

El Dorado Peru

10/1996



The camp goes up little by little and, waiting for supper we gather around the fire to recount the journey. I observe the restless faces of my associates and I study Admiral Guillermo Faura, a man over seventy who has surprised everyone, including himself. He has climbed as high as 4,800 meters above sea level. Some months ago in Lima we had clearly agreed on his participation on this expedition as long as he quit if he experienced any health problems.

It is generally easier to gain my criticism than win my praise. As I always expect the most from everyone, when someone makes an excellent contribution, I regard it as normal. Nevertheless, today I must congratulate don Guillermo. I am glad that he was part of this group of experts representing the three countries participating on this endeavor, particularly because of his profound knowledge of the matter which has brought us here. Faura, former Minister of the Navy, is the author of the only major hydrographic study on the Amazon river. And we have come here to find, in a geographically sound manner, the true original source of the most gigantic river on earth.

THE EXPEDITION

It is cold, very cold. The warm soup gets cold in less than a minute. It seems that the wind seeps through our bones. Around us there is an arid world, wild and with very little vegetation, a great wavy extension called *puna*, which in Quechua means *barren land*, locked between the imposing chain of mountains of the central Andes.

We are presently located 200 kilometers from Cuzco, the ancient capital of the

At a time when hundreds of satellites explored the surface of our planet, the ocean depths and outer space, nobody knew exactly where the King of Rivers was born.

Inca Empire, and equidistant from Lake Titicaca and the Pacific Ocean. The tent protects us more from the wind than the cold. As it is taking me a while to fall asleep, I once more go over in my mind the beginning of this adventure.

I have often wondered, during my passages through the Amazon jungle, who knew from where the King of Rivers springs. While hundreds of satellites continuously search and photograph every corner of our planet and man turns his attention towards the exploration of space and of oceanic abysses, there still remain geographical doubts which lead us to great discussions. One of these doubts was the original source of the Amazon which had not been located exactly enough. Until the fifties, it was the

Marañon which was considered the principal source of the Amazon River. Then it was established that the Ucayali River was longer and, consequently, research was oriented toward the search for the early evidences of this river.

In 1953, French explorer Michael Perrin confirmed Colonel Gerardo Dianderas' thesis that stated, as of 1934, the source of this river was found at Caylloma (department of Arequipa). Although the fact was not initially taken into account, geographers accepted this statement after twenty years.

In 1969, the English journalist Nicholas Asheshov, along with Captain John Ridgway of the Royal Parachute Regiment, maintained that the origin was to be found in the environs of the Mount Minaspatá zone which they had recently visited, but very few people believed them. Ridgway is famous for rowing across the Atlantic Ocean.

That same year, Doctor Carlos Peñaherrera del Águila published the book called: *GENERAL GEOGRAPHY OF PERU*, where he points out that, according to the Instituto Geográfico Nacional's studies, the origin of the said river was at the Mismi Nevado (15°30'49" South Lat. and 71°40'36" west) situated in Caylloma 45 kilometers from Mount Huagra. Two years later, the photographer Loren McIntire, accompanied by mountaineer Richard Bradshaw and geographer Victor Tupa, organized an expedition sponsored by the NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC and the International Geodesic Service. Its purpose was to verify the information presented by the

stream which, most distant from the source of the Amazon River, should be the Carhuasanta River. McIntire claimed that first water traces rose from the tiny lake situated in the hills of the Choquecorao Nevado, commonly called -because of topographic map errors- "Mismi Nevado". However, that location is found two kilometers west of the place indicated by Peñaherrera.

From that time, many doubts were sown. So this is how I came to organize such an ambitious and exalting exploration campaign. Each achievement made by an exploratory mission depends on perfect planning, good logistics and the selection of qualified companions. In order to have a scientific foundation I began to investigate university text books and to research archives.

Early in the year when we arrived in Peru, I contacted local institutions. Ernesto Paredes Arana, the president of the Sociedad Geográfica de Lima, became interested in my idea and offered to help, as well as the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú and the Hydrography Department of the Peruvian Navy, who sent experts such as engineer Zaniel Novoa, Lieutenant Raúl Rojas and Juan Luis Tord.

A week later in Moscow, Professor Vladimir Katiakov from the Academy introduced me to a young scientist, Sergei Ushnurtev, a glaciologist with unusual experience on Central Asian glaciers and whose ability I cannot question at all. In the Russian capital I also met the geographer Rima Chayrutdinova, who far from claiming any privilege because she was a woman, asked for the outset to be treated as one more member of the expedition.

