

Shoeshiner or boot polisher is an occupation in which a person polishes shoes with shoe polish. They are often known as shoeshine boys because the job is traditionally that of a male child. Other synonyms are bootblack and shoeblack.

Up my street – along your road

1

The time had come. Emma was sitting in the plane with her parents. She wasn't nervous. She had already flown a few times before. But this time it was going to be such a long flight: they had already been in the air for 10 hours! La Paz: it lay more than 10,500 km from Frankfurt, with two short stopovers in Madrid and Santa Cruz. La Paz, Bolivia, is in South America she checked it out with her dad in the Atlas. He had already been there a few times before and was now on his way back to advise a company of hydroelectric power. In the previous weeks he had enthusiastically told the family about a land full of contrasts which was also described as the Earth's mosaic. There were all kinds of vegetation, all kinds of climate zones from desert to salt desert, from subtropical valleys and rainforest right up to the Highlands of the Andes mountains of about 4000 m. Emma was going to live at 4000m above sea level from now on. Just imagine it!

The German city that she lived in was just about 20m above sea level! The highest mountain in Germany, the 'Zugspitze' wasn't even 3000m high. Would she notice the difference? She thought about her home, her grandparents, her best friend Marie, the old neighbour, Ben, to whom she had enjoyed reading. She hadn't really wanted to go. But nobody had asked her. Instead her parents had told her enthusiastically about the big house they were going to live in and her new school. The worries she had about how she would express herself without being able to speak Spanish had been completely overlooked by her mum with the explanation she was going to a German school, where lessons would be in German. Amidst all these ideas Emma fell asleep.

2

"Look Emma," said her dad suddenly. "We'll soon be there. You can see La Paz down there."

Emma rubbed her eyes and looked out of the window. She loved her dad far too much to show him how sad she really was.

"Wow," she cried full of shock, which on this occasion was real, not acted. A sea of small colourful houses dazzled her as the sun's rays reflected from their roofs. She had never seen a town like it before. It lay in an enormous basin, surrounded by mountains on the summits of which was snow. Would one be able to go skiing there?

As Emma went down the aircraft steps she clung tightly to her dad because she suddenly had the feeling that she was in a boat.

"That's because of the altitude, you'll get used to it," her dad said.

Whilst they were waiting to get their passports stamped with their arrival Emma checked out the people in front of her in the queue. Dad was bigger than most of them by two heads. Even Emma proudly recognised that she was almost as big as the Bolivian woman in front of her in the queue. In her class she'd always been one of the smaller ones. It felt great to finally belong to the bigger ones.

In front of the airport four taxi drivers accosted the family, wanting to take them into the town centre. However, Emma's dad preferred to go in one of the small white buses. A man was already standing on top of the bus strapping down the luggage. Whilst he was doing this the bus had filled up and now there was only room to sit at the front next to the driver's seat. The family of three squashed itself onto the two seats available. No seat belts. The driver drove off with a jolt. Emma felt that he had confused the accelerator with the brake. At the crossroads instead of stopping he hit the accelerator and hopped in three or four leaps across the junction. Emma held her breath as the bus from the Al Alto airport drove down to La Paz. The view that she had of the city was indescribable. A sea of houses was spread over the hills, proudly overlooked by the Illimani, the local mountain which seemed to protect the city. The closer they got to the city centre the more congested the streets became. The bus made slow progress. The streets were full of people. It seemed as if all of life happened on the street. It was bright and loud. It wasn't until they reached the southern side of the city where they were due to live that it became greener and somehow more European. Here it almost looked like Germany, more orderly, quieter but also more restricted, more sealed off.

They had to walk the last stretch. They hadn't got much luggage with them; their things had been sent in a container a few weeks before. Standing in front of the house Emma was struck with new ideas, and newly built house, hidden behind a high hedge, at least as nice as the house they had in Germany. There was even a nice big garden with a little swimming pool!

3

Emma had acclimatised herself well over the last four months. The German school which was one of the most expensive in the country was fabulous. Her classmates were nice and most of the lessons were given in German. Now it was winter holidays, in July! But it was really cold, particularly at night. Because of this lots of her friends had gone back to Germany on holiday and Emma didn't really know what to do with herself. Eventually she was able to persuade her mother to go into the city centre with her. She had never been there other than on the day when they arrived. Down in the south city there was everything which they needed and apart from that her mother could get everything she needed with German and English, her Spanish wasn't so good, which irritated Emma. Luckily Emma had Spanish lessons in school. She wanted to be able to speak with the people on the streets.

Just like before she was thoroughly impressed and enraptured by the hubbub on the streets in the city centre. You could buy everything you wanted and needed on the street corner; supermarkets weren't needed. You could get Coca-Cola here and there - a cure for altitude sickness, (she was advised to drink a lot of it) in addition to cocatee which wasn't always available, and something sweet.

Emma's mum wanted to buy one of the colourful pieces of cloth in which the local women carried everything on their backs, children and everything else. She wanted it as a tablecloth. However, they quickly recognised that things like cloth and colours and tools were not available everywhere and you could only find them in certain places, but then the whole street would be full of them. It was a mystery to Emma how number three in the street would make a living by selling them.

They wound their way slowly through the higgledy-piggledy alleyways. It was uphill all the way. Emma's mother had to stop every so often to catch her breath. The altitude was still giving her some trouble. But she didn't want to take a bus. There weren't any bus stops and neither was there a timetable: somehow the people seemed to know which bus they had to hail to get aboard. For Emma and her mum it was all completely new, the chaos, the stench of the exhausts of the vehicles crawling up the hill.

After what felt like an eternity they'd found the right street. Emma's mother went from stall to stall checking out each and every piece of cloth very carefully. Emma got bored. They all looked the same. Surely it couldn't be so difficult to choose! On one stall there was a TV showing a Disney film. Emma stood watching, captivated and didn't recognise that her mother had moved on. At one point she laughed heartily. Behind her back somebody else laughed heartily, too, and she turned around. She got a big shock. On the same level she saw only a pair of eyes, the rest of the face was covered with a mask. She looked the boy (or was it a girl?) up and down and discovered a box in his hand. The boy had noticed that he was being checked out by Emma and he had to laugh again.

