

SOTÓN. THE HONOUR OF THE MINE. BRIEF REMINISCENCES OF A VISIT TO THE MINE

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On the surface, before heading for the pit, we shed everything; we leave behind the March sunlight that is shyly making itself noticed behind a greyish mountain and the mist that a fresh morning breeze is breaking up and twisting, we remove our clothes and carefully place, in the cabinets of the mine building, all our certainties, our confidence and our daily garments and we dress with nervous uncertainty donning the garments and footwear that one of our guides has kindly given us. Underwear, socks, vest, used blue overalls, a leather belt that goes round our waists and features several straps and buckles to which we must attach the basic tools of the trade and some lone heave-duty Wellingtons. We adjust the strap on the helmet to the size of our heads and put it on. Minute by minute, as this investiture ceremony takes place in the dressing room, we receive another item of equipment that adds to the weight and to the feeling that we walk becomes slower and more clumsy. The light on the helmet with its battery and a breathing device in its metallic case that we have to strap to the belt and wrap around our bodies. We are instructed on how the manual breathing device works, we are told that we will have to use it if the gas indicator points to an excessive concentration of coal seam gas or a sudden fall in the level of oxygen; instructions that Llanos and Ángel, the miners who will guide us through the galleries, give us serenely and in a matter of fact manner to reassure us. It is the beginning of a trip to which I have been kindly invited by Guillermo Laine and Iván Fanjul, who belong to our group.

I shyly greet the person responsible for the boarding process. It is a blonde woman, young, one of the women who have managed to break the historical barrier of rejection that, until a few years ago, hindered their chances of working inside a mine. I observe how she lifts the door to the cage and I get in with mixed feelings of anxiety, expectations and respect.

At Sotón, the cage is a narrow enclosure with thick metal walls against which you lean, avoiding the tracks and gears that occupy the central part of the floor. The descent is dizzying, our means of transport shakes and wobbles over the void, pushed around by the currents of air and the hostile reaction of an environment that seems to want to repel it. We listened to the humming

sound that occurs every time we passed the entrance to one of the galleries, a “tzsummm”, “tzsummm”, “tzsummmm” combined with a sudden brusque shudder of the cage. In the time it takes a normal person to walk a short distance at a comfortable pace, a peaceful stroll in the light of day and under the transparent dome of the sky, we have traversed 500 metres of hard, damp and gloomy rock where not the slightest glimpse of sunlight can reach.

We are in the depths of the earth. In this underground city it is night-time and the most absolute silence and darkness reign everywhere. A long, wide avenue, a gallery with robust fortifications, black like the night, extends to a point on the horizon that we fail to distinguish. It is a majestic achievement, also disturbing, built by men with their hand; men who have struggled each day to keep the avenue clear and open in the face of the constant pressure from the rocks capable of crushing any construction however robust and that force them to strengthen, support and inspect every section of the gallery.

There are no lights on the walls or ceilings and only the light from our helmets penetrates the darkness, like a drill in the coal seam, with a yellowish and vaporous ray that dies out after a few metres and fades as it confronts, exhausted, the impenetrable darkness of the tunnel. We often direct the light towards the ground, as we have to avoid a number of obstacles that the light from our torch fleetingly discovers and then leaves once again submerged in darkness behind us.

Like the remains of a battle that has ended just before we arrive, the galleries are full of machinery that emerges every so often from the shadows, bulky wagons standing on their iron tracks with a load of equipment, metal structures and timber for the shoring, or piles of heavy steel arches that will be used to build the front structures as the coal face advances.

One of the liveliest impressions that a mine produces is the intense feeling of territoriality perceived in all the spaces; a jealous territorial feeling, proud, that, as in valleys, forests and villages on the surface, drives people to give every important area a name, to humanise them with adjectives that speak of a powerful awareness of emotional ownership over these work places. The galleries, just like streets, have numerous signs and posters that inform us of our location in the immense work area or of particularly dangerous places, of the orientation of the galleries or seams that were exploited for a time and then sealed off once the seam was exhausted. They may be wooden signs with words or topographic marks or the almost

ceremonial and mystic presence of a Saint Andrew's Cross, indicating the passage from a safer section to a more threatening area.

Even more surprising than this type of official warnings is the extraordinary ritual of writing they represent, equally a document of daily memory and heritage that increases the enormous value of this mine. Wherever you set your eyes for an instant, directing the light from your helmet on the wood and bars of the structures that hold and support the rock, there you will find an endless number of messages written in chalk or using a marker. It is an unfinished wall of graffiti, sometimes overlapping, that occasionally interrupt each other and reappear in another preferential transit area on the way to the seams. These are messages that miners leave for others or for posterity, a silent but loquacious dialogue, sometimes strict and harsh, like a game of chess played with words, used to exchange opinions, move verbal pieces in an attempt to outdo their opponents. The tone of these messages can be derogatory or assertive, insulting or funny, sharp or aggressive. Swear words and insults coexist with accusations, severe sentences and instructions or words written with spelling mistakes on purpose to mock a colleague. The word "hentybadores" written on a support timber especially attracts our attention.

