

POTOSI'S SILVER TEARS

The city that once made Europe rich is dying. The impoverished miners who live there are struggling to survive amid the ruins of its bygone splendor. "It's so poor, it makes you want to weep," says Bolivian historian Valentin Abecia. He's not exaggerating. A visit to Potosi, which helped to maintain the splendor of Europe from the 16th to the 18th centuries, is today a spine-chilling experience.



Around two billion ounces of silver were extracted from the city's Cerro Rico (Rich Mountain) during the Spanish colonial era. Cerro Rico silver paved Potosi's streets, fuelled the European Renaissance and helped fund the "Invincible Armada", the Spanish fleet that sailed against Elizabethan England in 1588. But today Potosi is dying. "When a mine closes, all that's left is a ghost town," says the city's mayor, René Joaquino. Something of Potosi ebbs away whenever a seam of metal is exhausted or world mineral prices drop. Most of the mines closed down after a crisis in 1985 and many people left for good. Two years later, when the Bolivian government introduced new incentives to mining, unemployed miners began to trickle back and set up 50 co-operatives.

Streets Paved With Silver

Most of the city's population of around 120,000 are Quechua Indians, who live by scratching at what is left in the old mines. They have no access to modern technology and no social security protection. There is practically no middle class in Potosi. "I don't know any rich people who live in this city," says Abecia. "Some have made money here but then they left to live elsewhere. The old houses are falling into ruins, and their furniture and fittings have been removed. The few things that have been preserved are in the Casa de la Moneda (the Royal Mint)." Abecia is the curator of the museum funded by Bolivia's Central Bank which is housed in this historic building.

In 1572, in colonial times, Spanish Viceroy Francisco de Toledo created a system of forced labor called "la mita". Every seven years, for a period of four months, all males between 18 and 50 were ordered to work in the mines. They were paid a pittance and rarely saw the light of day. Eighty per cent of the male population of the 16 provinces of the viceroyalty of Peru died in these conditions. "Every peso coin minted in Potosi has cost the life of 10 Indians who have died in the depths of the mines," wrote Fray Antonio de la Calancha in 1638.

Mining methods have changed little over the years. The miners still toil from dawn till dusk. Generators pump air into the tunnels so they can breathe. Children still wriggle into tiny places where adults cannot go. Working sometimes for 10 hours or more a day in extreme temperatures, the miners keep going by chewing coca leaves. Two-thirds of the population has respiratory ailments.

"Barely 20 per cent of the mine-workers are actually members of the co-operatives," says Joaquino. "The other 80 per cent are casual laborers who earn next to nothing. They are peasant migrants from the north, the poorest part of the department of which Potosi is the capital."

The historic centre of Potosi, where the Spanish settlers once lived, is today home to a small middle class. It is ringed by a poverty belt inhabited by miners who work in the co-operatives. Both these areas

are surrounded by a wider poverty belt filled with those who have fled the hunger of the countryside to hire themselves out as unskilled laborers in the mines.

Peasant women from the north come to the city to beg. They sleep on the ground in the markets, numb with cold, cradling in their arms the babies they have brought with them. Bernardina Soles has had 10 children. Five of them have died—a grim reminder of an infant mortality rate of 135 per 1,000. Her dream is to take some of her children away from her home village, where they could only have two years of primary schooling. The illiteracy rate in the department of Potosi is 30.8 per cent.

Poverty On A Silver Throne

Mining has always been Potosi's lifeblood. Modern prospecting technology has discovered that the mountain still contains at least as much silver as the Spaniards extracted from it. The Bolivian government has invited foreign firms to bid for the contract to mine it.

In recent months, argument has focused on what form the new mining operations should take. Should the top of the mountain be cut off—this would be the cheapest method but it would disfigure the mountain—or should a horizontal tunnel be bored through to the heart of the ore-bearing rocks?

Geologist Jaime Villalobos, a former Bolivian minister of mines, says “most of the ore is concentrated inside the peak. El Cerro's rock has lots of mineral seams of different sizes suitable for modern methods of extraction. It's economically feasible to remove all the rock, crush it and process it. The cheapest way to extract it would be the open-cast method.”

This means cutting into the top of a mountain that is a national emblem. The people of Potosi are against that: 97 per cent of them said in a poll they would rather starve than see the silhouette of El Cerro disappear and, with it, the World Heritage title.

They would prefer to see a horizontal shaft bored, as UNESCO has advised. However, this option is more expensive. It means digging the shaft and extracting the ore while preserving the shape of the mountain. When he was minister, Villalobos says his investigations showed the Cerro contained “more than half a million tons of silver-bearing ore. But that doesn't mean it's economically feasible to extract because a lot of it is low-grade ore.” The company that wins the contract to mine the mountain will have to study this.

People in Potosi show discontent when they talk about mining. Villalobos understands. Mining, he says, “whether in colonial times, or whether by the private sector or by the state-owned Bolivian Mining Corporation, has taken non-renewable resources from the area and left behind only contamination and poverty. This project should have a built-in guarantee to create wealth for Potosi,” he says.

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Barron, A. (2000). POTOSI'S SILVER TEARS. *UNESCO Courier*, 53(3), 3.