"Haven't you ever seen a shoeshine boy before?" he asked.

"No, though maybe yes, I don't know. You really frightened me. There are shoeshine boys in our part of town but they don't wear masks. Why are you doing it? Are you hiding from someone?"

"I don't want anyone to know that I work as a shoeshine boy. There are all kinds of comments and insinuations in school. But now you know. My name is Raúl. What's your name?"

"I'm Emma."

"You don't come from here, do you? Are you on your own here?"

This was the moment when Emma noticed that her mother was no longer standing at the stall. And certainly she checked around her, her mum was nowhere to be seen. What should she do? Raúl noticed that she was close to tears.

"Come with me, we will soon find her."

He took her by the hand and asked at every stall if they had seen a gringo, a German woman. Emma saw her mother at the end of the street. She was wringing her hands and talking with a policewoman who didn't really seem to understand her. Emma and Raúl called out loudly each in their own language. Emma's mum turned to them and threw herself upon Emma.

"Where have you been? You can't simply run away!"

Meanwhile the policeman had approached and was screaming at Raúl, "Get away from here!"

Emma came between the two of them and explained in German, "I didn't run away. You simply carried on and left me standing there!" Then she turned to the policeman and said in Spanish, "That's my friend Raúl, he helped me to find my mother again."

At this point the policeman withdrew from the matter. Even though Emma couldn't see his mouth she saw the smile in Raúl's eyes,

"Thanks," he said, "nobody ever defended me before!"

Then Emma's mum took notice of Raúl. She also looked him up and down and apologised to him. She slipped a 10 Bolivianos note into his hand, which was unwelcome to Raúl, he didn't want to accept it. It seemed to him that she just wanted to do it out of sympathy, but 10 Bolivianos is the equivalent of 10 pairs of shoes polished. With this money and the money that he had already earned he'd be able to buy the medicine for his little brother and go back home right away with it. If he got a move on he'd be able to get back home, do the washing and perhaps go and play football with his

friends. So in spite of everything he accepted the money, noticing that Emma and her mother were both at their wits end he hailed a taxi for them and explained to the driver where they had to go.

4

A week later Emma was once again driving into town with her parents. The package had arrived for them which they had to fetch from the central post office. When they arrived there Emma heard someone calling her name above the noise of the traffic. Confused, she turned round but couldn't see anybody that she knew. For a second time she heard her name being called and she was looking down the street to the left and right when someone who had been sitting in front of her stood up. The face was covered with a mask. "Hi Emma, how are you?"

Her confusion was completely apparent until she recognised the boy. It was Raúl. Emma introduced Raúl to her father as her rescuer and asked if she might stay outside with him whilst her parents collected their parcel. At first they were a little sceptical but then agreed and went inside. Raúl gave Emma his little stool which she sat on clumsily, whilst he sat on the floor. "It's not exactly comfortable," said Emma. "Do you sit like this all day long?"

"I've got used to it. I've been cleaning shoes for the last two years," replied Raul.

"How old are you then?" asked Emma.

"I'm 10," replied Raul, "and how old are you?"

"I'm just nine. So you started work when you were eight years old. You're not allowed to do that where I live in Germany. Don't you go to school?"

"Of course I do. I mainly clean shoes in the holidays, in order to earn some money, so that I can support my mum."

"What? You mean you're not even able to keep the money for yourself?"

"It's for all of us. Everyone helps as best they can, otherwise there wouldn't be enough."

"My big sister and her baby live with us and then I've got three younger sisters. My little brother Gabriel has fallen sick, so we're worse off than usual."

Emma didn't know how to reply to this. She'd never had to even think about money. She'd never even considered that things might be different for other children. She was a little embarrassed at the thought. Fortunately at that moment Raul had another customer and didn't appear to notice Emma's embarrassment. Emma watched Raul with amazement and tried to recognise the individual steps involved in his work. In the end the client's shoes were highly polished, he tossed Raúl a coin and left. He didn't even thank you or say anything to you.

"That's disgraceful. You ought to defend yourself," she protested.

Raúl had to laugh: "I didn't even notice that, and in any case I have become used to it. Most people don't even recognise us. I'm really pleased that they let me clean their shoes and as long as they pay that's okay."

Shortly after this Emma's parents came out of the post office with the parcel. Emma quickly asked Raúl, "Is this your regular place?"

"Nearly always," he said, „you can come and visit me again."

5

Raul counted his money: eight Bolivianos, about one euro or 1 pound. That was just about enough for a sandwich for a midday meal and the cost of his bus ride home. He'd have to work for a few more hours. Gabriel needed more medicine and money for his next doctor's appointment. The boy

thought about Emma. He was amazed how much he had already told her about his life although he hardly knew her. She already knew much more about him than his friends from the neighbourhood and school. And despite everything she seemed to like him. Of course he had noticed how quiet she had become when he explained how the money was completely inadequate. Such problems were completely new to her. He had to laugh about how quickly she could get angry about something which had nothing to do with her. She also couldn't seem to understand that he was wearing a mask so that he wouldn't be recognised. I should defend myself, she told me. But how? If I had to clean shoes without wearing a mask then everything would be worse for me. Of course it's not bad work, even I know that. In fact I enjoy cleaning shoes and I can also support mum with it. Apart from that I'm my own boss and nobody can tell me what to do.

"Hey! Wake up you sleepy head. Clean my shoes!" Raúl was rudely awakened from his thoughts and quickly buffed up the shoes which were standing in front of him. He concentrated completely on the shoe and didn't dare to look up. Emma would have certainly been frustrated yet again!

Raúl was wide-awake again. In the ensuing hours he had a few more clients so that by evening time he was able to make his way home, satisfied. The journey home was long and he had to change buses and finally walk home a couple of blocks. Through the bus window he watched the sales girls sitting in their coloured skirts on the pavement with their goods laid out around them. They didn't earn much money as Raul had found out from his mother who had had to give up her job as a washerwoman because of her rheumatism. So now this was the only way she had of earning a living for her five children and grandchild. Earlier, when her husband had been working in the mine and they hadn't lived in the city she had all day at home and was able to look after the family but since his death every single Boliviano which came into the house was of incalculable importance. Raul was very proud of the fact that he was able to help to feed the family by his shoe polishing.

