

No One Ever Walks Here

Excerpts from a Journal by Ingrid Reti
Edited by her daughter, Irene Reti

My parents both survived the European Jewish Holocaust as children. They were flung from Europe across the world. My father and his family (originally from Budapest, Hungary) immigrated to Caracas, Venezuela in the late 1940s, where my grandfather found work as a civil engineer. My father received a scholarship from the Creole Petroleum Company to attend engineering school at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, with the understanding that he would return to Venezuela and work for Creole. (Creole was a division of Standard Oil of New Jersey.) In Boston, my father met and fell in love with my mother, who had survived the war by immigrating to England as a Kindertransport refugee from Nuremberg, Germany. She was reunited with her parents and spent her teenage years in Boston.

My parents married and moved to Venezuela in 1954, to Adaro, an oil camp set up for Creole workers. They lived in a Quonset hut in Adaro from 1954 to 1956, right on the edge of the sea. In 1957, they moved back to the US so that my father could complete his graduate studies at MIT. They returned to Venezuela from 1958 to 1960 and lived in Judibana in a concrete block house.

In Judibana, my mother, then 30 years old, kept a journal documenting her experiences in this isolated and remote tropical enclave of mostly American expatriates.

Judibana Oil Camp, Paraguana Peninsula, Venezuela, 1958-1960

Living here makes your mind get lazy. There's no outside stimulus to help you along. If I can make a schedule for myself to do the housework why can't I schedule an hour a day to do some writing?

I went out in the patio this morning and saw a bunch of straw in the lime tree. I didn't know what it was at first but then realized it was a bird's nest. I came out again a little later and stood there quietly watching a little black and yellow hummingbird busily flying back and forth putting bits of feathers and fluff in his nest. He didn't seem to mind me and I stood there for a long time watching him. I went in and read about hummingbirds in my new bird book.

The wind is blowing full force again this afternoon, pushing the trees to one side and driving everything in its path along with it. I wonder how the birds can fly in all this wind. We are so much larger and we have to lean forward and brace ourselves against it.

No one ever walks here. It seems as though people have lost the use of their legs. The automobile has made us lazy. I have seen people drive rather than walk two houses down the block. I sit here looking out on an empty street, the only movement being the wind pushing the trees towards the north.

Sunday we drove out beyond the old lighthouse, about a 2½ hour drive. It was pretty rough and bumpy driving, but I enjoyed the scenery. Miles and miles of uninhabited monte. Beautiful old mesquite trees with grotesquely warped trunks and roots; donkeys and goats looking for shelter under them. All kinds of cactuses, some in bloom; lizards scuttling across the road, birds of prey hovering up above; song birds flying low over the bush. It's dreary and desolate and yet has a beauty of its own. Then the ocean—powerful and majestic waves breaking close to shore, the water reflecting the sky shimmering in all shades from dark brown to brilliant blue. The sand was soft and springy, littered with shells of all types of marine life, brightly colored coral conch shells, delicate oyster shells, green and white sea urchins.

The lighthouse was old and neglected looking. We climbed up the spiral staircase to the top. On one side, ocean as far as the eye can see, on the other uninhabited monte. Two houses and an old church near the lighthouse. Little naked kids coming out of the house stared at us strangers. Why was a church built here in

the middle of nowhere? Perhaps the fishermen used to come here to pray for a good catch and a safe journey.

We sat out in front of our house for a little while last night. A beautiful starry sky overhead; wind rustling in the palm trees all around us. It's peaceful and quiet here and we do live close to nature. If only there were more intellectual stimulation, more people who have things in common with us. There are days when we both feel very lonely for some friends to share things with.

The little bird is still working away at his nest. I saw him there at 7am this morning, busily stuffing fluff into it. It looks as though the opening is going to be from underneath. In proportion to his size, his nest is going to be as big as this house is for us. A little while later I discovered that he gets his fluff from the patio overhang. There seem to be lots of little feathers stuck and he gathers them up and takes them away. Early in the morning is the nicest time here. I like to just stand quietly in the garden and listen to all the birds singing their songs.

