

Hugo Blanco, Peruvian Revolutionary, Dead at 88. I Met Him Once. It Was a Magical Experience

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Blanco, the Peruvian revolutionary is dead. I met him once back in 1996 when my wife Sherry and I were living in Mexico City. It was an experience of magical realism.

One day, two German Trotskyists, a young couple in their late twenties living briefly in Mexico City, a pair whom we had met some time before, called us up and said, “We’re going to meet with Hugo Blanco, would you like to come along?”

Well, of course we would. Blanco was a world-famous revolutionary who had in the early 1960s led an uprising of Quechua peasants in the Cusco region of Peru. Under his leadership, peasants seized land from the landlords and organized to defend it. His story was epic.

The Peruvian government, of course, sent the army in to repress the rebellion, and they did. Blanco was tried, convicted, and sentenced to twenty-five years on El Frontón, a penal island. There was an international campaign for his release. That campaign and a change of government led to his deportation to Chile in 1971. But then, two years later, the Chilean military seized power, arresting and murdering leftists, and Blanco sought refuge in the Swedish embassy. There was another international campaign for his release and safe departure, but he was smuggled out by his supporters first. He went into exile in Mexico and Sweden.

Then in 1978 he returned to Peru, helped to found the Revolutionary Workers Party, and was elected to parliament as the candidate of a left-wing coalition. From his parliamentary seat he denounced a Peruvian general as a murderer. He served in parliament until 1992 when Peru’s President Alberto

Fujimori carried out his "*auto-golpe*"—that is a coup to keep himself in power. Having gotten the word that both the Maoist Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) guerrilla group and the government were planning to assassinate him, he went into exile once more in Mexico and then Sweden.

In 1996, he was living in Mexico and we were going to see him in Cuernavaca on a Sunday around mid-day. To my mind, Sunday afternoon in Mexico meant either tequila or beer (or both), but this was to be a serious discussion, so tequila was out and we picked up a couple of six-packs and went in search of his address. Being Mexico, there were in Cuernavaca three different streets that bore the name we were looking for, and after eliminating two of them because neither of them had the number we wanted, we went to the third. Finding the number was an adventure because the numbers were in no order, rather people choose a number they liked. So 3 might be follow by 172 and 172 by 75 by 42. Or so it was then.

When finally we found the right number on the right street it turned out that it was a Montessori School. I think Blanco may then have been its principal. We knocked on the door and he appeared, then 62-years-old, a muscular man with prominent features, and a mane of thick white hair. He was wearing a loose-fitting outfit, white tunic and pants such as the Mexican peasants of the late nineteenth century had worn.

Blanco warmly and graciously invited the four of us in and led us down a hall into the school flooded with sunlight coming in through the large windows. We walked among ducks waddling down the hall with us, chicks fleeing before us, and cats on the shelves waking up and stretching, and irritable because their naps had been interrupted.

We went into a classroom and sat down in tiny chairs at a round table and I passed out the beer. As I did so, I noticed in one part of the room boxes filled with chrysalises on twigs, sitting in the sun. A science experiment I thought. Very nice.

Blanco was excited to talk about the Chiapas Rebellion of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, an uprising of Mayan peasants, that had taken place on January 1, 1994. President Zedillo had sent the Mexican Army to suppress the revolt, but mass popular demonstrations against the military action had forced the government to halt. The two sides remained facing each other in the Lacandón Jungle (as they still do today). Blanco himself had led such a revolt in Peru thirty years before and was naturally full of thoughts about peasants, rebellions, and revolution. The Germans were as excited to have the conversation as Blanco himself. We all had the sense of sitting at the feet of a master.

As Hugo began to speak, comparing his Peruvian experience with the Quechua peasants to that of the Maya in Chiapas, the magic moment had come. The chrysalises began to open and out of them began to come small, white butterflies, white as snow. As they emerged, they stretched and waved their wings about and soon took flight, fluttered around a little, and began to land on Blanco. They landed on his thick white hair, on his white tunic and on his white trousers.

Covered with butterflies from head to toe, he continued to talk. He was perhaps unaware of them, and so he went on speaking and gesturing. The Germans listened intently as did Sherry, but I drifted out of the conversation. I was in a magic realism novel where the characters sat on tiny chairs, surrounded by butterflies, and talked with a remarkable man about the possibilities of rebellion and revolution in Latin America.

After a couple of hours, Blanco stood up, the butterflies quietly dispersed, and again accompanied by the ducks, we left the charming Cuernavaca Montessori School.

Hugo Blanco remained a revolutionary all of his life. He continued to call himself a Trotskyist-and a Zapatista. It was an honor to meet him. And a magical experience.