The sun had already disappeared behind the Illimani, the second-highest peak in Bolivia. Raul loved these moments when little by little the lights went on everywhere and the city became a sea of lights. Before he went home he quickly bought some bread and eggs. He would be longingly awaited by his brother and sisters and even more welcome when they saw the eggs in his hand. Today there would be scrambled eggs.

His mum gratefully accepted the eggs. Everybody took up their plate quickly and sat on the beds. The family only had two rooms and a small cooking area. Raul's mother and big sister slept in one of the rooms with the baby. Raúl and his brother and sisters slept in the other room. Because there was so little room they each shared a bed, but this meant there was a table and chair where they could do their homework. They shared the toilet with other families in the backyard. They all ate in mum's bedroom which wasn't quite so small and was therefore more comfortable.

"When I'm bigger I'm going to build a third room on the house," thought Raúl.

Raul told his mum about the second meeting with Emma and also that she had no idea about the important things in life.

"I can't go out and say to everybody look here I'm a shoe cleaner. Everybody thinks we're criminals, glue sniffers and alcoholics. You can see for yourself how even Uncle Edwin is always slagging off shoe cleaners!"

His mum drew him to her: "In my opinion they can all know that you're a shoe cleaner. Without your help I often wouldn't know how on earth we were going to eat or how we would be able to pay for

the medicines. I'm really proud of you. But I can understand that you don't want to tell anybody. People are so full of criticism and when they're not well themselves they quickly find someone else in a worse position whom they can cut to pieces."

"But it would be great if people like Emma could understand what our life is like, said Raúl.

"I've got an idea," said his mother. "Somewhere here we've got an old shoebox. The next time she comes she can also have a go at cleaning shoes. That way she'll get an idea of what it's like for you. You can also invite her. I'd like to get to know her."

Raúl looked at his mother with delight. Somehow she always found a solution for everything. He would do it just as she suggested.

6

Over the next few days Raúl hoped Emma would show up again. She didn't. She could only go into the city with her parents. What he didn't know was that every day Emma had been giving her parents an ear-bashing, begging them to take her into town. In the German school they had long holidays in July and August, but in the Bolivian school there was only a two-week winter holiday, and those two weeks were now nearly over. If she couldn't get into the city soon then the holidays would be over and she wouldn't see Raul again. She didn't even know where he lived. In the end her father gave in.

"You can come into town with me today. I've got to go close to the post office. You can go and see Raúl whilst I am there. But you don't move from that spot!"

Emma jumped for joy and quickly got her things together. In her opinion the bus took much too long. When they arrived at the post office she looked all around her. Today there were a lot more shoeshine boys there and she was not at all sure that Raul was there. But then she recognised him by his shoes. She approached him and put one of her shoes on his box. Raúl immediately went to work. Emma looked down at her shoes which were in sore need of a good clean. Raúl didn't look up until Emma started to laugh. Only then Raúl looked up.

"That's a nice surprise. I thought we'd never see each other again. I'll do your shoes quickly and then I'll show you my nice surprise."

Emma said goodbye to her dad and reassured him that she wouldn't move away for the next two hours. Shortly after that Raúl took her by the hand and they went to a nearby stall. Raul said to the sales girl, "Dona-Maria, could you give me the bag that you've been keeping for me for the last few days?"

The woman looked at the young couple and gave him the bag with a smile.

"Now I'm curious," said Emma. "What have you got in there?"

"Everything you need to be a shoe cleaner: a box with a seat, brushes, polish and buffing cloths, a mask so that no one can recognise you and gloves so that no one can see your light-coloured hands."

"Oh that's super", she looked down at herself and laughed. "Good job that everything had to happen so quickly at home and I didn't put my best dress on and simply left my jogging trousers on."

Raúl and Emma walked on a couple of metres where Emma could put on the mask whilst out of sight. On the way back to the post office she even felt as if she was a different person. Whereas as a white blonde little girl everybody smiled at her friendly, it was as if she now didn't exist. Her view

between the cap and the mask was very limited and she had to pay attention to be able to follow Raúl. Carrying the shoebox made walking no easier and consequently the box accidentally hit another passerby.

"Watch where you're going you idiot!" screamed the man at her.

Emma was shocked. This wasn't at all what she had imagined. The man also hadn't noticed that she wasn't a boy.

At the post office they settled down at Raúl's old position. Immediately other shoeshine boys came and said that she couldn't polish there. However Raúl introduced her as his girlfriend and she was then permitted to stay. Raúl then explained that the whole of the city centre was divided up amongst the shoeshine boys and virtually every one of them had his own fixed place. Otherwise it just wouldn't function. Those without a place are quickly squeezed out by the others. Beneath the mask Emma was slowly getting warmer and was itching everywhere. The uncomfortable seat didn't improve the matter.

"You polish first," she said to Raúl, "I'll watch how you do it one more time so that I don't polish the first client's socks."

After Raúl had polished another two pairs he said, "You've got to do the next one."

Shortly afterwards another client approached. "This one is okay", said Raúl. "I clean his shoes every day".

"Hello Ramiro", the man greeted Raúl. "How are you? Are you going to clean my shoes?"

"I've used up all my brown shoe polish but the shoeshine boy next to me can polish your shoes, sir."

Emma looked at Raúl nervously. He smiled reassuringly back at her, "You'll do it okay!"

The man heard it and asked, "First time, is it? Well, let's see how you are doing. With such a good teacher it can only be good."

Even Emma became less nervous at these kind words and began to work her way through the shoe cleaning process. Raúl showed her again which was the next step. Under the mask Emma was sweating a lot but she finished the task and then proudly inspected her work.

"Thank you," said the man and disappeared with these words.

"He was really nice," said Emma, "you could at least tell him your proper name."

"Perhaps maybe someday," replied Raúl hesitatingly. The next hour passed very quickly, despite the fact that both had virtually no clients. But they talked and laughed a lot together. Suddenly Raúl said, "Here comes your dad again."

"What so soon?" Both children watched as Emma's father approached. He looked at both shoeshine boys suspiciously. He abruptly went to another boy and asked if he had seen Raúl. The shoeshine boy stole a glance to Raúl who stood up.