We took a little trip to Punto Fijo to buy some meat. It's a dusty, dirty town. Walking down the streets you have to keep brushing the sand from your eyes. The contrasts are tremendous. On the one hand, ultra modern buildings with beautiful glass fronts, air conditioning and nicely decorated shop windows. On the other, raggedy looking boys and men standing in the gutter selling oranges, limes and tomatoes from their wheelbarrows; garbage strewn all around them; fat flies partaking of the feast. The latest models of Mercedes Benz, Buick, Chrysler, etc. zoom down the street while two donkeys leisurely trot along. Pasaje Zeiter teems

with small merchants selling everything from shoe laces to dresses in their outdoor stalls. Close to them a fishmonger enveloped in flies scales a small red snapper. Huge carcasses of meat hang in the Franco Italiano butcher store; the butcher skillfully slicing off choice cuts. Shabbily dressed women buy lard; Americans buy large quantities of meat to put in the freezer. A man expects preferential treatment because of his uniform; another wearing dirty clothes and sandals patiently waits his turn.

I came out into the patio today and saw a man in back of the fence bending down over a box. Little chirping noises were coming from the box. It sounded like birds and I was afraid he was taking some birds off the trees. I called over to him and asked him what he had. He came over to me with a 2 ft by 2ft wooden box cramped full with 8 or 10 beautiful red cardinal birds. He asked me if I wanted to buy a pair. I told him I liked birds flying free not imprisoned with a net or some other cruel device. A little while later when he was gone I looked out and saw something red lying on the ground. I went out to investigate and saw a dead cardinal he had left behind, a beautiful bird, scarlet in color, a little crown on top of its head. Not so long ago it was flying about singing its song and now it was lying in the dirt stiff and dead. Already, large and small ants were crawling all over it. I got a shovel and dug a shallow hole in the ground, carefully placed it in there and put a stone over its grave. Why do people want to put birds in cages when they are meant to fly free? Man's cruelty to animals is matched only by his cruelty to other men.

I do not believe that any individual American or Russian wants to fight the other. If they knew each other on an individual basis they might like or dislike each other as human beings. But even without knowing each other the desire of the vast majority of people is only to live in peace. And yet constantly we are egged on by both governments to hate each other. We live in a constant state of tension and are beginning to take this so for granted that there seems to be very little incentive towards a search for the solution of the impasse between the two countries. We have almost begun to expect a crisis to flare up in a different part of the world every few months.

I got a letter from Mama and Papa today saying they got the notification that the Wiedergutmachung [Holocaust reparations money] had been granted. \$1200 I didn't really earn. And yet I wish I would have had it in 1945 when I graduated from high school. Then I would have used it to go to college. Even without that, I often wish I would have gone. I probably could have worked my way through if I had tried or gotten a scholarship. The trouble is I didn't know enough about that at that time. If I had gone to college I might have gotten a degree in psychology or sociology and be able to work in that field instead of just as a secretary, although it wouldn't do me much good down here anyway. I really don't know what I want to use the money for now. I want to think it over carefully first before I decide. I know that the part I am going to give away I want to give for something that will promote international understanding and tolerance. I feel that is the only appropriate thing that it should go to under the circumstances.

I wonder why I have such a tremendous curiosity about everything? I saw a gargantuan sea fan on Sunday. First, I thought it was a piece of driftwood. Then I saw a picture of one in the *Geographic* and looked it up and found that it is an animal found on coral reefs. That would seem to indicate that there is a coral reef off the coast of Paraguana. I would like to go back to that beach and look at the different specimens of marine life. I want to read Rachel Carson's book *The Sea Around Us* more carefully and identify them all. There's so much I'd like to know and learn.

I listened to Hamlet on tape this morning while I was ironing. Ironing is an occupation for the hands, but certainly not for the mind and that's why I like to occupy my mind with something worthwhile at the same time.

Two eggs in the warblers' nest now and she spends most of her time there. I managed to peek in one of the times she was absent and saw them. Some animal found the cardinal's burial place and dug it up. Found its little emaciated body lying out back this morning. Covered it up again. I suppose the other birds are using its feathers for its nest.

