

Personal Experiences of a Latin American City: Narratives

- (1) About three decades ago, millions of Mexican Indians began fleeing the poverty of Oaxaca, Chiapas, and other poor states for the evanescent promise of wealth in Mexico City, their new Zion. They fled primitive housing, malnutrition, alcoholism, robbery, rape, incest, and illiteracy. But most of all, they fled unemployment. Those with friends or family often lived temporarily on the roofs of one-room shacks of those who had come before them. They used sheets of plastic to shield themselves from the high-plateau rains and the chilling dew of daybreak. The newcomers begged, borrowed and scrimped to get cinder blocks or flattened oil drums to construct their new dwellings. In the beginning they often lived for months with only two or three walls and little that could be called a roof.

- (2) From the day Adelaida came to the Valley of Mexico in 1980, she has taken whatever work she could get. She has been a door-to-door laundress. She has hauled cement bags at construction sites. But most of all she has been a maid. Maids are at the lowest rung of the social and economic ladder of Mexican society. Maids are paid very little -- typically the minimum wage of about three dollars a day (US equivalent). With only two years of grammar school, Adelaida didn't know much about inflation. She just knew her wages weren't going as far. She knew she and Felix, her husband, could only afford to buy meat once a week for their children, less than they once could. With little money for any kind of fun, Christmas was rarely a special event. "They'd ask for a doll or a bicycle, but I couldn't buy anything. I had some money for Christmas last year. But there was an accident in the family. I had to spend it on that. The children cried.

- (3) Sometimes Ana Serratos pauses outside a McDonald's restaurant here, but she resists the temptation to stop in. Fast food is way beyond her means. A Big Mac, medium Coke and fries cost \$3.05, and for Ms. Serratos, who earns 35 cents an hour wrapping tape around bundles of electrical wires in one of Juarez assembly plants, that is a full day's wages. "What people in your country make in an hour, I work a whole day for," Ms Serratos said to an American visitor. "These companies from the United States and Japan don't pay people what they ought to. They come to kill us with work." Then she pauses, reflecting, "But we have to recognize that they're important for Juarez."

- (4) I am 35 years old and have three children. I began working as a prostitute when I was a secretary in the social welfare office. At that time I was in financial straits because one of my children was ill. I worked over twelve hours a day in the office and also had to satisfy my boss's sexual desires just to keep my job. I soon realized that I could earn considerable more money as a prostitute.

(5) We, too, are Mexico, and we are not modern. We are illiterate, we have no electricity, no running water, our homes have dirt floors, two-thirds of our children do not have schools; we have the highest tuberculosis rate in the nation, and half of our population does not speak Spanish.

(6) Enrique grew up on the mean streets of Mexico City, the product of a broken home. His father ran out on his mother, an all-too-common fate of poor Mexican children. To help his mother make ends meet, Enrique sold gum and gelatin at street corners to passing motorists. Pressure for money was so great at one point that he agreed to be a runner for local marijuana dealers who used children to fool the police. That might have led him down the wrong path, as it did some of his pals. But a mother's determination helped Enrique escape the streets and make it through college. In fact, he did even better. In a country where the average person never gets beyond the sixth grade, Enrique became a doctor.

(7) The only relatives I knew were my papa's sister Juana and my mama's sister Catarina. They lived a few blocks away. My Aunt Catarina was married to Juana's son, who was my papa's nephew. He was a porter who carried heavy loads on his back. He was tall and strong, but the work finally killed him.

My life was very sad. My clothes were made from little pieces of scrap cloth, and we used felt slippers instead of shoes. We never heard music in our house, nor did we dance. As for fiestas or the Christmas posadas, we only watched them from the roof. And it wasn't until we came to Mexico City that we learned about receiving gifts on the Day of the Kings.

She (my mom) and papa didn't send me to school because I was the only girl who could help at home. That's why I am no better than a donkey, because I can't read.

(8) Agustin Gomez, the father, came from a better-to-do peasant family of Azteca village, which he and his wife left seventeen years ago in an effort to improve their lot. They are now a hard-pressed working class family living in a crowded one-room apartment in a vecindad (neighborhood) which I call the Casa Grande.

The Gomez family prefers city to village life and has made a good adjustment to the *vecindad*. It shows relatively little of the disorganization and breakdown which is so often associated with the urbanization process and has remained stable despite some internal conflict. The working children contribute to the support of the family and religious participation has become more important. The family maintains its ties with relatives in their village and preserves many village beliefs and customs. There also have been some striking changes in family life, however, namely: displacement of the father by the mother as the dominant figure in the family; increased freedom for the children; a steadily rising standard of living on the basis of installment buying; a higher aspiration level; added leisure, and greater opportunities for diversion; broader social contacts; and a gradual modernization of many beliefs.

Sources of the Narratives:

Excerpts # 1, 2, and 6:

Oster, Patrick. 1990. *The Mexicans. A personal portrait of the people*. New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, pp. 21-35, 70.

Excerpt #3:

Dillon, Sam. 1995. At US door, huddled masses yearn for better pay. *The New York Times International*. (4 December).

Excerpt #4:

Colimoro, Claudia. 1994. A prostitute's election campaign. In G. Koppers, ed. *Campaneras: Voices from the Latin American women's movement*. London: Latin America Bureau, p. 92.

Excerpt #5:

Poniatowska, Elena. 1995. Women, Mexico, and Chiapas. In Elaine Katzenberger, ed. *First World Ha Ha Ha! The Zapatista Challenge*. San Francisco, CA: San Francisco, pp. 103..

Excerpt #7:

Lewis, Oscar. 1969. *A death in the Sanchez family*. New York, NY: Random House, pp. xi-xiii.

Excerpt #8:

Lewis, Oscar. 1959. *Five families*. New York, NY: Basic Books, Inc., pp 12-14.