"Where is my daughter? I told you that she wasn't to move away and I trusted you to look out for her. You've both disappointed me. Where is she?"

Raúl looked down at Emma who could hardly stop herself from laughing.

"Dad, I'm here, and I haven't moved away from the spot."

Emma's dad looked at both of them, perplexed. Not until Emma stood up did a laugh emerge.

"Well look at that, I really didn't recognise you. Let's go get an ice cream together, my treat!"

"You sure have to because I've earned enough money for the bus ride back and I did that within two hours", said Emma.

Whilst eating the ice Emma's dad had good news. "I just heard that because of the cold weather your school holidays are being extended by one week. Raúl, if you would like you can meet one another more often over the next couple of days. It really worked out well this time. But in future you're only to sit next to Raúl, Emma."

"Okay," said both children, smiling fit to burst.

7

From the children's perspective the next couple of days went far too quickly. Emma had hardly arrived at Raúl's spot when her father was coming to pick her up; at least that was the way it appeared to them. They had so much to say to one another. Raúl wanted to know about Germany and she showed him photos so that he could imagine it better. Additionally she taught him a couple of German words every day. Raúl learnt quickly and after a week reckoned he would be able to greet and part from somebody and offer shoe cleaning in German.

As the school holidays were coming to an end, Raúl's mother reminded him that they wanted to invite Emma to their place. Raúl had been putting it off. What would Emma say when she came and saw the way they lived? She was certainly used to something quite different in Germany, and also in the south city side in La Paz. But then he grabbed the nettle and asked her father if Emma might accompany him to his home. He would bring her back to the post office at the pre-arranged time. Emma's father agreed because he had taken to Raúl's kind, responsible ways.

For Emma the journey seemed unendingly long. She'd lost all sense of orientation. Raúl lived in precisely the opposite direction to hers. Whereas she had to go about 500 m down into the south side of the city he had to go to the north side and about 500 m higher than the city centre. When they finally reached the little gate to his home Emma was tired out. The children went into the backyard via the gate. There were lots of things standing in the corners of the yard which led onto some doors to the houses. Raúl explained that a large part of his family, uncles and aunts and cousins and some other people lived there. A smiling woman walked out of a wooden door. She was wearing a coloured skirt and her long black hair had been plaited into two long pigtails. She beckoned the children in and greeted them very warmly. People emerged from all sides and surrounded Emma, greeting her warmly with kisses and hugs. Emma was completely overawed by such warmth. She sat herself on the bed and was given a blanket for her legs and a hot cup of tea to warm her up inside as well. Although it was early in the afternoon it was unbelievably cold because of the strong wind. Emma looked around for a heater only to discover that there wasn't one. How cold would it be at night? She now understood very well why the winter holidays in the state schools had been extended by a week and why the children went to school an hour later in the winter time. Without heating it would have hardly been possible to do otherwise. It was cold, small and cramped, loud, but nevertheless right from the start Emma felt really comfortable in Raúl's family. The community, the laughter, the little sisters who were always pulling at her hair to check out if it was real. Everything seemed to make Emma really happy. Raúl himself relaxed as he saw how at ease Emma was in his family.

Time passed and Emma had already been in La Paz for nine months with her family. On this particular day when she came home something was different, Emma recognised it immediately. Mum had cooked her favourite meal, Spaghetti Bolognese, Dad was at home which was also unusual for this time.

“What was school like?” asked her mum.

“Good. I got a 2 in maths.”

“Great!” replied her parents in chorus. They were quieter than usual and during the meal they took stolen glances at her. They were keeping something secret from her.

“What’s wrong? Why are you being so funny?”

Her dad cracked and said in a tense voice, “Darling we’ve got to tell you something important. I just got a very good job offer back in our hometown in Germany. We’re going back to Germany in two months’ time!”

Emma didn’t know how to react. She felt particular joy at the thought of seeing her old friends Marie and Ben again, particularly because she hadn’t been able to get on too well with her classmates in La Paz. But then as she started to think about never seeing her best friend, Raúl again her joy turned to sadness. How was she going to tell him and how would they be able to keep in touch with one another?

Over the next weeks Emma and Raúl didn’t talk much about her parents’ plans until the point of the last meeting at Raúl’s home when they had to say goodbye to one another. Raúl comforted her and promised her that they would meet again one day and suggested that they should keep in touch with one another by letter. Emma was very sad and nearly couldn’t hold back the tears when her mother came to fetch her. Emma said goodbye to Raúl’s mum and thanked her for the many days that she had spent with them.

That last night Emma couldn’t sleep. She was thinking about Raúl and the long flight and the meeting with her old friends. On the journey to the airport she looked out once again over the city and the Illimani mountain. She remembered the way they had arrived in La Paz and everything which had happened and what she had come to learn to love; above all she remembered the many lovely hours she had spent together with Raúl. But now she was simply tired and sad. When would she ever see Raúl again? She was determined that this was not going to be her only visit to La Paz.

Two weeks after her arrival back in Germany Emma found a letter in the letterbox. It was from Raúl. She immediately started to write a reply and took the letter to the post office with her mother.

Dear Emma,

How are you? I hope that you got back to Germany okay and that you were warmly received by your old friends.

I miss you a lot and hope that in your reply you can tell me a lot about your new old home,

Yours Raúl

Dear Raúl,

I'm fine, thank you and I hope that you are, too. Not much has changed here, however, it's exciting to be home again. If only you could be here to see everything for yourself.

Today we're having a party to which my parents have invited all their old friends. My friends are going to be there, too. I'm really looking forward to seeing them. You're the only one who's missing!

Yours Emma

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One year later:

Dear Emma,

In school we've got new computers and so we now get IT lessons. We've each been able to set up an email address. I'm always really delighted about your letters, but it will be much easier by email, don't you think?

In school I'm now in the music group and I play the Quena. Do remember it? It's a flute and very typical for our music. In the beginning I couldn't even get the sound out of it but I've become really good at it. I always practice hard whenever possible. Fortunately it doesn't get on my brothers and sisters' nerves so I'm able to practice in the evenings.