The work face and the seams are equally given women's names or other more general designations but not by chance (María Luisa, Esperanze (Hope), Refugio (Shelter)) and it is not unusual for some of them to refer to almost human and temperamental attitudes of the coal and rock, such as "La Mala (The Bad)", an unsettling epithet that the person accompanying me in this sections preferred not to explain. These names do not only personalise the work area but also provide a more accurate location of the areas or the position of a piece of equipment if you have to give instructions to a colleague. "Gallery 7 north, between Shelter 3 and María Luisa" could well be one of these references.

The path towards the work area is strewn with cables and pipes, the arteries and veins of this powerful underground organism, with functions that can be distinguished by their size, the material from which they are made or the red and blue tones we see under the light of our torches. The emotions add up to the tension of finding ourselves in a living universe in full operation. The intermittent and roaring hissing of an air leak or a valve can surprise you in the dark.

Walking in a mine is an experience of constant hesitation where your feet and hands are used to feel and lean on any solid mass that provides support, you stumble and you are constantly trying to stay on your feet. You fine tune your senses and carry on forward towards another unknown area. The ground is a mass of dry earth or caked mud in the best sections and a quagmire, sometimes flooded, into which your boots sink, in the worst. In abandoned or sparsely transited galleries, water filtrations transform the surface into a pond of opaline colours with a clay and ochre bottom where the iron tracks remain submerged. The drain ditch is overflowing and I am warned of the dangers of stepping on it, as in some areas it is waist deep.

The contrasts in colour, so many times described in mining books or by the miners themselves, are formidable and appear when you least suspect for a short space of time. In one of the main ventilation galleries, the powerful air current hits you in the face and the impact is even greater if the vent is opened. Then, oxygen precipitates, gathers at the opening and escapes with the energy of a hurricane to the next section of the gallery. This is why it is so important to close these vents and this is why Guillermo did not miss the occasion to show me the flags, the controls with the aspect of metal pendants, that control the opening and closing of vents on both sides of the panels. In some places, this fresh air prevails if your route follows the ventilated area longitudinally, but if you turn into a cross gallery off the main route, the living feeling of clean oxygen disappears after a few metres and is replaced by the torrid heat and the dry atmosphere in which you absorb rather than breathe the air that is as thick as if it were liquid.

Long before the flashes of tiny lights can be glimpsed in the distance or some dun-coloured silhouettes can be seen moving around, the nearness of a work face can be felt. Suddenly, there is a concentration of equipment or lines of wagons filled with overhead timbers, there are more cables and we can see a niche carved into the rock where there is some piece of specialised machinery, such as an ATU. The metallic structure of an ambulance is noted for its singular presence among this accumulation of elements. The noise increases and becomes deafening once we have reached the work face. The gurgling of a drain pump seems to cough; a rhythmical and unmistakable “Pop, Pop, Pop” that has earned it the nickname with which it is most commonly known: “popolito”. In this universe, the machines also take on more familiar nicknames that soon make us forget their real technical names; a custom that, after all, is respectful and displays affection, that acknowledges the importance of these devices, essential for the work being performed, the maintenance of the site and for survival.

The first sight of a slope is startling. A 50 degree slope that hurtles into the depths of the earth. The ramp is burnished by the constant sliding of materials that polish the surface and, in spite of the darkness, make it shine like a mahogany platform. We make our way down a steep stairway that borders the slope; narrow wooden or concrete steps that force us to take short steps. We need to wear gloves as we have to hold on to a metal and chain handrail to keep our balance. At the end of the cul-de-sac, we can finally see some miners stripping the coal from the face. One of them is using a sledgehammer to weaken and crack the coal seam. They constantly look up to the top limit of the seam, as Guillermo points out to me, because that is the most vulnerable point and from where the mine may cave in. His colleague, crouching, deftly cuts timbers that they use to support the first openings provisionally until the final supporting structure is put into place. The heat is unbearable in spite of the ventilation systems, the air ceases to flow and the atmosphere is denser than ever. The miners are sweating copiously and the range of noises is so overwhelming that they need to use earplugs.

In a world that hardly has any geographical spaces left to conquer, a globalised world, with roads, sea lanes and airlines connecting every corner of the globe, miners are some of the few human beings who are still discovering and going where no-one has been before, into the heart of the rock.

