

Siamese Twins Go Home to Land

Philadelphia Inquirer

Sunday, Dec. 1, 1974

Where Children Starve

By DONALD C. DRAKE
Inquirer Medical Writer

SANTO DOMINGO, Dominican Republic—The ragged little street band filled the warm evening with a scratchy Latin rhythm as one of the singers, a 10-year-old boy with a dirty shirt and forlorn voice, begged centavos from diners in the open-air cafe.

"Dinero para la musica," the boy pleaded again and again, as people turned to avoid his insistent eyes. "Dinero para la musica."

At that moment in Philadelphia, 1,530 miles to the north, two other Dominican children were being fussed over and treated in one of the world's finest medical facilities — the ultra modern Intensive Care Unit (ICU) of Children's Hospital.

Altagracia and Clara Rodriguez, the bewitching 15-month-old Siamese twins, were getting even more attention than usual because in two days they would be discharged and taken back to their home in the hills, 75 miles southwest of here.

Las Auyamas is 1,700 feet up in the hills, a village of reed shacks and tin-roofed huts. It is without running water, electricity or sewers, and the only form of transportation is Land Rover buses because the roads are frequently washed out by rain.

Las Auyamas is where the twins live.

From here, you drive inland toward San Cristobal, a fading town with a decaying luxury hotel that no one seems to use anymore.

Dipping south and then west, a macadam road carries you past boys riding donkeys so emaciated that their ribs are showing, and girls balancing 10-gallon tins of water on their heads.

Further along, after passing Bani, the roads deteriorate, with gaping holes every 100 hundred yards or so.

Ahead, though, are the strikingly beautiful Black Mountains with a thick white haze obscuring their tops.

Into the hills, the scenery becomes even more beautiful, with 40-foot coconut trees bordering the road. The car was soon struggling with the incline as it climbed higher, the driver taking a curve here, and hugging the road there to avoid an oncoming truck. One more turn and suddenly there is the valley, rich with green foliage and in the distance San Jose de Ocoa.

School had just broken for the day in San Jose and the streets were filled with children — dressed in blue or brown uniforms.

Those in brown attended Escuela Luiza Ozema Pellerano, an attractive school with 1,000 students up to 14 years old. This is where the twins will go if they get past the first six grades taught in their school in Las Auyamas.

The class rose as a unit

when the strangers walked in inquiring about the Rodriguez family. "Do you know where the twins live?" the teacher asked the class.

"In Philadelphia," a girl yelled from the front row.

A few blocks away was the San Jose Hospital. It has 50 beds, equipment for only the simplest surgery and a staff of five general practitioners.

It was here that the twins were born. Dr. Ricardo Velazquez remembered well the caesarean section he performed on Mrs. Rodriguez because she was having trouble delivering.

"I reached in to bring the babies out by their feet and discovered they were connected," he said, adding with understatement, "It was a very big surprise." He told the father that they probably wouldn't survive, but they were still alive two days later so they were sent to Santo Domingo.

Actually, there was every reason for people here to believe the twins would not survive.



Clara and Altagracia Rodriguez

They come from a country with an average family income of \$430 a year, where 70 percent of the citizens are malnourished and, therefore, susceptible to disease, and where the life expectancy is 58 years, compared to 70 in the United States.

The infant death rate is 50 per 1,000 live births, almost three times that of the United States, and 46 percent of all deaths occur among children under four.

Whooping cough, measles, tetanus, tuberculosis and diphtheria are all major child killers. But underlying most of the illness is malnourishment.

They come from a country with an average family income of \$430 a year, where 70 percent of the citizens are malnourished and, therefore, susceptible to disease, and where the life expectancy is 58 years, compared to 70 in the United States.

The infant death rate is 50 per 1,000 live births, almost three times that of the United States, and 46 percent of all deaths occur among children under four.

Whooping cough, measles, tetanus, tuberculosis and diphtheria are all major child killers. But underlying most of the illness is malnourishment.

It makes the children susceptible to internal disorders, draining water from their tissues, forcing them to vomit and eventually killing them because of dehydration.

Diarrhea, which is not a pediatric problem in the United States, accounted for 70 percent of all Dominican deaths — child and adult — in 1971.

At the Robert Reid Cabral hospital, the 310-bed children's hospital in Santo Domingo where the twins were taken two days after their birth, the Rodriguezes were told that little could be done for their daughters in the Dominican Republic. The country's medical system just couldn't handle it.

The medical director at the hospital is Dr. Hugo R. Menloza, a soft-spoken man with gentle eyes and a slight air of sadness. The government pays him \$300 a month as medical director, so in the afternoons he keeps private office hours — a common practice here.

Dr. Mendoza was giving a visitor a tour of his hospital. When he got to the swinging doors of the emergency room, he paused. "What do you say in English?" he asked. "Ah yes . . . Here is Dante's Inferno."

Dramatically, he swung open the double doors. Inside were 30 crying, moaning babies. They were lying on five long tables, a half-inch board separating one from the next.

Long Tables

On one side of the long tables were the mothers. On

the other side, hanging from overhead pipes, were the bottles of dextrose. A tube led from each bottle to the forehead of a child where it was implanted in a vein.

