

Colony of the Damned

Bizarre allegations plague a West German settlement

To the impoverished peasants of Chile's rural Seventh Region, the arrival in 1961 of *los alemanes* (the Germans) seemed at first like a godsend. The 60 or so blond, blue-eyed settlers of Colonia Dignidad (Dignity Colony) quickly set to work constructing what they called an "educational and benefactory society" on the site of an old ranch near Parral, 250 miles south of Santiago. Before long the newcomers had built a model community that offered many of the area's 20,000 residents access to employment, trade, free hospital services, an elementary school and, eventually, even a European-style restaurant on the nearby highway.

In recent years that utopian vision has gradually given way to a darker, more sinister image. According to accounts provided by former Colonia Dignidad residents, the colony, which now numbers about 350, has become a virtual prison camp under the control of its founder and leader, Paul Schäfer, 66. A self-proclaimed psychologist, Schäfer fled Germany in 1961 with his small flock after police launched an investigation into charges that he had sexually abused two boys.

Schäfer has also been accused by former colony residents of engaging in the illegal importation and manufacture of light arms. Most chilling, perhaps, are accusations by victims and ex-agents of Chile's dreaded intelligence service, DINA (renamed CNI in 1977), that Colonia Dignidad has been involved in the torture of leftist opponents of the military regime of General Augusto Pinochet Ugarte. "These are gruesome matters," says Hugo Baar, a colony co-founder and a former associate of Schäfer's, who calls the colony a "group that has become poisoned with lies."

The first sign that something was seriously amiss came in 1966 when Wolfgang Müller, then 20, escaped from Colonia Dignidad for the third time and begged the West German embassy in Santiago not to send him back for fear he would be killed. Müller, who now lives in West Germany under a different name, claimed that Schäfer had molested him when he was twelve. He told of regular beatings and the use of electroshock and narcotics by camp doctors, and described Schäfer as a dictator who condones drug experiments and torture and enforces hard la-



bor from sunup to sundown.

The colony again became the object of international attention in 1976, when a United Nations human rights commission report identified the camp as one of Chile's detention centers. The next year the West German branch of Amnesty International denounced Colonia Dignidad as a DINA torture center. The colony responded by launching a defamation suit in West Germany against Amnesty International, a legal dispute that continues today.

Last February four former Colonia Dignidad members went before a Bonn parliamentary subcommittee and described their lives as regimes of terror. Lotti Packmor, 55, who left the colony with her husband in 1985 and now lives in Canada, said she had seen young boys given injections in their testicles and described Schäfer as having beaten a young girl until "blood spurted from her nose." Added Georg Packmor: "No one dares

even to think of escaping." A colony spokesman denied the charges and said that such alleged witnesses were mentally ill, alcoholics, adulterers and drug addicts.

One of the most serious blows against Schäfer came from the testimony of Baar, a onetime member of the colony's inner circle who escaped in 1984, leaving behind nine children. Baar decried his former colleague as a paranoid dictator who rode around the compound in a bullet-proof Mercedes-Benz carrying weapons and ammunition.

Later the same year, the unexplained disappearance of Boris Weisfeiler, a Moscow-born U.S. citizen who was hiking near the colony, aroused the concern of the U.S. State Department. Since then, a Chilean government investigation has concluded that Weisfeiler drowned in a nearby river. U.S. officials consider the case still open. The Pinochet government has given the colony its tacit support. West Germany, for its part, has been reluctant to speak out against Schäfer in the past because of close ties between Colonia Dignidad and officials at the West German embassy in Santiago.

That reluctance has begun to fade. Last fall, in connection with the Amnesty case, a West German judge asked the Chilean courts to arrange an inspection tour of the colony. Last week the managing director of Amnesty International's West German section announced in Parral that inspections of the surrounding terrain have so far supported testimony by former DINA prisoners who claim they were taken to Colonia Dignidad to be tortured. During the next two days a group that included a Chilean judge, Amnesty Attorney Maximo Pacheco, colony lawyers and representatives of the West German government was allowed inside the colony. According to Pacheco, the group identified four underground rooms that matched descriptions by DINA torture victims. The visitors had less luck with their request to interview Jürgen Szurgelies, 24, who was returned to the colony by local authorities after escaping last month. The West German embassy in Santiago has initiated a case in a Chilean court to put Szurgelies under legal protection, and the court is expected to decide this week whether he was taken to Colonia Dignidad against his will.

Meanwhile, some human rights officials are afraid that Schäfer, if pushed too far, might take drastic action. Said Baar: "I fear for the lives of the Dignidad people if it comes to conflict there. I am certain that shootings cannot be avoided, and I say that out of deep conviction." —By Guy D. Garcia. Reported by James Graff/Bonn and Laura López/Parral



■ Paul Schäfer, the leader of Colonia Dignidad ■ A nurse on duty in the ambulance room of the camp's hospital ■ Colony members assembled for a meeting inside the guarded compound