

*True Stories  
from a  
Paraguayan  
Leper Colony*



# Outcast *but not* Forsaken



**MARIA WEISS**  
*with Maureen Burn*



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Plough

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# Preface

This book has an unusual history. It is the result, in 1986, of combining and editing several manuscripts written by Maureen Burn in Paraguay from 1954–1958. Part 1 is based largely on Maureen’s account of her visit to Sapucay, the leper colony where Maria Weiss had lived. Maria called it “The Furnace.” A shorter version of this was published by the Wheathill Community in England in 1957 (*Plough* magazine, Volume 5, No. 1) under the title “Visit to a Leper Colony.” Parts 2 and 3 are based on two manuscripts prepared by Maureen Burn, the first in Maria Weiss’s voice, the second in Maureen’s, with a few additional anecdotes recorded by Belinda Manley. All this material is based on conversations with “Doña Maria,” as she talked naturally in her simple Spanish to sisters of the *Sociedad de Hermanos* (Society of Brothers), when they visited her in her little hut near Primavera Hospital. We are thankful to Maureen and Belinda for recording and preserving Maria’s vivid memories of Sapucay.

Our thanks go also to Major Jenty Fairbank, Archivist at the International Headquarters of the Salvation Army in London, for more information about Ambrosio Castillo published in *All the World* magazine in 1965, which we have incorporated in the epilogue.

We are deeply touched by the simple faith of some of these men and women who were treated as outcasts by society. They come alive in these unpretentious narratives and have much to teach us.

*The Editors*  
1986

## PART 1

# A Visit to Sapucay

**Maureen Burn**

In July 1954 we welcomed at our Primavera community in Paraguay, South America, the first person from a leprosy settlement to come and live with us. The joy was increased because this led to the reuniting of a family separated for nearly twenty years, the husband and son having come to the community about ten years earlier. At first, Maria lived in an isolation house near our hospital, but when it was established that the illness had been checked, she was able to live among us normally. Her coming meant not only a widening of our sympathies but first-hand acquaintance with one who had shared the lot of a people “living without the camp.”

Our community in Paraguay, known as *Colonia Primavera*, was established in 1941 and existed until 1961, when most of the members moved to communities in the United States, England, or Germany. Although a small plane could fly from Asuncion, the capital of Paraguay, to Primavera in about half an hour, the journey by land involved an overnight riverboat trip of about fourteen hours up the broad Rio Paraguay and, in good weather, another fourteen hours by horse wagon into the interior (in later years four or five hours by truck from the river). Primavera Hospital was built in 1942 and staffed by members of the

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community. Maria came there for an operation. On July 8, 1954 she was brought in a small plane, accompanied by one of our brothers, from the Santa Isabel Colony near Sapucay, about forty miles southeast of Asuncion. My own work at that time was in the hospital laboratory, and that is where I first met Maria and began to note down the true stories that follow, told to me in her very simple Spanish.

At Maria's invitation I accompanied her when, after some eighteen months in Primavera, she returned to the leper colony to settle her affairs before coming to Primavera for good. One morning toward the end of 1955 Maria and I set off. We drove in our truck to Puerto Rosario on the Rio Paraguay and from there took the overnight riverboat to Asuncion. Here we were met by Peter Mathis, a member of our community, who was to accompany us to the Santa Isabel Colony near Sapucay on the following day. Another member had already visited the doctor who was director of the colony. (He lived in Asuncion and flew out to the colony to treat the patients.) He had promised to arrange for a horse to be brought out from the colony to meet Maria at Sapucay station, so that she could ride the six miles to the colony.

So Peter and I borrowed *maletas* (saddlebags) and packed our things into them, as they are the best means of carrying belongings on horseback. We also took food for a three-days' stay: *galletas* (hardtack) and cheese and corned beef and yerba maté – the latter especially for Maria. It is her remedy for tiredness, headache, or indigestion; also it warms her in cold weather and cools her in hot weather. We also each took a poncho or blanket.

Then next morning we took the train to Sapucay. It was my first experience of a train journey in Paraguay, and I shall never forget it. The fuel for the engine was wood. The

## *A Visit to Sapucay*

train had a long corridor down the center, and this was filled with a constant stream of vendors milling their way back and forth from end to end of the train. There were old women with pastries or chunks of *asado* (roast meat) or crocheted bedcovers, young girls with baskets of *chipa* (typical Paraguayan bread), small urchins selling water or *tereré* (maté made with cold water and sucked through a *bombilla* or metal straw), and one jolly little bootblack. The *tereré* boys carried a can of water with an improvised handle. They also carried a small cloth bag of dry yerba maté hung on a cord from their necks, and an enamel cup and *bombilla*. I noticed some passengers bought only water and others ordered a cup of *tereré*. The boy made this by pouring cold water on dry yerba in the cup. Then the boy stuck his *bombilla* in it and gave it to the customer. When the customer had finished, the boy tipped the old *yerba* leaves out of the window and rinsed the cup out with some of his water, and it was ready for the next customer. Often when handling change the boy stuck the *bombilla* in his own mouth to free a hand for counting. I noticed that when the *tereré* boys had sold out, they were able to buy a nice dinner for themselves from the selling women – *asado* or *chipa*. They also probably had a little money over to take home.

