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## Life and Solitude in Easter Island

Dario Verdugo-Binimelis

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Foreword by Juan Grau

Review by Shawn McLaughlin

Reluctant as I often am to purchase self-published books because of the liabilities associated with them (see my review of Jeff Barbour’s *Blue Planet & Beyond: ...* in the last *Rapa Nui Journal* for a discussion on how horrible this can be), *Life and Solitude in Easter Island* caught my attention because it wasn’t attempting to be a scientific or historical text but a memoir of a time on the island that few Rapanuiphiles, and even fewer people generally, can probably appreciate unless they were there – the early 1950s.

In particular, the author, Darío Verdugo-Binimelis, MD, a physician who received his training in the Chilean Navy, early one day in November 1952 saw in the Chilean newspaper *El Mercurio* an advertisement for a physician to carry out a two-year stint on Easter Island. And, after a family discussion (including Darío’s wife Adriana and their four sons; family plays a very important role in this book<sup>2</sup>), they all said, “Why don’t we just go to Easter Island?” It really was that simple. Theoretically, and even philosophically, anyway. Until the final paperwork was processed and the then 40-year-old physician was told he was qualified to go to Easter Island. That’s when the real fear set in.

But I’m getting ahead of myself. In the introductory material, the author says he wrote the book 50 years after the fact to 1) memorialize his Rapa Nui experience before it faded from memory; 2) expose himself to a kind of self-therapy in dealing with the sadness that nostalgia brings; 3) awaken the conscience of the leadership in Chile as to what’s happening on the island today; and 4) emphasize the “Easter Island/Earth Island” metaphor. The author says the book is not meant to be scientific or historical but it is both and neither, which I’ll elaborate more on below. In the course of nearly a dozen chapters, the author takes us from his family’s bittersweet departure from Chile aboard the old steamship *Allipén*, the 11-day journey across the Pacific to the island (with cramped quarters and yet fun adventures along the way, including a moment of panic when they thought one of their sons had fallen overboard), and their arrival on an island with no electricity, no running water, no

<sup>1</sup> AuthorHouse is a self-publishing company.

<sup>2</sup> So strong is the family connection that the author more or less gets permission from his own mother and father before making the journey to Easter Island. And in the Afterword, written by the author’s four sons – Pedro, Darío Jr., Roberto, and Gonzalo – the importance of family is repeated several times. In some ways a better title for the book would have been *Family and Solitude in Easter Island*.

telephones, no currency, no stores. At that time a supply ship arrived yearly and, even if one conserved wisely, usually by the latter half of the year most of the island's supplies were gone. Sugar, if not kept hermetically sealed, turned to syrup because of the humidity. Bugs got into dry foods. Thus, vegetable gardens were very important and rations<sup>3</sup> of lamb meat were dispensed each week by the "Easter Island Company".<sup>4</sup>

This family's arrival on the island was naturally a big deal and at first the author and his family felt like animals in a zoo, so curious were the Easter Islanders (who often pushed their faces up to the glass windows in the family's house to peer in at the strangers). But the author and his wife and sons were determined and family unity was very important to them. They even drew up a "constitution" of sorts outlining their goals and intentions. And undeniably this sense of unity was necessary for survival, certainly at first. So important that it's quite possible you can imagine they did indeed rationalize their way through the fear and trepidation anyone might experience in such situation. For example, at one point the author goes up on to the roof to check the water tank (water for homes was derived from rain that fell and accumulated in cisterns). He found all kinds of residue in the tank, including dead floating cockroaches and dry leaves. Realizing he couldn't actually clean out the residue without mixing it all into the water supply proper, he left it and they rationalized that, because the water they drank really came from the *bottom* of the tank, it would be okay.

Eventually the islanders accepted the Verdugo-Binimelis family and the author was soon called *taote*, the Rapanui term for a healer with priest-like qualities.

But these people took their responsibilities and their new lives very seriously. Nor did they want their children to suffer from a lack of education; they constructed a schoolhouse adjacent to their home and, having planned well in advance for this before departure by accumulating maps and textbooks, both the author and his wife educated their children, along with (later on) a few Rapanui children. During the family's second year on the island, the author acquired a kerosene-powered generator for a ham radio to communicate with the outside world. In one of the more humorous stories in the book, the author was eventually told by the island's mayor that the radio antenna would have to be lowered a bit because it was taller than the mayor's flagpole and this just wouldn't do!

