

8

The Nation, Vol. - March 23, 1940: "Notes on Puerto Rico, II" by  
Freda Krehwey



This letter is not a "report"; it is a commentary on things heard and seen in two weeks in Puerto Rico. Anything more would be an impertinence. Only a visiting Congressional Committee could base a report on such casual evidence. I begin with this warning because I noticed in a recent issue an over-optimistic announcement of "reports" to be made at intervals by this editor. Call them notes and I'll feel happier.

It is unnecessary to talk about the two chief scourges of Puerto Rico, but no visitor can avoid it. Poverty and political corruption meet you on your arrival and trail you until you leave. They are flagrant and pervasive. They all but obscure the beauty of a fine countryside and the good work of honest public officials. They dominate education - the university as well as the lower schools; they pervert justice; they make the democratic institutions of the country a sour joke. They collaborate in ruining an island created by nature for pleasure and abundance.

Corruption is as open as the sunshine. On the day we arrived my husband and I met a single small but revealing example of how things are supposed to work. The Assistant Commissioner of Education, Oscar Irizarry, a Puerto Rican who was educated in the United States and worked there before his appointment, met us at the dock and helped us through the elaborate formalities connected with landing a car that belonged to a college on the island and so could come in without paying the customary 10 per cent excise<sup>e</sup> tax. We waited in an office of the Interior Department while the necessary documents were prepared. While we stood there Mr. Irizarry was approached by a Republican member of the Puerto Rico Senate who loudly demanded, in the presence of several employees and ourselves, that the Assistant Commissioner dismiss a number of employees in his department who happened to be members of the Liberal Party. It was well known, he said from the eminence of



his own political detachment, that they were playing politics. With good humor and firmness Mr. Irizarry declined. He patted the Senator on the shoulder and said, "You know I can't dismiss these people for no reason except that they are Liberals. Show me proof of improper conduct and I shall act at once, but not on flimsy, general charges." The Senator was angry and insistent. He said that he would find a way to get at the Assistant Commissioner. "We can't oust you because you are appointed by the Commissioner and he is appointed by the President. But we can slash your appropriations and that is what we will do". The Republican-Socialist coalition, of course, controls the island legislature.

The incident is insignificant compared with dozens of others which I heard about rather than witnessed. Political scandals involving millions of dollars that found their way into the pockets of Senators and Representatives and their friends have been uncovered, proved, discussed in the press, and then forgotten. If they have come into the courts they have been thrown out by judges who know where their political and financial fortunes lie. More often they have been suppressed by influence and money before legal action got under way.

Politics dominates appointments to the university, the appropriation of funds for buildings and salaries, the choice of lecturers. A university instructor said to me: "Teaching is freer under Trujillo than under our board of trustees. In Santo Domingo several eminent Spanish Republican scholars have been given posts in the university. We couldn't get those men in here". The rector of the university, with whom I talked at some length, is not a reactionary or a politician. But he yields to pressure and acts or refuses to act out of fear; his fate and that of the university are in the hands of the politicians and he knows it. A more defiant character might stand up to his overlords, but to fight would take courage and might well mean defeat.



The result is a curious one. Many liberals teach in the university, and much imaginative work is done there. Intellectual ferment is in the air. The students are excited about politics, particularly exasperating question of Puerto Rico's political status. Many of them are radicals. On the other hand academic standards are low and academic discipline slack. During my stay I visited the Polytechnic Institute at San German, a Presbyterian college headed by an able American director, Dr. Jarvis S. Morris. The contrast was startling. Hard work and discipline were evident; a friendly atmosphere pervaded the place and the students seemed interested and alert, but the stimulation of political turmoil was wholly absent, as remote as in a denominational school in the States. Perhaps this is healthy. At any rate it is a fact that students dropped from the Polytechnic for low marks can go into the university. The Polytechnic is a small school, but it may serve as a yardstick with which to measure the academic level of the university.

Politics affects the university in tangible as well as intellectual ways. The buildings recently put up with federal funds are imposing and beautiful. But a desire for display seems to have outweighed good sense and planning. The new college theater is larger, more elaborately equipped, more elegant in detail than most of those on Broadway. The building is air-conditioned. The dressing-rooms would satisfy the most exacting movie star. The acoustics are perfect. Certainly no university in the United States that I know of can boast such a theater.

But the University of Puerto Rico has no funds for scenery. It cannot afford to turn on the air-conditioning or even to operate the lighting system. It has no drama department or money to spend on one; in fact, there is not even a dramatic club in the university. The theater stands there, empty and unused, as fantastic a demonstration of conspicuous waste as I have ever seen. It cost, by the way,



about three-quarters of a million dollars. Meanwhile university salaries are low. The English department is housed in a one-story wooden structure that looks like temporary army barracks. The science department is inadequate.

Perhaps these and other equally apparent defects may be remedied later on. The rector and many of the teachers and students earnestly hope that their institution will become the long-discussed Pan-American University. If that is to happen, the men who directly or indirectly control appointments and the expenditure of funds will have to show a new interest in education and a new disinterest in politics. Nothing I saw or heard inclines me to expect any such revolutionary change.

Next week I shall add a few notes on the social and political situation in the island, especially on the remarkable campaign of Luis Muñoz Marín.