I enjoyed seeing the market today and the Indians in Maracaibo and observing the people on the ferry. On the whole, however, we are living in this country without really being a part of it or knowing it or its peoples. What strikes me again and again is the terrific contrast in the style of living of the people here. Beautiful villas with chauffeur-driven cadillacs on the one hand; a peasant riding a burro and living in an adobe shack on the other. And what about the adobe shack

with the new Buick out front? Where does that fit in? I try to look into some of the houses as we drive by them in the little villages around here. The standard decorating scheme seems to consist of walls covered with pictures cut out from magazines and newspapers with perhaps one or two photographs of relatives interspersed, a mirror, two or three cane chairs, a couple of hammocks slung back during the day, a small table with a radio on it and a refrigerator (the latter two only if the family is a little wealthier and there is electricity). Occasionally there is an iron cot, with or without a thin felt mattress. Out of the house pour half a dozen people. How do they feel when they see the type of houses we live in, with all their comforts and conveniences? Are they bitter? Are they envious? Or are they just indifferent? The trouble is that we tend to look at everything from the point of view of how we would feel about it. In order to do that, you would have to live like them and among them and speak their language.

Street scenes on Avenida Tachira:

The eggman comes to our street on his motorbike and box-like cart behind. Every Saturday he transports all the kids of the neighborhood in it. Yelping dogs running after the cavalcade. He is Portuguese, polite and very anxious to please, returns two eggs for every one that is bad.

Two maids carrying stuffed paper bags idly swing their hips as they amble around a corner.

A milk chocolate colored boy of about ten, his clothes hanging on him like a scarecrow, whistles cheerfully as he shuffles by, his shoeshine box in one hand, an almond in the other.

A mockingbird comes to rest on the trunk of the palm tree, delivers his latest song and flies off again.

The voices of two children reverberate like thunder in the silent street. A thin, sallow-faced maid shadows them.

Yesterday I looked through some old address books which I had in Germany. Some of the names in them are now only names; their owners lie somewhere in Europe in an unmarked grave. Others I have long ago lost all contact with. I knew there was no point to keeping these books and yet I had to force myself to throw them away.

A newcomers' coffee this morning for the Women's Club. Everybody receives little heart-shaped name tags on entering. Women seated on couch and chairs trying to balance coffee cups and plates, some standing up shifting from one foot to another. Introductions, smiles all around, friendly noises without meaning. Desperate search for something to talk about, some interest to find in common. Relief when a known person enters. Greet her like a long lost friend. Soon run out of pleasantries. What to say next? Some women very boisterous and loud, others self-conscious. All ages from 25 to 55 represented. Lovely centerpiece of tropical flowers on the table. Woman pouring coffee on one end of the table, another pouring punch

in the middle, three heart-shaped coffee cakes between them. Self-service first with constant urging to have more later. Relief when time comes to leave. Great show of how much it was enjoyed, strong urging to come back for a visit.

We drove over to the Shell Club for dinner. Cloudless sky, wind blowing full force. Cattle guards taken out at the Guardia gate; detour through the sand. Gaping ditch running parallel to the road waiting to receive the new pipeline. Coating machine looking as though the pipe was growing right out of it. Brown and white cows with bones and ribs protruding leisurely ambling across the highway. Further on, a more massive cow balanced atop the pipeline. Beyond the pipeline, cactus and mesquite on both sides of the road. Lots of “for sale” signs next to houses already under construction; water spurting out of a leak in the pipeline. Two burros, contentedly drinking.

I started to read an article in the *Geographic* on the firing of Explorer I. Beautiful pictures and most interesting. Yet why do we want to conquer space when we can't even arrange our affairs here on earth properly? Of course, sending a rocket up to the moon sounds far more glamorous than clearing the slums in our big cities, training better teachers and building better schools. Yet the latter require much less money and are far more in need of them. Of course, these rockets do give us scientific data and we have to “keep up with the Russians,” so perhaps there is a need for them. But this certainly cannot be said for the constant making of more and more A and H bombs and their testing. They are just a sheer waste of money, for

even should the worst come to pass and there is another war, they would never all be used.

The warbler's nest fell down today. I picked it up and took it in the patio. It is beautifully constructed, with pieces of cotton, fluff, Kleenex, twigs and reeds.

Too much wind to walk now. Eyes fill with dust and sand. You either lean forward to brace yourself or are pushed from behind. Dog's ears flop. Skirts fly up; curls disappear and hair becomes tousled and wiry. People driving by look at you with astonishment.

