

When 33 Miners Were...

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# Buried Alive 2,000 Feet Under!

The story captured headlines across the world for months. It was as terrifying as it was dramatic. Thirty-three miners working deep, deep in the ground were buried alive. A rescue at such a depth had never been attempted. The chances of getting them out alive were remote at best. Then, amidst the hopelessness, one person—a businessman-turned-politician—decided to undertake the impossible. Would he be able to get them out alive? Would he even succeed in finding them?





**I**t was hot in the Atacama Desert region of northern Chile on Thursday, August 5, 2010. A bus carried a group of miners along the narrow, pothole-ridden road leading into the mountains outside the city of Copiapo. They were heading to the San Jose Mine to work the day shift.

Shortly after the bus arrived at the entrance to the mine, nightshift workers emerged, covered in soot and drenched in sweat. They barely acknowledged the newcomers, who now boarded a truck that would take them deep down inside the mine for their 12-hour shift.

The opening of the mine was in the mountains, 2,600 feet above sea level. To descend into the bowels of the Earth, a road (called “the ramp”) meandered and wound downward deeper and deeper. This road was the only entrance and exit to the San Jose Mine. Large quantities of copper and gold had once been mined from near the surface, but that supply had been exhausted long ago. Now miners had to travel deep below to find more of these valuable minerals.

Seconds after the truck entered, the miners were plunged into utter darkness. From there the ramp followed its unpredictable course. Sometimes it ran straight for a while, then it would twist and turn—hairpin turns, in some places.

From time to time, the truck passed openings measuring 75 to 100 feet wide. These were ancient caverns that had been emptied of the precious ore many decades earlier. Now they lay there mutely, no longer serving any purpose.

The San Jose Mine was an inverted skyscraper. Opened in 1889, the uppermost layer was dug out using shovels and pickaxes. As the mining industry grew more sophisticated, the mine was dug deeper and deeper. By 2010, the winding ramp stretched three miles. The mine itself reached 2,300 feet—nearly double the height of the Empire State Building!

In all, there were 35 dayshift workers, ranging in ages from

19 to 63 years, descending to their worksite that morning. They were well compensated by local standards. One of them, Carlos Mamani, was a Bolivian farmer who had just started at this job five days earlier. Another one, Franklin Lobos, had been a well-known retired professional athlete who had tried several post-sports careers before joining the workforce at the San Jose Mine. The group’s supervisor was Luis Urzua, known respectfully to his colleagues as Don Lucho.

Most of the miners knew each other well. Among them were also two pairs of brothers: Pablo and Esteban Rojas, and Florencio and Renan Avalos. Some had medical conditions that should have disqualified them from working in a mine, including high blood pressure, obesity and breathing issues. One suffered from emotional disorders. Among the “perks” of working at the mine was that the workers were not subjected to a physical exam before being hired. Still, most were strong and healthy men who were well-suited for the arduous work.

## San Jose Mine

Though more than a century old, the San Jose Mine still produced enough gold and copper to warrant sending miners deep underground to extract the ore. The mine belonged to the small San Esteban Mining Company that maintained its own processing plant in Copiapo where the ore was refined. San Esteban had 300 employees in all.

The owners of the company were a pair of middle-aged Chileans, Marcelo Kemeny and Alejandro (Alexander) Bohn, both of whom were of Hungarian descent. They worked mostly out of their office in Santiago, capital of Chile. From time to time, they would visit the San Jose Mine up



Map of the site of the San Jose Mine.



An aerial view of a copper mine in Atacama Desert.

north, the only mine the company owned, to see the situation firsthand.

Marcelo Kemeny, a friendly unpretentious man who the miners got along with well, was viewed by the men as a bungler. He had inherited the company after his father passed away in 2000. In the ensuing four years, San Esteban became so plagued with problems that Kemeny was forced to bring in Bohn as a partner. Bohn, who was Mrs. Kemeny’s brother and a childhood friend of Kemeny, invested \$800,000, most of his savings, into the San Esteban Mining Company and succeeded in turning it around.

Before partnering with Kemeny, Bohn worked as an executive for the British-Dutch company Unilever, based in London and Mexico City. There he specialized in taking over failing businesses and getting them back on their feet. By the time he returned to his family in Santiago, Bohn was worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. Instead of spending it on luxuries, though, he invested his money in San Esteban.

It was not long before Bohn realized that this was not going to be the best deal of his life. Because he wanted to help his friend and brother-in-law, he had not researched San



A scene in the Atacama Desert.

Esteban as thoroughly as he perhaps should have. Only after becoming a partner did he discover that the company had a history of mining accidents and was deep in debt.

Still, Bohn’s business acumen made the company profitable. Copper prices were climbing and the bank agreed to extend the deadline for the loan payments. The workers were paid on time and although Bohn was not particularly friendly to them they knew that they were indebted to him for keeping their jobs.