Another extraordinary trial awaits us at Sotón before making our way back. The second route will take us into abandoned or totally unused areas, the “return to vacuum” that begins and ends in the shaft and where empty wagons accumulate, along sections where the thrust of the rock walls has been so strong that the supports have collapsed or bent but still resist the pressure and where the galleries get narrower at each step.

In addition to the unique lesson on mining one obtains from the mine, Sotón offers another trip, clearly perceptible in this second area. Time travel that takes us from the latest technology to the most primitive working systems, as if we travelled back in time during our visit. And, from that past, we have the challenging “J”, the vertical well, narrow like a chimney and with timber props, which connects with two mining levels. Entering the “J” is taking your emotional tension and impact to another level. You crawl along the ground in the narrowest and least steep area or you hold on to the posts, always respecting that old miners’ slogan of having three points of support (two hands and one foot, two feet and one hand). At the end, when it becomes absolutely vertical and your body is snaking among the structures, you have to

wait for your colleague in front to reach the end. If not, you could cause pieces of rock and dust to fall on his head, putting him in danger.

The J and a new timber structure between two galleries, which evokes ancient or medieval techniques, takes us to the last section before reaching the shaft and the cage. At various points along the route, we drank some sips of water, a necessary custom, as Guillermo explained, if we want to avoid dehydrating.

We reached the surface again. The day is windy and the pale sky of the morning has given way to a splendid sun that pleasantly warms our backs. “It is always wonderful to exit the mine and find this sun”, Llanos tells me. And, I agree. That is another feeling we always try to explain in Arnao; the first instants after leaving the darkness of the galleries behind and that, thanks to the coastal location of Arnao, is amplified as you come face to face with the open horizon over the sea. Here, in Sotón, the dark green landscape of the hills and the mines relieves your sense of sight in a more delicate manner.

I feel stunned and exalted, that state of mind that one experiences when one has been subjected to an intense intellectual or sensory experience, weary and finally unforgettable, an experience that is so intoxicating that you are not aware of the fatigue of your mind and body, as if you were still mesmerised. Guillermo, Iván, Ángel and Llanos are still kind enough to take me to the machinery room. I listen with attention to Guillermo’s explanations, intermittent given the overwhelming symphony of noise from the machinery. I cannot fail to admire the majestic beauty of these industrial devices that, with their pure colours and convex and circular shapes, have the appearance of avant-garde art. However, somehow I am not completely there, I have not yet come back from the dark galleries or the slopes that lead to the abyss or the stifling atmosphere that envelopes you and then swallows you like the tube of a wave.

In twenty years dedicated to history and cultural heritage, I have experienced many situations, feelings of happiness and frustration, I have witnessed extraordinary discoveries that have caused enthusiasm and I have visited hundreds of sites, buildings and landscapes that awaken the unique emotion of the past but I think nothing that I have read, my knowledge or my research have prepared me for the intense experience of visiting a working mine, of walking in its depths that are still in use and witnessing such a heroic and proud occupation with my own eyes.

I later confess to Guillermo that the wealth of images, sounds and sensations I discovered in Pozo Sotón have captivated and overwhelmed me. I was unable to forget what I saw that weekend, or the feelings, the smells or touching things for the first time. I think of Sotón and of the people working there and I try to ensure that my words are respectful. I think over the adjectives I use to describe my visit to the mine very carefully. I'm afraid many will be frivolous and inadequate if we take into account that I am speaking of a hazardous occupation, of workers who are still there, at the seam, mining the coal, while I write these lines.

I am certain spellbound. I remember that I went into the mine with a green notebook in which I noted information on the fly and that I can hardly read in many cases now; I toured the mine shaft with hundreds of questions in my mind and the desire to learn absolutely everything. However, as I advanced along the galleries, I stopped writing and I ceased talking and only very occasionally contributed to the warmth of a conversation. I simply listened and kept silent. Reverential awe is a more appropriate concept if I have to define my emotions at Sotón.

Consequently, I believe it would be a mistake to consider Pozo Sotón a museum in the conventional meaning of the word. For most people, a museum is a building or a space that put together after the demise of a culture, of a settlement or an activity, like a tomb or a cenotaph in which funerary remains are placed and the most beautiful dowry is exhibited. Sotón is a living experience that should not be allowed to die, a place with a cultural and human significance, full of frozen images, attitudes, thoughts, experiences; a tribute to mining that serves as a reminder, that enables us to understand the courage and dignity of the miners, the majesty of the constructions they built in this subterranean world and the whole set of contradictory sensations it brings to light. Words, aromas, sounds, equipment, rock, coal and water, shoring, slopes and wells; it is all there in Sotón, where the honour of the mine is also preserved.