As a physician, the author recalls with detail (aided by his wife's memory and notes they'd kept) various experiences treating patients, including lepers in the leper colony. Medical facilities were practically non-existent – no x-ray machine, only boiling water from a kerosene generator for sterilization, dental services limited to molar extractions,

sulfa drugs (precursors to more common antibiotics today), and a tiny lab where the author did bacteriological and clinical work, especially with regard to leprosy. He tells amusing story of assisting in the delivery of a breech birth that distressed him greatly because he couldn't fully recall the procedures for handling such a problem, since his training in this area had been so long ago – so he jumped on his horse, raced home, grabbed a medical text, read what he needed to know, returned to the scene of the birth, and extracted the child without further incident.

In another anecdote, he recalls that the Lions Club of Santiago donated corrective eyeglasses for reading (for the elderly population of the island) but some of the younger islanders thought it would be "cool" to wear glasses, so they came to the hospital to try to get them and the author would have to talk them out of it.

There is a comprehensive chapter covering leprosy on Easter Island, which provides a unique historical perspective on its state at the time. The *taote* had 37 patients (representing 4% of the population), 13 of whom were interned in the leper colony, and 24 outpatients with a mild, non-contagious type. The author speaks with great respect about the people infected with this dreadful affliction and how painful it was when he had to tell someone that they'd tested positive for leprosy. Of course, he also relates the great joy he experienced when he was either able to release someone from the colony because they were no longer a threat or because lab tests showed negative results. Indisputably, this man was a compassionate physician who truly cared for his patients and the islanders in general.

In late 1953, a measles outbreak ravaged the island. Two Rapanui who arrived on a vessel from the mainland were carrying Rubella and a few days later the outbreak began. It eventually resulted in 771 cases or 97% of the population of 793 at the time. Despite the author's best efforts, five islanders died but it could, of course, have been much worse because the Easter Islanders had been so isolated from the outside world for so long they never developed immunity to certain diseases. As Nolie Mumey reported in her *Easter Island As It Is Today*<sup>5</sup> (where "today" is 1963), the islanders were particularly susceptible to contact disorders. When the *Presidente Pinto*, a government owned supply ship, would drop anchor on its annual trip, all the islanders would develop a cough accompanied by a sore throat and mild diarrhea, which they called the "Pinto Disease". In fact, the only disease-related benefit to Easter Island's extreme isolation is it was shielded from the Influenza Pandemic of 1918.

But while there was no such thing as routine tourist visits to the island in those days, there were occasional visits by vessels, sometimes carrying important or wealthy clients, and the author reports that the islanders would

<sup>3</sup> At one point the author points out that it would be a nice break to get away from the stress of urban life in Chile that included the "rationing of basic goods", which is ironic because this is largely what happens in the second half of each year on the island long after the supply ship has dropped its cargo and supplies on the island run out.

<sup>4</sup> This would be the Compañía Explotadora de la Isla de Pascua — literally "the company to exploit the island" — founded by 3 Scottish retailers from Liverpool.

<sup>5</sup> Johnson Publishing Co., Boulder, Colorado.

spruce themselves and their properties up to impress the visitors. This disturbed him because he feared it would give the wrong impression of what the island was really like and, in particular, never wanted people to get the idea that Easter Island was just some exotic, south seas paradise. Which isn't to say he didn't appreciate the timelessness of the island. Early during his stay, he walked about with a rapid pace and people would often ask him why. Eventually he learned to slow his pace and came to know the virtues of what he called the "cosmic solitude" of Easter Island:

To be able to appreciate nature at its best: a night full of stars, a sunset, the birth of a flower, the smile of a child. It appears almost impossible to fully appreciate these simplicities of life in our urban cities where we become totally immersed in "things".

So, despite claiming that the book is neither an historical nor scientific text, the author has managed to create both. But only because he has confined his recollections, for the most part, to the two years he and his family lived on the island and therefore the book becomes a time capsule. The solitude is both real and symbolic and this notion is embodied in the author's statement that Easter Island "was an isolated society but without isolated individuals". In some ways it's hard to imagine how one would do this — first, to wait half a century to decide to conjure up these memories, then to actually commit them to paper and pretty much limit the commentary to those two years. And be *reasonably* accurate at the same time. I qualify *reasonably* because the passage of time might explain some of the errors and oddities that show up in the book. I won't dwell too heavily on them, for part of the problem may lie in the fact that this is an English translation of the original Spanish-language memoir, *Vida y Soledad en Isla de Pascua*, and some may be the result of mistranslation or misinterpretation. Others, however, are clearly not.