Since February I've been in secondary school, class 2. That means that I have lessons every afternoon. It's not so bad because I go into La Paz for 5 o'clock in the morning and polish shoes until nine. That way I can at least help a bit putting food on the table. We've all developed big appetites and Mum doesn't know how she can cope with all the cooking.

Look out for yourself,

Best wishes

Yours Raúl

Dear Raúl,

That's a good idea with the email address. I really like the letters but it always takes so long to get an answer from you.

I also changed schools in August and I'm in class 5 now. Unfortunately the school is not just around the corner as it used to be. I've now got to ride my bike 6 km to school. It would be fine if only there wasn't so much rain.

My new classmates are really quite nice but some of them only wear designer clothes, and think that they are something better because of that. For that reason I carefully avoid buying them myself. But it's not so easy you are quickly excluded from the group. That's when I think of you and the mask so that you wouldn't be recognised. We've got to stand by our principles haven't we?

Sending you a warm hug,

Yours Emma

Dear Emma,

You simply can't avoid telling me that I got to take my mask off! You recognised yourself how the people treat us here. I'm not taking on any victim's role. It's easy to say 'Take your mask off'. But people just don't know what we've experienced, and that's what matters. And as long as that's the case we'll keep our masks on.

When it's about music or football then we can be who we want to be and what we really are. That's the reason why I love music and football so much. Nobody asks where you come from. It all depends upon you and your talent as to how far you get with it. That's how I can gain respect for myself. It's not like that in school. The requirements are quite different. The rich people can afford very good private schools and what about us? I'm really pleased that somehow we can get enough money together for all the school materials, the books and the uniforms. Without the support of the charitable organisation it wouldn't be possible and we wouldn't be able to go to school. Whereby it has to be said that uniforms have their advantages: 1) you don't have to think about what to put on in the morning and 2) everybody looks the same so there's no mobbing in your class. I'm sorry that in your school it's different. Your schoolmates will soon recognise that you are special.

I'm very fond of you,

Raúl

Dear Raúl

I think that you can be proud of your work and that you ought to tell others about it. Many others ought to be like you. You could be an example to them.

I'm still against uniforms however, it's important that everybody is accepted as an individual, even if it takes longer in the morning.

You are quite right. I also think it makes little difference where you are born although of course it is a matter of pure chance. Of course there are differences in Germany too in the different levels of society but there's a good chance of a good education for everybody. I've now got to take part in a school social project for the AG. So at least I can do something now.

Greetings to all your family.

I'm fond of you too.

Yours Emma

Five years later

Hello Emma,

Did you have a good holiday? I hope you could make use of your La Paz Spanish in Madrid. There have been some changes here. I got a bursary to the music school in La Paz and am now getting professional Quena lessons. I can hardly believe it. At 16 I'm one of the younger people but the others are all very nice and have accepted me. Now it's a question of more practice. If only I had the time!

I hope everything is going well for you in school,

Best wishes

Raúl.

Hello Raúl,

Congratulations! I would love to hear you play and would love to hear how you're getting on in the music school.

School's going okay for me. My friend and I have just prepared a presentation and now I'm planning a party for my 15th birthday with my mum to which you, unfortunately, can't come.

Best wishes to your family,

Emma

Dear Emma,

All the best on your 15th Birthday. If you'd been in La Paz we would have had a really big feast. The most important birthday for a young lady! But in your country it's the 18th birthday which is so important, isn't it?

With others in my group we've got our first performance in two months. Lots of politicians and other important people are going to be there.

Many greetings and a hug

Raúl

Dear Raúl,

My birthday was really good. You would have enjoyed it too despite it not being celebrated in the same kind of way as in La Paz. We all had a lot of fun.

There's nothing much new here. Lots of school, homework, choir and sport and then the week starts again, from new.

Warm greetings

Emma

Two years later

Whats app

Raúl: The unbelievable has happened!

Emma: What is it then, tell me!

Raúl: Our music director is planning performances for us, in Germany!

Emma: What? How? When? Where? (I'll leave out why!)

Raúl: It's all due to happen in about two months on my 18th birthday. We are playing for three weeks in different towns. He managed to get a project grant. He didn't tell us about it beforehand because he didn't want to give us false hope.

Emma: I can't believe it! I'm so delighted! I'm going to be a camp follower so that I can hear you as often as possible. What nonsense, I've got to go to school. But can you come to our place for a couple of days. Mum and Dad would be delighted about that, too. You are invited.

Raúl: I'll ask about it this afternoon.

Emma: So delighted. You'll be able to get to know everybody else and everybody else will be to get to know you .

Raúl: I can't believe it. Who would have ever thought that I would be visiting you in Germany? But I promised that we would meet again.

Emma: Call me when you know more about it all.

Raúl: I will but it'll be 6 o'clock.

Emma: That means it'll be 12 o'clock midnight here and I'll already be asleep but I'll have something nice to wake up to. I'm really looking forward to it!

It was all due to start in two weeks. Raúl was going to have his first flight ever and that to Germany where his best friend Emma was living, the country about which she had already heard so much. At school he was in his last year. The timing of the trip was very unfortunate as far as he was concerned but then when would he ever get the chance to go to Germany again. Since he was such a good pupil he had already discussed with his teachers how he would keep up with the curriculum by himself whilst away and that he would take the exams with his classmates upon his return. They've made it perfectly clear to him that they could make no exceptions for him. These thoughts caused him little stress, Raúl was very clear about his responsibilities and understood what was expected of him. In a year's time he wanted to study engineering at the university. He was more worried about his family. He was going to be away for three weeks. Up till now he hadn't even been away overnight. Raúl had worked a lot in the previous weeks so that he could put aside a bit of money. When he tried to give his mother this she said to him:

"Take the money to Germany with you. You'll be able to use it there. If you got anything left over at the end then bring us back something nice. We'll get by here okay don't worry about us. Enjoy this once in a lifetime opportunity. When you get back you got to tell us all about it."

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On the evening before the flight Raúl listened to all the news. Different groups had been demonstrating in the town centre and the city centre and had blocked off the streets. In many places there was no way through. He made up his mind to plan in an extra hour for the journey to the airport so that he didn't miss the plane.