The scenery was most interesting, as it was different from the flat and more tropical part of Paraguay that I knew. We passed San Bernardino on the left. It is a kind of inland holiday place – a lake – for the Asuncion people. Peter asked a small boy how soon we would be in Sapucay. The boy whispered to the others, and all left the compartment where we were. They probably thought we were new patients going to the colony there.

When we arrived at Sapucay station, we began to look out for the horse promised for Maria. We saw several men

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with horses, but Maria did not recognize any of them, and anyway they were passing on and not waiting for anyone.

Peter then went off to try and hire horses for us, or a wagon, but he was told no one wanted to hire anything on a Saturday afternoon. Maria said she was quite prepared to walk in slow stages, but we did not want to do this. Peter then found the name of a German who is friendly to our community; so he went to ask his advice. In half an hour he came back with an oxen wagon. The German had found a man who had not yet unyoked his oxen and was willing to take us. The oxen were tired, as they had been carting alfalfa most of the day. I felt sorry for them, but the man let them go at their own pace, which was half as fast as a man walking, so that it took us four hours to do six miles.

We followed a dirt track out of the village of Sapucay. When we got beyond the village, we passed a few straggling



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houses and saw people peep round the doorway or round the corner, as if almost afraid of contagion, for were we not strangers going toward the leper colony? One man called to the wagoner in Guaraní, and he answered. Maria said the man was asking about us, and the wagoner had replied, “I can’t get information out of them; they are talking a *gringo* (foreign) tongue.” We had been talking in German.

The cottages had now stopped, and we entered a wide, grass-grown road with fences along both sides and woods coming right up to the fence. The road twisted and turned and climbed all the time between wooded hills. It was a wonderful moonlit night. The slow pace of the oxen allowed all the impressions time to sink in: the silvery light, the moving oxen, the grassy road with the shadow of the trees on it, and the moon suddenly appearing over the purple shoulder of a hill. I could not help thinking that we were passing along a Via Dolorosa, and that the uncanny beauty of the scene contrasted sadly with the heavy hearts that had passed along that way.

Suddenly the wagon pulled up. We had arrived. There was nothing to indicate it – no high walls or barbed wire enclosure. All we saw was a light fence such as might form the boundary of a large ranch. There was a farm gate leading into the colony, and it was open. Outside the fence there were two houses, one of adobe and the other of brick. The adobe one was the administration house, and the brick one was the doctor’s house, where he lived when visiting the colony.

A young man came out of the administration house and greeted “Doña Maria” very warmly. Maria said he is a male nurse in the hospital, but he also disinfects letters and helps in the administration. He said he would try and find accommodation for us. Seemingly, relatives of patients

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usually sleep in the patients' houses when on a visit. There is no accommodation for visitors, though probably important visitors coming with the doctor would be put up in the doctor's house.

We said we wanted to accompany Maria to her house, so the male nurse said he would send two soldiers with us to show us the way back. The soldiers did not utter one word to us. They walked on in front and did not offer to carry anything. Peter and I helped Maria to carry her things. She had brought a nice lot of presents of clothing for her friends, as well as her own blankets and clothes. We passed through an open gate and into a wood. The trees met overhead, and we could not see. It felt as though we were walking along a dried-up stream, as we were always stumbling over boulders and stones. It took us about ten minutes to pass through this belt of woodland, which separates the "healthy" part of the colony from the "sick" part.

As soon as we were out of it, we saw the first houses, each with a little plot of land. Some were nicely cultivated with maize, and others were a wilderness of weeds. The houses varied in size and condition according to the means of the owner. They had been built by the patients themselves and were mostly of the Paraguayan type, that is, one room with walls and one without walls, thatched over with the same roof, and with mud floors. Some had





## *A Visit to Sapucay*

a nice veranda, which was used as a living room. Maria told me that everyone preferred the freedom of a little house, however small, to the institutionalism of either the hospital or the *salas* (dormitories). All new patients have to go to the *salas* to begin with, until they manage to get or build a little house, or share one with someone else. Only those who cannot attend to themselves or lack means to procure a hut make their home in the hospital.

