offspring.

Chile is still haunted by the demons of its Pinochet years and has been working on the delicate task of revisiting its history and leading a divided society toward a peaceful transformation. The Colonia Dignidad became an epitome of this difficult process. The oppression and abuse was not limited to the sect; during the dictatorship, which lasted from 1973 to 1990, it became a famous torture camp for opponents of the system who were brought there by Pinochet's secret police. Hundreds of Chileans were tortured in the Colonia Dignidad, many of them were killed or just disappeared. The few survivors describe the torture methods as highly effective, techniques which might have come directly from the hell of Nazi concentration camps.

Today, Erika is in her late fifties. Due to the slave labour, her health is ruined. Traumatized from years of brainwashing, she has embarked on a long and winding

road trying to understand the outside world that she was made to believe was the land of the devil. The sect abolished families and children were kept away from their parents – some did not even know who their parents were. Women were ignored, considered to be 'dirty' and were used as work animals, beaten by the leaders of the sect. They were seen as the incarnation of evil, bringing temptation to a group of boys and men who should only be attracted to the Tio Permanente, Paul Schäfer.

One cannot imagine the extent of the damage that this system caused. Through a small museum on the premises, Erika is able to tell her story and show the brutality of a system where victims and perpetrators lived together – and still do in this hotel village that tries to make ends meet after the sect was closed and Paul Schäfer was finally sent to prison.

With all of the pain that Erika has to deal with, it is striking that there is no real understanding for the Chilean victims of the system. The Chilean government wants to transform the property into a memorial for the victims, but Erika doesn't see it as a memorial for her ordeal. She feels that she was evicted from her home, the only home she knows. A home that she helped establish through hard labour. She would rather live with the former perpetrators in the scene of her tragedy than leave to start a new life and the chance to discover another world. Discover love and freedom. **CF**