Raúl said goodbye to his family at home. He preferred it like that, otherwise there might have been tears and that would have made the goodbye more difficult. At the airport other members of the group were waiting. Jose, the leader was excitedly calling up Armando who lived in La Paz behind the football stadium and who hadn't arrived at the airport yet. That day of all days there had to be an international game of football against Chile. (Football internationals were always played in La Paz to disadvantage the opposition with the altitude). All the streets around the stadium were blocked. Armando had left home three hours ago for a journey which would normally take three quarters of an hour. The flight was called, the group had to go into the building. If they waited any longer they would all miss the flight. Armando was only a few streets away but nevertheless he wasn't going to make it. Sad and shocked Raúl made his way through security with his rucksack.

Raúl had a window seat on the plane. He took out a chewing gum. Emma had advised him to chew during the take-off, so that the air pressure didn't affect his ears. Full of curiosity he looked down at El Alto in La Paz from up in the plane. He was highly excited and it seemed to him as if his heart was going to burst out of his chest. It would be better if he didn't look out of the window.

They were checked again in Santa Cruz. Raúl suspected that they checked him and his friends extra carefully – "Just because we come from La Paz", he thought. "The people here think that they are better than us. But we are all Bolivians!"

Before the take-off to Madrid the stewardess gave instructions about wearing seat belts and where the emergency exits were. Raúl's friend sitting next to him, Juan, took a photo of the stewardess

with his mobile phone. When she'd finished doing her talk she set upon Juan demanding that he should delete the photo immediately and threatened him with prosecution. Raúl and Juan were completely stupefied. Nobody had told them that they weren't allowed to take photographs.

José was eventually able to calm the woman down. Both the boys felt as if they'd been beaten about the head. Everything was so new. What else was going to happen? How many times were they going to put their foot in it without knowing or even recognising that they had done so?

The airport in Madrid was enormous. Although all the signposts were in Spanish they still found it difficult to find their way through. Only after asking lots of questions was the group able to make its way to the gate. They arrived very late but in time for the flight. On the plane to Frankfurt Raúl had a real surprise. He found himself in the first-class. For the first time he was able to really relax and enjoy the flight. It was at this point that the full anticipation of their stay occurred.

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In Frankfurt the group found its way through the passport control to the luggage carousels. One by one they lifted their cases off the belt. In the end everybody had their case except Juan whose case was missing. Fortunately they were able to establish that the case had been left in Madrid. It would be forwarded the next day. Raúl checked the time, they had missed the train to Berlin. What should they do now?

Deep in thought Raúl was pulling his case towards the exit. Suddenly he heard a voice calling after him,

"Raúl! Raúl! At last! Welcome to Germany!"

Emma and her parents were standing in front of him. He hadn't reckoned with them. How good it was to see a friendly face. Emma threw her arms around him energetically. Raúl observed that she was taller than him by half a head. Emma had found out that there was a train an hour later which they could take. She and her parents safely took the group to the platform where their train would leave and had a bit of time left over. Three weeks is such a short time so we thought that we would at least be able to meet you at the airport, said Emma. The surprise had succeeded.

"What is your exact itinerary" she wanted to know from Raúl. "Exactly when are you going to build in time to come and visit us in Bocholt?"

She knew from contacts which she had had with Raúl that the leader had changed the group's itinerary. Emma's father had organised performances in Bocholt and accommodation in guest families. Raúl was, of course, to stay with Emma and her family.

"First we've got to go to Berlin," said Raúl. "In the second week we are in Cologne and then will be spending a whole week with you. And then it's back to Frankfurt"

The Intercity Express (ICE) to Berlin arrived. They had to say goodbye to one another but this time it was only for two weeks. Raúl gave Emma's parents a farewell hug, too.

"Many thanks for the lovely surprise. We would have got lost a hundred times without you! I'm really looking forward to meeting you again in Bocholt."

On board the train Raúl and his friends had to seek out some seats for themselves. The reservations had only been for the earlier train, so now they were scattered through the whole compartment. Raúl was delighted to discover that he could charge his mobile on the train and that he also had an internet connection. He sent his big sister the news that they got to Germany okay. He looked out of the window. The train was travelling at more than 200 km/h and everything was racing past him. He could recognise some windmills in the distance. Most of the names of the towns meant absolutely nothing to him, the only one he recognised was Wolfsburg which he knew of because of the large Volkswagen factory.

13

Raúl felt that he was in a dream and was frightened to wake up from it. But every day he became more and more certain that he actually was in Germany. The group had various performances in Berlin and Cologne which had all been well received. Some of the volunteers who had spent a year working for the voluntary organisation which had supported Raúl came to the performances. The other group members were surprised just how many German people Raúl knew. Raúl gave no explanations but just enjoyed all the attention.

Above all they gave him the feeling of recognition. Many of them had made very long journeys across Germany just to see him.

Between performances the group had time to see all of the places of interest in the two cities. The Brandenburg Gate and Cologne Cathedral impressed them greatly. In Berlin they took a tour with a former homeless person and learn something of the realities of life which reminded Raúl of La Paz. The experience of the homeless and the conflict with discrimination, life and work on the streets, but also something of the meaning of sticking together and signs of being helpful were very similar to his own experiences.

It was the guide's optimism which particularly impressed Raúl, the way he was able to turn every negative into something positive. His example demonstrated to him how important it was to accept help which made it possible to bring about positive change in your own life whilst at the same time being true to yourself. He recognised that it was only in this way that prejudice could be reduced and that changes could be brought about, step-by-step.

That same evening as the group was sitting together and talking about their trip round the town Raúl took the plunge and told the others that he had worked as a shoeshine boy in La Paz. It was very difficult for him but he recognised that the others were listening attentively.

When he finished Juan said to him, "So that's how you came to know so many people at our concerts. Why didn't you tell us all that before?"

Raúl shrugged his shoulders. "I thought that if I did you wouldn't want me in the group any more. There is so much prejudice and one can easily and quickly be shut out."

At that point Efrain jumped in: "I can confirm that. I've had lots of experience in that direction." He hesitated a moment and then turned and looking directly at Raúl said, "I too am a shoeshine boy, but in El Alto. That's probably the reason why we didn't know one another."

For a brief moment there was silence then the group leader, Juan, began to clap and others followed suit.