It was now about 8:30 p.m., and most people were indoors or in bed. Maria told us that most people went to bed with the sun in order to save candles or kerosene.

Maria got quite excited as we went along. She pointed to a small house set back on the left and said, "Floreciana lives there. She has been keeping my calf for me." Then we passed a house on the right, and there was a light shining indoors. Maria said, "Felipa lives there. I used to live with her," and she called out, "Felipa." Felipa came out and immediately said, "*Ah, Doña Maria, qué gorda!*" ("Ah, Doña Maria, how stout you are!")

This is a compliment, and everyone said it to Maria. Maria, who had actually put on weight since coming to us, said, on the other hand, how thin everyone looked. This was because the *cooperativa* had stopped running, and people had lost the vegetables it grew and the money they used to earn on the land. (For a number of years the joint United States–Paraguayan service, *Servicio Técnico Interamericano de Cooperación Agrícola*, or STICA, ran a primitive farm program at Santa Isabel to grow some crops and also provide work for the patients. This was known in the colony as the *cooperativa*.) Also bread was scarce because of the political troubles between Paraguay and Argentina, so that wheat had nearly ceased coming into Paraguay.

**PART 2**

If I Make My Bed in Hell,  
Thou Art There

(Ps. 139:8)

Doña Maria's Life and Experiences,  
Especially in the Santa Isabel Colony (1936–1954)  
As Told to Maureen Burn

## CHAPTER 1

# Life in Argentina and Paraguay

### **From Bavaria to Argentina**

I was brought to South America when I was five years old. We were a big Roman Catholic family, with a lot of boys. I was one of the youngest children. We came from Bavaria, where my father had a small cobbler's shop. He was a good cobbler, but not a good businessman. He wanted to emigrate from Europe with all its wars and rumours of wars, especially as he had many sons.

So he was very excited when he read an advertisement of a big tract of land in Argentina, for a very small price. The neighbors reminded him that he knew nothing about agriculture, but he said that didn't matter, as he was just going to raise beef cattle on the land.

I remember the sea voyage. It seemed very long to me, and each day you could see nothing but the sea around you. I remember asking my mother if it would always be like that now, with nothing but the sea.

### **Growing Up in Argentina and Paraguay**

When we got to Argentina, it seemed to me that instead of the sea we had nothing but flat prairie and grass around us.

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My father had a big shock when he got to the big piece of land that he had bought, for he found that any water on it was salty, so it was useless for cattle. And he had sold everything he had to buy it. So my father had to seek employment with a cattle rancher, and my big brothers became gauchos or cowboys.

My mother worked both indoors and outdoors, from dawn till dusk. She baked all the bread we ate and bought big rolls of cloth and made the dresses and shirts for us all. She used to get angry when she saw my father give a tidbit to a dog, and sometimes she would say, "I believe you would put that dog in one of the children's beds!"

The cattle ranch had wild beef cattle on it, and we children were warned not to go out among them. But one day three of us went out on the prairie to look for mushrooms. We thought it was all right, as the only cattle we saw were specks in the distance. Franz, my older brother, took charge of us. He must have been about seven years old then. We were so interested in looking for mushrooms and collecting a nice pile to take home, that we quite forgot the cattle.

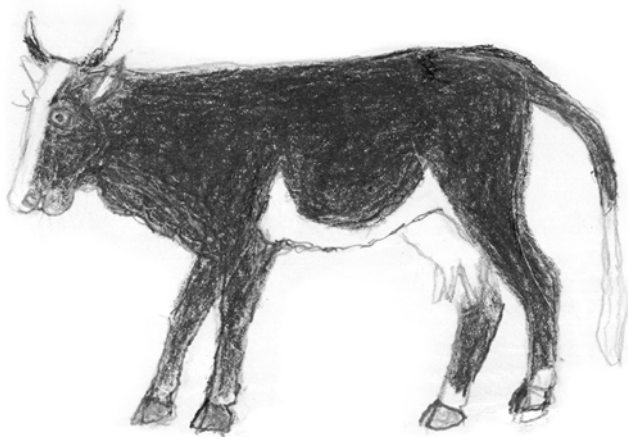
## *Life in Argentina and Paraguay*

Then suddenly Franz said, “Lie flat and don’t breathe.” A ring of wild cattle were coming nearer and nearer toward us. You could hear the thud of their hoofs, as we were lying flat against the earth, with one ear against the ground. Then you could also hear the cattle breathe.

