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Whispering Sadness

The case of the Patagonian Indian Human ZooIn Paris and Berlin in 1881

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Mots-clés :

Silent kidnapping in the Patagonia, South America

The story is not complex, but it is a true story. It happened over a century ago in South America, Chile. But it is also a story full of violence and amazement. Before the turn of the last century, a German merchant or entrepreneur was navigating the southern tip of the Patagonia in South America and the Strait of Magellan. The Patagonia is the southern most tip of South America where the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans meet. You probably cannot find a more desolate place on earth. Winds blow at enormous speeds. Freezing temperatures are rampant and the sea is very turbulent. Survival was almost a daily challenge; these barren lands are good for raising sheep flocks. And colonizers some decades later did so.

Hunting Indians: a good business

The German merchant navigating these desolate lands became fascinated watching at a distance the *Selkman* Indians that lived in this region. They went by almost naked and survived in clans and families closely tied to an inclement weather. They hunted seals and other animals for their living. Some of these Indians also light night fires to keep the warm in camping's. So many tribes were called "*fueguinos"* the Spanish word for "fire-lighters." Yet their thousand old customs and ecological integration, was in itself an amazing human feat that had been going on for generations and centuries. The German merchant, let's call him "Otto", became almost entranced with seeing them live this "primitive life". Mr. Otto dreamt of a good business exposing these rare Indians in a human Zoo in Paris and then the Berlin Zoo. Why not?

Catch the Damn Indians

So he ordered his sailors to capture some “savages” Indians. He boarded them into his ship and sailed to Europe. His aim: a human Indian Zoo in Paris. Of course since no authority was around and the Indians were considered sub-human, he didn’t care to ask for any permission whatsoever to do the kidnapping. He just kidnapped all these men into slavery. Believing, perhaps, he was in his own right to do a good business. A few weeks later upon arriving in Europe (by ship) with his “human cargo”, of Patagonian Indians, he went by land to Paris and then the Berlin Zoo, and established this special “human zoo”. He then displayed the desolate and troubled slave Indians. So he probably made a god profit.

 Naked selkman Patagon

Silent Deaths and Naked Burial

However, as we know, from the historical record in France, the Selkman Patagon Indians died a few weeks later in solitude and probably of sadness in Paris; by the humiliating behavior of their “civilized” European curators and businessmen. Their corpses then were taken secretly to a Zurich Museum in Switzerland. To make a long story short, some Chilean descendants in 2009 discovered these remains. The Chilean government of President Michelle Bachellet set up an Air Force plain to Europe to carry and repatriate the remains of the Zoo Indians to Chile, back again more than a century later.

 Selkman Indian Hunter

Silent Recovery and Honor Burials

Their remains were received with honors in Santiago, Chile sometime the second week of January 2010, silently. Upon arriving to Chile they had military honors at the airport. Descendants of their ancestor’s were allowed both to escort the trip to and from Chile to Europe. The remains of the Indians were then taken by plain to the southern Chilean city of Punta Arenas. The President also commanded a Navy ship and later a small boat to navigate six hours to a far off Island in the Straight of Magellan, to a cave, were their remains were silently buried in total privacy. Their Indian descendants had located certain caves were their sacred remains should lie forever.

Back in Chile their remains were then covered respectfully with skins of sea wolves and other local burial traditional implements by their relatives, descendants that still harness these traditional crafts. During the burial rites, no press or media of film was allowed. During six hours a silent escort of the Chilean Navy ship and then a small boat traveled the lonely and wind canal region, until reaching the Kurunkinká Island. In a

cave, their eternal remains lie forever.



Paitned Selkman Paatgon Indians
This story was reported in the Chilean newspaper “El Mercurio” in January, 2010.
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