“I’m really proud of you,” he said. “And you should be proud of yourselves, too. You are good lads, good pupils and musicians and you support your families through your work. We won’t treat you any differently now that we know that you are shoeshine boys.”

A great weight fell from Raúl’s shoulders. He was sitting amongst friends with whom he shared a love of music and who accepted him for who he was. He didn’t need to keep anything secret from them anymore, he could simply be who he was. The only time that he had had this feeling before was when he was with Emma. She was right; it was important to believe in yourself. You couldn’t just wait for others to change, you had to do something about it yourself.

14

Emma was standing at the railway station in Bocholt. The guest families for the other visitors were waiting next to her. You couldn’t go wrong there was only one platform. The train arrived each hour and then returned the way it had come. Bocholt was a city with about 73,000 inhabitants, by comparison with La Paz it was a small town. It was right on the Dutch border, where it was possible to stand with 1 foot in Germany and 1 foot in the Netherlands. Emma had also planned a surprise for the visitors. She and her parents wanted to do a trip into Holland to the sea. Bolivia hadn’t had access to the sea for over a hundred years since it had been lost to Chile in a war. Emma knew that it was one of Raúl’s dearest dreams to see the sea.

The train drew up and little by little everyone got out. Raúl was leading the group and warmly greeted Emma and her parents. The others were standing somewhat shyly and attentively behind him. Emma’s dad took over the placing of the Bolivian adolescents in the host families. These were all family friends of Emma’s parents who had never been to South America and who also couldn’t speak Spanish. Efrain wanted to hug and kiss on the cheek the mother of the host family. She however took a step backwards and held out her hand to him. Emma and Raúl had to laugh. That was the way in which two different cultures encountered one another. Luckily Efrain’s female host was able to laugh at the situation too and immediately gave Efrain a hug. “As a German woman we’re just not used to giving foreigners a hug. You have to brace yourself for that.”

Emma and her dad drove Raul home in her dad’s car. They lived in the country away from the town centre. The houses were not close together. Their neighbour had a large farm. The neighbour’s cows were standing at the border of the farm and were looking over the hedge into Emma’s garden. Raúl drew in a deep breath, Berlin and Cologne both smelt like La Paz. Here it smelt like the countryside and dung! Emma looked at his face and laughed, “Here in my village we’ve got more cows than people. You’ll have to get used to the smell. But it is really strong today, it’s not always like that. But for me this is the way home smells.”

Raul could sympathise with that: many people considered that the shoe polish stank but he loved the smell.

Emma's mother was waiting for them in the kitchen she prepared a lasagne. They all sat down at the table and ate hungrily together. A big coffee and cake party had been planned for the afternoon with all of Raúl's friends and their host families. To prepare for this they had to take out tables and benches onto the patio. Raúl's friends arrived one by one with their host families each of whom brought a gateau, contributing to an enormous buffet. "It's a little bit like at home at the Apthapi" thought Raúl. "Everybody brings something and then we all eat together." Juan was the last to arrive with his host family. His host father was a great big powerful man. He greeted Emma's dad with a loud voice. Raúl flinched. Juan whispered to him, "I think he is in a bad mood. He always shouts like that but it doesn't seem to trouble the others."

Emma had overheard what Juan had said although he had only whispered it; she took up what he had said, "I heard what you said, Juan, your host father isn't in a bad mood, he just greeted my dad very warmly. He just simply speaks loudly."

Raúl added, "When I got to know Emma and the other volunteers they were always arguing and discussing when they spoke German. But that's just the way they talk."

Juan shrugged his shoulders. Something else that was new. And he had always thought that the Germans were curmudgeons.

After quenching their first thirst for coffee Emma's father gave the official welcome. Jose stood next to him and announced a small concert. Emma was going to listen to Raúl's first live concert with his flute. Enraptured she listened to the music. She knew many of the tunes, some from earlier times and some which Raúl had sent her. Emma's parents and the host families also listened enthusiastically. After several encores José put a CD of typical Bolivian music into the player. Since the Bolivians were no longer holding their instruments they were able to dance to the music. For each of the different rhythms there was a corresponding dance, the steps of which they could all do. Between the dances Raúl noticed Emma's astonishment and said to her, "Every Bolivian knows all the different traditional dances. Every year in school in our sports lessons we learn at least one dance which we've then got to perform. When the Bolivians invited the Germans to dance with them many were reluctant and didn't want to, but in the end nearly all of them moved about on the dancefloor. The ice was broken and the Germans relaxed and gave up their reserve. When Internet translations failed everybody communicated with gestures and facial expressions. It was a wonderful afternoon for everybody."

15

The next day Raúl's group met at Emma's place to plan the week's performances.

Emma's dad had organised something already. Every morning they had little concerts to give in various schools and in the evenings concerts for everyone. In the afternoon everybody spent time with their host families. Emma and Raúl wanted to ride into town on bikes.

Emma pointed to her mum's bike, "You can have a go with that," she said, "It's a bit smaller than mine."

Raúl had been to El Alto which was just as flat as Bocholt and had already ridden a bike a couple of times. He jumped on and rode off. It was a very wobbly business.

“Shouldn’t we practice a bit before we ride off into town,” Emma asked with a smile.

“There’s hardly a car here so nothing is going to happen.”

There really was nothing there. Raúl had seen the occasional pedestrian going by with their dog. You really had to plan your shopping; you could do a few items by bike but a big shop had to be done by car.

Raúl missed the women on the side of the road, with their fruit and vegetables and the other little stalls that one found on every corner in La Paz. These were the places where you could buy the most important food and drinks as well as writing and hygiene goods. After half an hour of practice and a couple of tumbles the bike riding was going well and Raúl felt much more secure. Even Emma was convinced of his ability to ride.

“So let’s go”, she said, “there are bike paths everywhere, and the car drivers are pretty attentive because everybody here rides a bike.”

The couple took twice as the usual time to get into town, but that was okay. They had time and lots of laughs on the way. In the town they went into different shops. Raúl had to get a couple of presents for his family.

“In Berlin and Cologne I bought magnets with typical sightseeing scenes on them. What is typically German that I could take home easily with me?”