I remember our father telling us to pretend to be dead if wild cattle came near. I tried not to breathe at all. The cattle must have stopped coming any nearer, for I heard no more hoof thuds, but only long-drawn-out sniffs and snorts of hot breath. We lay like this for a very long time – then they went away.

Another thing I remember about Argentina was the locusts. We used to think the “hoppers” were just like soldiers marching. They used to cast off their coats two or three times, as they grew out of them, and we used to collect them off the grass stems.

I went to school for two years in Argentina. It was in Spanish; my parents only talked in German. I was much more interested in animals and living things than in book learning. I often would play truant, and the schoolteacher did not have much hope of teaching me anything. I used



to beg my mother to let me stay at home and help with the outdoor work, which she found increasingly difficult, for her leg veins began to give her more and more trouble.

My parents were still undecided about whether I should leave school or not, when my father heard of cheap land further north in Paraguay, in a colony at one time settled by immigrants from Europe. When he had made sure the water there was fresh, not salty, we moved, leaving all the bigger boys in Argentina where they found jobs and possibilities. That was the end of my schooling. I was then seven years old. I had had two years' schooling in Argentina and could read words of two or three letters, but I could not write or do figures. Anyway, I was very glad in later life that I could at least read a little.

We now had a little *chacra*, or smallholding, of our own, and I enjoyed helping my parents to work it. They knew I disliked school and loved animals, so they gladly accepted my help and gave me more and more responsibility. Years passed, and when my father was not making a success of his agricultural work, I used to take jobs away from home to earn some money, which I sent home for my parents. I went into domestic service in Asuncion and worked for a time in a corned beef factory. I always gladly returned home. I enjoyed meeting other young people and especially enjoyed the Saturday night dances, and I always wanted to be the "belle of the ball." But I noticed how many jealous brawls happened at these dances, and I didn't like that.

### **First Contact with the Bible**

There was just one family of girls who were different. I got interested in them and asked them how it was that they were able to steer clear of all the jealousies and quarrels.

## *Life in Argentina and Paraguay*

They said they would ask me to their house one day when they had a visitor they were expecting.

When the day came, I went, and the visitor was a young man full of fire and eagerness to share something with us, which he called a “treasure.” It was the Bible. He gave me one, and I decided I would try and read it. But I found it was much too difficult to read and that I would have to practice reading.

When my parents saw me spelling out the words and figuring out – better and better as time went by – what word the letters stood for, they said, “Whatever are you doing that for? Religion is just for real sinners.” But that did not put me off from trying to understand what was written. And I always went to this Protestant family when someone came there to explain the Bible.

There were many things I could not understand in the beliefs of these people. They used to speak against “images” and call it idolatry. But we in our family had always admired something our nearest neighbor had, and I often used to make an excuse to go to their house so that I could have another look at it. It was a figure of the Virgin dressed in red and blue, with golden borders to her draperies and a golden halo. Many people living in that district also admired this figure. The old lady in the house had brought it with her from Europe many years ago, and the daughter was always afraid someone would steal it. So when the old lady died, the daughter put it in the coffin by the side of her mother, and it was buried with her.

Years passed, and I continued to learn more about the Bible when someone came to explain it. Often it was someone from the Salvation Army who came. My father also started coming, and a few more local people began to come too.

## Marriage

Among them was the man I later married. His name was Adolf, and he had a *chacra* not far away. His parents, like mine, had come out from Europe. The year after we married, we had a little son. He was fair with blue eyes and had the loveliest nature any child could ever have.

Life was very happy. Adolf did the arable work on our *chacra*, and I looked after the animals and birds. We each did our favorite kind of work on the *chacra*, and our little son kept running from one to the other, and we didn't have a care in the world.





## CHAPTER 2

# To the Leper Colony

### In Isolation at Home

Our happiness only lasted for five or six years. Then one day Adolf asked me how I had burnt myself, and he pointed to a big blister on the back of my arm. I had not noticed it, and I could not feel it. This happened two or three times. I spilled boiling water on my feet, when pouring it off the pig food. I felt nothing and only later noticed the blister. Adolf got worried and took me to the doctor. The doctor took tests of



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skin and blood and sent them away to be examined. But the answers all came back saying nothing had been found.

In spite of this, the doctor said it would be safer if I lived apart, until we knew what the matter with me was. Adolf built a little house on our land, and I moved in, and every now and then I had more tests taken and sent away, but the answers all came back saying nothing had been found.

For two years I lived alone like this, or tried to live alone, for my little son used to keep running to me to ask me to come and look at something, or to come and see what he was making or doing. It about broke my heart to have to send him away.