The frequent use of "s" in Rapanui terms draws attention to itself (e.g., "moais", "tupas"), as the Rapanui alphabet has no "s". "Maunga" is spelled "Maonga" and

"tolomiros" is used instead of "toromiro". The author confuses "paleontologist" for, I think, "palynologist". The islets off the southern tip of the island are repeatedly referred to as "Motu Iti, Motu Tautara,<sup>6</sup> and Motu Nui", the *tupa* is described as a "primitive hut" (which is an erroneous interpretation<sup>7</sup>), and there are frequent references to two colonizations on Easter Island — one from the east and one from west and the accompanying legends of the "Long Ears vs. Short Ears", but presented as part of the actual history of the island rather than in the qualified scholastic terms and conditions we know today. And the author says the second wave of settlers exacerbated the deforestation, though he doesn't say how or why. He mentions the island's coral reef, even though it doesn't have one. And he also claims that there is great lament about Roggeveen unfairly giving the island the name by which it's known to the world — "Easter Island" — because, according to the author, it already had a name when the first Europeans arrived: "Te Pito O Te Henua". Then later he says the actual native name when Roggeveen arrived was "Rapa Nui" — but we know that Easter Island wasn't called "Rapa Nui" until Tahitian sailors gave it that name in the 1860s,<sup>8</sup> more than a century or so later. And he claims that there has been successful reforestation of the "tolomiro" [*toromiro*] tree, which is, sadly, untrue, although there have been attempts.

Some errors can be attributed to the fact that the book is self-published and the author tried to confine himself to the two years he and his family spent on the island — as if he never consulted any contemporary resources while writing *Life and Solitude in Easter Island*. But it is clear that the author had at least some familiarity with more recent source material and this constitutes a problem: the author cannot have it both ways. Either it is a time capsule or it is open season on content, and this disrupts the narrative and eventually the message the book is trying to convey.

That's why the fourth chapter is somewhat disturbing, for the author speaks on behalf of an island *moai* in the first person and discusses deforestation and over-exploitation and soil erosion — things that we are only now beginning to get a handle on.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, and also later in the Epilogue, the author worries about whether the idyllic peace of Easter

<sup>6</sup> There is a Motu Tautara but it's off the west coast near the Tahai Complex. The author here is clearly referring to Motu Kao Kao.

<sup>7</sup> Found mostly around the coast (some 30 exist), *tupa* are round stone towers up to 10 feet (3 meters) in height, with a flat roof and an interior passage — but of an undetermined function. It is thought by some that they were dwellings used by priests to observe the stars in order to predict changes in ocean currents that bring turtles to the island. To call it a "hut" is either the result of a mistranslation or a misunderstanding of the structure.

<sup>8</sup> Actually, according to Hippolyte Roussel, "The name 'Rapa Nui' [was] unknown to the natives. This designation of their homeland was introduced by foreigners or, more likely, by the natives of neighboring islands that would have landed here on whaling ships. No matter whom I asked and how many times, asking over and over again to confirm the truth of their assertions, they always answered, 'We don't know the name Rapa nui — our land has never had its own name — we only know Hanga Roa, Vaïhu, Otuiti, etc., etc....'". Source: "Easter Island or Rapa Nui (1866-1873)" in *Early Visitors to Easter Island: 1864-1877* (Ann M. Altman, trans.) - Easter Island Foundation, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Not that there wasn't speculation on this in earlier days but the author says he could find little or no information on Easter Island prior to their departure and so this *moai*'s "knowledge" is a bit out of place. Of course, within about a year after the author and his family left Easter Island, William Mulloy, as a result of his earliest studies of Easter Island, wrote in a letter to his family that "There is a good deal of evidence that the island was once covered [with trees] but that it was denuded by the prehistoric population". Source: *Island at the End of the World: The Turbulent History of Easter Island* by Steven Roger Fischer - Reaktion Books, 2005.

Island will be eroded by more people arriving from the mainland and even suggests some sort of political policy should be enforced to prevent this, which is particularly interesting since the author and his family are Chilean. He – or the *moai*, anyway – asks if alcohol or drugs will arrive (they have) and if horses would be replaced by noisy motorcycles and motor vehicles (they have). Perhaps more rhetorically, the author asks other questions or raises other issues – like the stratification of social classes on the island (we see some evidence of that today), dilution of Rapanui culture (according to Makihara, only half of the island's residents today are Rapanui<sup>10</sup>), the introduction of crime (vandalism, assault, and even murder has been reported on Easter Island<sup>11</sup>), and deterioration of the Rapanui language (which is probably unavoidable though efforts are underway to diminish the extent of the loss).