“Oh dear, that’s not so easy,” she thought. “It’s not as easy here as it would be in Bolivia. You’ve got so many small craftwork and alpaca products. You’ve only just got to go up the Sargánaga, the tourist street and you’ll find something. Here it’s more about chocolate and bread and midget gems, beer of course as well. Maybe she we should get the strip of photos, but that would be enough.”

Emma thought on a bit; “Perhaps we should look out for something more practical.”

By evening both of them had their rucksacks full. Raúl had been successful and found plenty of sweets and two card games for his brother and sisters. He wanted to take home a frying pan and a hot water bottle for his mother, and he had found a toolset for himself ‘Made in Germany’. He hoped that the German quality matched its reputation. Halfway home Emma suddenly slammed on her brakes. “

We really must have a Döner,” she said.” It’s typically German even though it comes from Turkey!” Raúl couldn’t make any sense out of the word Döner. Then he saw the vertical revolving spit from which thin slices of meat were cut off in a downward motion. Emma showed him the side dishes. “The meat is put into a flatbread. Then you can add the sauce and side dishes like salad, white cabbage, tomatoes, onions, goats’ cheese and pepperoni. Raúl ordered one with all the side dishes and heavily spiced. It was the first time that he had had heavily spiced food in Germany. He’d been missing the sharp Lljua sauce that was served with every Bolivian dish. The ‘Döner’ was really sharp and immediately became his favourite meal in Germany. Overall he enjoyed his food in Germany despite it being rather plain and often there were noodle dishes which had no name. Raúl was impressed by the way in which meals were so quickly ready. One reason for this was that water boils at 100° in Germany and not at 80° as in La Paz. And that the rice and noodles didn’t need to be browned before boiling and another reason was that things were prepared quite simply. The Germans seemed to chop up everything very finely and make a sauce out of it. Job done. In Bolivia

where every dish has its own name and was almost everywhere to the same recipe you had to stand in the kitchen for two hours. In Germany it was ready in about half an hour.

16

The last appearance was to be in a primary school. Raúl and Efrain had been building two shoe cleaners' boxes out of wood in Emma's dad's garage which they wanted to take with them. They'd already acquired brushes and shoe polish. Emma's mother had made some buffing cloths for them out of an old pair of cord trousers. Emma's lessons that day began in the second lesson and so she was able to accompany the musicians.

The first and second class children in the school welcomed the group with a song with greetings in different languages. Then one part of the Bolivian group played some songs from their repertoire and two others danced to the music. At the end of the performance Raúl and Efrain set up their shoe polishing boxes in the middle of the room and the children sat in a semicircle around them. 120 curious pairs of eyes looked at the musicians both of whom were somewhat nervous. Emma stood herself beside them and said to the children,

"This is Raul and this is Efrain. In La Paz they work as shoe polishers and earn money in this way to support their families so that they get enough to eat and that their brothers and sisters can go to school."

Then she turned to the children and asked, "How old are you?"

The children all spontaneously replied "Six!" "Seven!" "Eight!"

"That's exactly how old Raúl and Efrain were when they started work as shoe cleaners," said Emma. All the children looked at the shoe cleaners wide-eyed. Emma cast a glance over the children and looked at the shoes. Most of them were wearing trainers, but there was one little boy with leather shoes. They were already pretty clean. But she asked him nevertheless if he would like to have his shoes cleaned.

"We only bought them yesterday," said the boy".

"Well, we'll see what Raúl can do with them. I bet you that they'll look even better when he's finished."

Shyly the boy went up to the shoebox with Emma and put his foot on the shelf. Raúl started to clean the shoes and polish them until they were shiny.

"Your parents will be amazed", said Emma as the boy looked at his shoes in wonderment. With that one of the teachers went up to Efrain. Her shoes really did need a good clean and Ephraim bought a very good shine to them. At the end everybody applauded. Emma invited the children to come closer to Raúl and Efrain. They were even allowed to sit on the little bench and were amazed at how long someone was required to sit there. With Emma's help Raúl and Efrain were able to answer many of the children's questions. At the end the group played some more songs.

During the evening meal with Emma's parents Raúl said:

"Today was the day which we enjoyed most. We could see in their eyes how much they enjoyed the music and they were really much more curious when we got there with our shoe cleaning boxes.

They really asked us all kinds of questions. It really felt good to be able to answer them all and to explain to them why I became a shoe cleaner in La Paz.”

Emma’s father gave him a nod of approval:

” I think it’s great that you’re here in Bocholt and that you’ve been able to bring home some of your joys in life and your traditions and experiences through your music and through your shoe cleaning. Hardly anybody knows anything about Bolivia here and we can learn a lot from you.”

Raúl looked at him sceptically, “Germany is much more developed. I can’t even help you in the house as a way of saying thank you. You got machines for everything, dishwashers, washing machines and dryers, it’s almost impossible to do anything for you! You even got a shoe cleaning machin,” Raúl laughed, “but it can’t get the same shine on the shoes that I can.”

“You’re quite right,” agreed Emma’s father looking at his shoes, brought to a perfect shine by Raúl. “You really are an expert. But from you we learnt just how important the family is and also just how close your bond is with Pachamama, with Mother Earth.*” I found that particularly impressive in Bolivia.”

“I agree with that,” said Raúl. “Pachamama is very important for us. But nevertheless I have the feeling that environmental awareness is much more widespread here. You even separate paper, glass, plastic, kitchen waste and residual waste from one another and put them in different bins. I’ve also learnt a lot in these three weeks.”

*Pachamama is a goddess revered by the indigenous people of the Andes.

17

The concert trip was over and Raúl was sitting on the plane to La Paz. He’d talked with Emma half the night. They talked about their plans for the future, everything that they wanted out of their future lives and discovered that their hopes and wishes were really quite similar. What had become particularly clear was that to achieve a more social and just world they both had to become involved, each in their own country. Their experiences each of the other’s culture would help them to approach others in an open and non-stereotypical way. They had both learnt how contact, different perceptions and culture could enrich this process. Their friendship was the best example of this, to show how bridges could be built and how it’s possible to build a better world. Neither Emma nor Raúl knew when they would ever meet again. But there was no doubt that they would meet again someday. Until that time they would remain in contact. With these thoughts going through his head Raúl fell asleep.