We took a trip to Siburna Reservoir and Pumping Station. The speed-hungry V-8 engine of the Ford we rode in carried us past all other cars on the road. On and on we go over the winding road. The hills in the distance are capped with a thick layer of clouds. The sun reflects the glint of scattered ranchos along their slopes. The story goes that up there away from all roads and communication lie fugitives and outlaws and their descendents. They have returned to the "state of nature," and thus they live in the domain of the parrots, monkeys, and wildcats. The arm of the law is not long enough to reach them. We pass a spot where our road has been cut through the rocks. Herds of goats wander aimlessly amongst them, forever searching for enough to still their endless hunger and feed their young. Some look as though they had walked into an inkpot, others as though they sat down in a pot of lime. In the distance are a few palm trees, two windmills and a large, old Spanish Colonial house. Who lives there and why? Perhaps the local boss and landowner, perhaps a man looking for a Walden.

A high antenna points towards the heavens and spelling 20th century scientific progress points the way towards our destination. A barbed wire fence zones off this man-made island boasting electricity and running water. Two dogs bark and then slink away. We walk over to the massive well-constructed block house. A woman is bending over the flowers on the porch, her black skin set off by her red cotton dress. We are in her husband's domain. He is the caretaker of the pipeline. We decline her offer of hospitality, for we must move on, get to our destination. We pass two long turtle-shelled structures and a rusty gasoline drum. Our next stop is a new well being drilled. The triangular rig towers over even the tallest virgin trees. The bit chafes, scrapes and shrieks on its way into the hidden depths—deeper, ever deeper. Soon it should strike that precious fluid and spurt upward, captured and carried away in the lifeline. We drive on, easing the low car cautiously over the high humps. Soon we come to a point where this monster designed for superhighways will take us no further along the rutted rock-strewn road. Civilization must move on. And this is why we are here, to design a road from here up to the top of the hill which will allow a car like ours to pass.

A powerfully built Negro walking proudly erect with a load of wood on his head looks us over carefully. This is his country. We are the intruders. At last we pass inspection and he flashes an ivory smile at us. The survey crew comes towards us, their politely bared heads glistening with droplets of perspiration. Like a Chinese, I step back a few paces to let the men take care of their business. I see a rock by my feet covered with minute black ants scurrying hither and yon touching antennas, telling each other what to do and where to go. Finally, five of them come

on stage with what looks like a long roach leg. In triumph, they are escorted to the city underneath the rock.

Always keeping a proper distance, I follow the men up the hill. Fear of snakes makes my eyes dart continuously from the ground I walk on to the surrounding vegetation. At first the hum of one of the pump motors drowns out all other sounds, but the higher up we walk the more I become aware of the symphony of sounds around me. The incessant chirp of the crickets, the buzz of the bees, the sweet songs of the orioles, the raucous chatter of the woodpeckers, the soft cooing of the warblers all blend into each other. We stop for a long time on the summit of the hill. The more I look around me, the more I see—from the majestic virgin trees next to the gurgling spring, to the minute cactus valiantly growing out of a crag in the rock. The ground is pockmarked with holes leading to an underground city inhabited by snakes, rabbits, and field mice. Far below us, the burning noonday sun mirrors the reflection of the water in the reservoir. Reluctantly I follow the men back down again. If only I could sit here quietly for a while blending into the surroundings, how much more I could see and hear.

This account has kept me busy for the past three days so that I didn't have any time to comment on anything else. I want to devote more time to developing my writing. I wish I could write like Rachel Carson. She is so expressive and poetic and makes the whole seashore come alive in front of your eyes.

I just read that the 100th anniversary of the first discovery of oil in Pennsylvania is this coming fall. A lot of advertisements, books, articles, etc. will be

published at that time. Perhaps there is an opportunity for me there too. Perhaps living in an oil refinery camp from the woman's angle, or something to that effect? This climate is beginning to get me down. I feel like a caged bird who tries and tries to sing but after a while his voice sticks in his throat and he can barely croak.

The wind is blowing so strongly now that whenever I got out I have to anchor my feet firmly on the ground. It pushes and tugs at me to play with it, to be off with it. And yet the butterflies float gently in its arms, undisturbed and unperturbed. Some newly hatched birds in the trees around the house. I am not sure whether they are cardinals or a type of woodpecker. Two warblers were playing a game of tag when I came out to move the hose this morning. They flashed by me like a ray of light.

An aspiring writer who much later in life found success as a feminist poet and book reviewer, my mother always intended to develop these recollections into an article about women's experiences in the Venezuelan oil camps, but was not able to accomplish this in her lifetime. When she died in 2007 at the age of 79, my mother left her journals to me. Her journal about her experiences in Venezuela is over 300 pages of typed manuscript.