Despite its occasional flaws, and because the author wisely chose to largely confine himself to his two years on the island, treating the accounts with great emotion, conviction, and occasional wit, I can recommend this book comfortably to anyone who would like to get not so much an impression of Easter Island in the early 1950s but the impression of a person and his family who lived on Easter Island in the 1950s and truly committed to doing it right – and beyond cultivating a sense of respect for the Verdugo-Binimelis family, in so far as this book's story advances the knowledge about our favorite island, that makes it worth it.

The few flaws are worth overlooking to get a glimpse into life and solitude on Easter Island in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



### **Isla de Pascua: El Sueño Imposible de Antoni Pujador**

by Francesc Amorós

276 pages with colour and b/w photos  
ISBN 84-96483-20-0 In Spanish; soft cover

*Review by María Eugenia Santa Coloma*

A song in the film *El hombre de la Mancha* is called “The Impossible Dream” and it is used for the title to this book, based on the life of Antoni Pujador. This is the story of a dreamer who fell in love with Rapa Nui in the 1970s and made the island and its people a part of his life. From his first visit to the island in 1974 until the end of his days, he desired to remain forever on the island. And thus it happened: his ashes are buried in the cemetery of Hanga Roa.

To write the story of an idealist such as Antoni Pujador, who was born in Barcelona in 1948, appears to be interesting and, if the author defines his own work as

<sup>10</sup> “Rapa Nui Ways of Speaking Spanish: Language Shift and Socialization on Easter Island” - *Language in Society* 34:727-762 (2005).

<sup>11</sup> See many of the entries in the *Rapa Nui Journal* under “What’s New in Hanga Roa” for examples of these types of events.

“enthusiastic”, it is – at the least – a challenge for the reader who hopes that, in addition to enthusiastic, it is exciting.

The book is divided into four parts, including a prologue and an introduction by the author, in which the background of the book is explained. Written in a colloquial language, the first part is dedicated to the early life of the protagonist, Antoni Pujador. In the second part, his first trip to Rapa Nui is narrated. The third part is dedicated to his participation in one of the archaeological expeditions lead by Thor Heyerdahl, and finally, the fourth is related to the end of his “impossible dream”, with some testimonial documents included as an epilogue.

In the first eighty pages of the book, the author reviews the youth of Pujador. Climbing and aeronautics were two of the interests which marked his life and which Amorós describes in detail. For example, the year of the foundation of the climbing clubs, the numbers of members, the head office of the club, etc., is mentioned, as well as lists of the names – all anonymous to the reader – of members who joined some of the hiking groups in which Pujador was involved. All the elevations and characteristics of the mountains he climbed are also described, including the length and the type of rope used in a certain climb or the unevenness of a particular cliff.

Continuing in the same style, Amorós describes – with some errors – the aeronautical activities developed by the protagonist. Not only the different types of aircrafts piloted by A. Pujador are mentioned in detail, but even the number of available seats and the number of cylinders of certain models of aircraft. Here Rapa Nui has fallen into oblivion.

After a first part without a narrative rhythm, in the second part the name of “Easter Island” turns up again, inviting the reader to recover a little bit of interest for the book. Here, the first visit of Pujador to Rapa Nui is narrated, his first friends, and his increasing fascination for a place that would become a part of his life. Some facts are repeated more than once and some biographical notes of people unknown to the reader are included. This part does not lack references to UFOs nor the mysteries hidden in the island's caves. The discovery of a four-headed *moai* and several *rongo-rongo* tablets by A. Pujador is mentioned.

Two chapters are dedicated to the map of Easter Island that Pujador made with the author's cooperation. Here we read many of Amorós' personal references and he states that he is “one of the few persons who can swank about knowing the place in which the Norwegian explorer lived”. He speaks, of course, about Thor Heyerdahl.

And he is the one whom the third part, entitled “1987: Archaeology and Politics”, is dedicated to. Likewise, the image of Heyerdahl beside Pujador is used to illustrate the front cover of the book. It is explained in an anecdote how Pujador took part in the archaeological campaign carried out by Heyerdahl. After a visit to his house in Italy, Pujador asked the Norwegian explorer about being accepted as a member of his archaeological team, and he also asked if he could take his friend Amorós with him, although neither were archaeologists. More than other parts, this one has