Dehydration. These were the babies who were so severely dehydrated by their diarrhea that they needed emergency care or else faced the likelihood of dying. One case a week like this would be unusual in the United States. Here, there were 30.

Many months earlier, when the twins arrived at Children's Hospital for their operation, they, too, were somewhat dehydrated, anemic and had vaginal infections.

In the future, though, the twins should be better off. They were given every immunization known at Children's Hospital, and Dr. C. Everett Koop, who led the surgical team that separated them, has made special ar-

rangements with the Medical Assistance Program, a non-profit organization running health and food programs in 82 countries, for the twins to get vitamin and protein supplements.

Very few Americans, of course, get the kind of medical attention the twins received in Philadelphia. For 82 days, until their release on

Thanksgiving, they were watched constantly by one and sometimes two highly trained pediatric nurses.

The most modern medical equipment and a skilled team of surgeons, physicians and nurses were required to separate them in an operation that took 10½ hours.

The cost was all donated. But under ordinary circumstances the fee would have been \$200 a day per child, or \$32,800. And that doesn't count the cost of physicians and ancillary services.

By way of contrast, there is the 300-bed Hospital Dr. Dario Contreras, the only orthopedic hospital in this country and thus the facility to which the twins will be sent if they suffer any serious bone-related maladies. It is one of nine hospitals here to offer free medical care for the poor, and most natives are poor.

Only recently has it installed an intensive care unit, but, it is equipped with none of the beeping electronic monitors, suction pumps or oscilloscopes common in the United States.

"The only thing we monitor here is blood pressure," said Dr. Donald W. Ross, of California, a CARE doctor teaching orthopedic surgery to Dominican physicians.

Dr. Ross stode past the rooms full of patients, joked with a couple of men who were in traction, saying something in broken Spanish, and then went down the stairs to the Sala de Ninos, the pediatric ward.

Strangely Quiet

The unit was strangely quiet, for malnourishment makes children quiet. One room had 10 cribs, and almost every one of them contained a child with a cast on one of the limbs.

"Osteomyelitis," Dr. Ross explained, holding an X-ray film up to the light. Even an untrained eye could see the gauges and holes in the bones. Osteomyelitis, a severe infection of the bones, is not a major pediatric problem in the states, but malnourishment impairs a child's ability to fight off the infection which eats the bones.

Another room was filled with children with big bellies, spindly arms and huge pleading eyes, the hallmarks of the malnourished. Many of the children had burns, another common problem because open fires do the work of the safer electric or gas stoves used in the United

At the hospital in San Jose, where the twins were born, the people said it would be difficult for the strangers to find Las Auyamas. So someone came along to guide.

Hard surfaced road had disappeared by now, replaced by a gutted dirt road. The beauty was breathtaking. Royal palms, as high as six-story buildings, reached up into the sky with huge white birds perched on the heavy leaves. Cows stood on the hillsides at what seemed like impossible inclines eating grass. Wooden shacks with brightly colored walls popped up in clusters here and there.

A two-foot deep pocket of water cut off the road near Las Auyamas and the last half mile to the Rodriguez house was made on foot. On all sides, reaching steeply upward, were the lush hills, almost obscuring the sky. Here and there were coffee bushes or an orange tree or heavy palms.

Smile of Welcome

The twins' father was standing at the counter of his open, roadside produce store. Recognizing me from his trip to Philadelphia, his eyes opened wide in surprise and his face filled with a huge smile.

The twins' house is made of wood with a concrete floor and a corrugated tin roof. The walls are bright green with red trim. On one wall is a picture of Dr. Koop.

The house consists of two small bedrooms, a small living room and a kitchen. There is no electricity, no sanitation.

The twins will sleep with their parents. The other five children sleep in the second bedroom.

Still, the house is neat, more substantial than most in the small, isolated community.

Many people leave Las Auyamas to work in Santo Domingo or Puerto Rico, but most return when they have some money. It is home and they like it. There are no locks on the doors, and the people all know each other. They travel to San Jose on weekends when there is a good band in town.

Sickness, Poverty

There is sickness and poverty. In August, when it becomes very hot, diarrhea strikes and sometimes a child dies. Six months ago, one of the babies died of diphtheria. But the people here say there is also love and friendship.

It seemed incredible that from this remote part of the world, the word of the Siamese twins could spread to Philadelphia. It had passed through a line of relatives to Puerto Rico, and then to Mrs. Diana Zimnoch of Warrington, who brought it to Dr. Koop in Philadelphia.

And now, one day before Thanksgiving, the day the twins would be released from the hospital, Rodriguez asked about his famous daughters. He knew that *Ladies Home Journal* was going to pay \$10,000 for exclusive rights to their story. But he didn't know that they would be returning in only a few more days.

He said he hopes to use the money for a house in San Jose. He'd keep the business in Las Auyamas, and commute on weekends by Jeep bus.

By now, night was beginning to fall, the moon clearly visible in the poor village with the green house.

It was hard to grasp that the same moon was shining in Philadelphia.