Once I went with him. He had made a little trench and put pieces of glowing wood in it. He had got the glowing wood out of the fire on a shovel and put it in the trench and covered it over with earth, and he said he was making charcoal for my brazier. I knew he must have been watching the men making charcoal. I was so proud of his getting the hang of the charcoal making, at only seven years of age, and he was pleased I had come. But the doctor was really angry and said I must keep away from the child.

So I could do nothing for my husband and child, except keep away. The only thing I could do was to collect my own firewood. I used to go far into the forest collecting fallen branches and often had a big bundle of firewood to bring home. Many a time I would startle a big rattlesnake or a *yararé acá curusú* (Bothrops snake) under the fallen branches. But I just could not be afraid of them, for I was facing something much worse than a snake bite: the fear of being sent away to the leper colony.

I often wondered if all the loneliness of my isolation and the sorrow of seeing my family neglected in many ways was necessary, as my tests always came back with nothing found

## *To the Leper Colony*

in them. It was this kind of uncertainty that was the hardest to bear.

People all avoided me because of fear of the disease. I just had no heart to cook or eat anything, and I got as thin as a rake because of grief. I did not know anyone could live and be so skinny. I then took ill, but it was more the illness of sorrow than anything else. If I had found a pile of gold in those days it would not have interested me. I saw everything with the eyes of my grief, and everything looked strange and different. I used to wonder if the sun would rise again next morning in this terrible world of grief I was in.

### **Sorrowful Journey**

We decided we could not go on much longer like this. So Adolf took me to a big doctor in the capital city, and my sister-in-law kept the child. We wanted to know, one way or the other, about my illness. The big doctor took a look at my arms and legs and stuck pins in and did other tests to see how much I could feel. Then he said I had leprosy and that I should go to the leper colony and get treatment, and perhaps I would get no worse.

So we made arrangements to go as soon as we could after returning home. My sister-in-law continued to keep the boy for us, and Adolf said I should think of all the things I would need. But I had no interest in anything. So he got together my clothes and a few old photos I had of my parents and my brothers and sisters. He also said I should take cooking pots and bedding, and he said he would like me to take the fine eiderdown my mother had made for me when I married.

Then he ordered a wagoner to take us, and he came with me the four days' journey to the leper colony. It felt to me like going into the grave, that journey did. My heart

## *Outcast but Not Forsaken*

was frozen with grief, and I could not think. We did not speak – there were no words suitable. When we reached the gates of the colony, the wagoner spoke to the man there, and he was told to pull up at the women's *sala* (dormitory). This was a very rough, old building, more like a shed.

I did not know at the time that it was where the more advanced cases were housed, so I got such a shock when a lot of women crowded out to see who had come. Some had no noses, some had no fingers, some had feet like horses' hoofs, because they had lost their toes, and many of them had faces that looked alike, because they had no eyebrows.

I was so frightened to see this all of a sudden that I burst into tears and told Adolf I just could not live among them. More and more people were collecting round us and looking at us and the things Adolf had brought. They were speaking in a dialect we couldn't understand. Poor Adolf did not know what to do, and the wagoner wanted to unload.

### **Eugenio and Anastasia**

Then a man pushed through the crowd and spoke in German. He had guessed we were *gringos* (foreigners), because we were fair. He seemed to understand all that we were feeling, and we did not need to explain. He talked to Adolf and then took us to his house and said I could stay with them as long as I liked and until I had found my feet in the colony.

We also met the woman of the house. Neither of these two were frightening to look at. They looked no different from people outside the colony. This was a comfort to us both after the shock we had had. The woman said it was always very hard for a new patient at the beginning and

## *To the Leper Colony*

that they had all been through it, and she repeated what the man had said about me being welcome to stay as long as I wished.

Then Adolf and I had to part. I will never forget the wagon disappearing into the distance, taking him away from me. It was all I could do to stop myself running after it. I stood and watched it out of sight and felt more dead than alive.

Then someone took my arm. It was Anastasia, the woman of the house. I had not noticed her till then. She must have been there all the time. She took me home and got a bed ready for me on the wide veranda, as they had only one room, which they occupied.

I lay down, just as I was, without taking off my clothes and did not even think of thanking her. She did not mind and left me alone, except for bringing me some food, but I could not eat it. Eugenio, the man, was also kind and did not bother me with talk. I lay there wishing only to die and end it all.

But as evening came on, I was shocked and alarmed to find a stream of Eugenio's close friends come with guitars and much singing and laughter. Those who had no seats came and sat on my bed. They must have decided I was asleep or crazy. I wondered what the respectable folk at home would have thought. Nothing unpleasant ever happened, but I made sure I was in bed every night before the crowd came, otherwise I could not get to bed till after they had gone.