Italy was also represented by Renzo Grego, an old friend of mine who shared with me the thrill of crossing Borneo from coast to coast: 2,500 kilometers of jungle along the Equator.

So now there are eight of us, too many for my taste. Three nationalities, three different personalities. All of us are proud to participate with enthusiasm, which is the spark that ignites harmony in the group, something that rarely happens.

ON THE TRAIL

This morning Serghey and Rima have been measuring the volume of water in the streams Carhuasanta and Apacheta: the results show that the volume of the latter doubles that of the former. After prudent and careful examination of the photograph taken by the French SPOT satellite, we follow the wide main valley which is crossed by the Apacheta River, two meters wide and flowing 150 liters per second. In this manner we definitely rejected the source found by McIntire.

The whole day we explored the neighboring streams: Silanque and

inhospitable, almost inhuman, and silence is absolute. Moving about is quite tiring, we often stop to catch our breath because at 5,000 meters there is about half the oxygen found at sea level.

By this time we have lost interest in most streams, except Apacheta. Early in the morning we start off on our trip to the source of this river: Agustín Achaco, the Quechua Indian who has been with

us from the beginning, has managed to get us two horses. One for the Admiral, the other for Andrés, his aide, the same one who has remained by the sturdy officer's side for twenty years.

The Apacheta becomes narrower and less deep. After four hours along a trail which may have been leveled only at certain intervals by some shepherd with the help of his herd of llamas, we reach the bottom of the valley, a few meters away from the peak of the Quehuisha Nevado. Between the white rocks there are green patches of thick and insipid moss growing, and one or other grassy spot watered by the slightly fermented well from which the Amazon River sees its light.

The altimeter reads 5,170 masl. We can't move for a moment, we remain motionless in contemplation. Then Zaniel, the science coordinator, with the help of a tiny navigational instrument, finds our exact position: 15°31'05" S, 71°45'55" W.

Some dozen meters further above, a slightly stressed line can be perceived: the continental divide between the Pacific and the Atlantic. On the other side of the ridge, the Colca -the deepest canyon in the world- can be seen, as well as the characteristic volcanic cones of the Misti, Chachani and Pichu-Pichu, all of them above 6,000 meters. Over the same divide, short and rapid rivers descend towards the Pacific Ocean. On our side, however, the Orinoco and the Amazon are born, with their majestic tributaries which could also compete with the greatest rivers in the world.

I dip my hand with excitement into the frozen, transparent water of that fountain so apparently insignificant but is the source of the most famous river in the world, the river which maintains all world records: in addition to its length (7,100 kms), also its basin (with more than 6,000,000 square kms) and its volume (more than 180 million liters of water per second) are all beyond comparison.

ACCOMPLISHED TASK

After 25 years of voyaging in the strangest and wildest parts of our globe, when it appeared that the mystery of the unknown and adventure of earthly discoveries no longer existed, there was still the great satisfaction which is the reward for time spent and sacrifices made.

My thoughts are interrupted by Serghey's dark voice which reminds me of another important fact, the Amazon River does not spring from a glacier; as it was always thought. With the change in the weather during the last few years, permanent snows and glaciers, remnants of the glacial age, have disappeared for ever: our river simply springs from permafrost.

From this source of water which is welling up at our feet, springs the Apacheta, which in the valley will join a river with great volume, the Carhuasanta, taking the name Uloqueta; later carrying more and more water from successive tributaries will change its name to Challamayo and then to Hornillos until it becomes the Apurímac. Although a furious river which echoes along the Apurímac, can channel itself into the deepest crevices descending to levels of 4,000 meters of unevenness in a 500 kilometer run, five times more than the Colorado in the Grand Canyon of Arizona. Meantime, the original Apacheta continues its course, modifying once again its name, until it becomes the Ucayali River; the plain widens and, further ahead, when it joins the Marañon, it gives birth to the magnificent river called Amazon. ♦

Jacek Palkiewicz, reporter and explorer, has taken part in many land and sea expeditions. In 1975 he crossed the Atlantic Ocean on a lifeboat. Following the XVIII century explorers' style, he has traveled across the Gobi desert, Vietnam's jungle, the islands of Borneo and the Yangtze river to document his historical and cultural theories.