

The World's Far Flung Corners

By
Roberto Padow

I Knew the Child

I knew the child who made the struggle against leukemia possible. Her name was Rosario and she would have been 46 today.

She lived in a vecindad in the south of Mexico City. It wasn't the worst place I've seen but neither was it a dwelling where anyone who could afford better would live.

Her father was a drunk, her mother a woman who wallowed in self pity. She had a baby brother four years old. As an adult, he didn't do so hot. He wanted more than anything to get out of that vecindad and the quickest way he saw was selling drugs. Out of the vecindad he is now, doing a 40 year term in a maximum security penitentiary for a drug related murder.

The day Rosario died she was in a daze on her hospital bed, attended by her grandmother. The usually white parts of her eyes were a dark red. And she took the kindly old woman's hand, begging her to be at her side when she meets the Virgin. She was seven years old.

Her body was shipped to Houston, Texas where, thanks to the research done, the turning point was reached and leukemia is no longer the death sentence it used to be.

To those with a problem I say, in the name of Rosario, fight on! Don't let her death count for naught.

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He Had a Dream

Nowadays, much is being written about the racial situation in the United States which gives the impression that no progress has been made for many years. A heinous murder or otherwise brutal, racially motivated crime makes sensational news but doesn't accurately describe the whole picture.

Absent from publicity because it isn't news are the interracial couple strolling unnoticed through a neighborhood in which their presence would have scandalized everybody 43 years ago, the integrated crowd of youths hanging out on a corner in a section where during another time no black could live or the individual who was once bigoted but lives and acts as if he'd never had any prejudices.

The most exceptional case came to my attention in 1984 when the changes were already well under way.

During a summer visit to my native Brooklyn, I was able to cross generation barriers and make friends with some teens who frequented the hang-outs I had years before. A young man named Bernard asked me "Did you know Jerry Stein?" When I told him I did he said "His son's a good friend of mine". Bernard was black and during the 50s, if anyone was a racist it was Jerry Stein (not his real name).

I'll now describe this individual. He was big and freckle-faced with a perpetual scowl and his arms and torso were all but completely tattooed.

He had been expelled from high school for fighting, after which he'd enlisted in the navy and in short order, received a less than honorable discharge for the same reason.

A few weeks after leaving the service, he was in the school lunchroom shooting the breeze with some friends when a teacher recognized him and told him he had to leave as he was not a student there. He then savagely attacked the teacher, beating him so badly he had to be hospitalized and the incident got into all the papers.

Like any teen-ager, I could sense I was getting a lousy deal but didn't know where it came from and wanted to do what displeased the adults. One of these things was being a friend of Jerry Stein.

He and those around him had been taught bigotry practically from the cradle. They liked me in their way and tried to turn me into a racist under the guise of making a "man" out of a "boy". Space does not permit me to go into everything that happened during the attempted conversion but they wrote me off as a hopeless case after one incident.

Somebody mentioned seeing a black with his arm around a white girl and when I had no reaction, he repeated it emphatically and asked me whether I heard him well.

I said "Yes, I did".

"And doesn't it make you mad?"

I answered "Well, uh, no".

Jerry Stein's teeth chattered. His limbs shook. His eyes shot fire. And all of them pretty much in the same state gave me their version of what they'd like to do to this black guy who had his arm around a white girl.

The details slip me after all these years but what I do remember, if any of them had put their money where their mouths later were and the victim miraculously survived, they'd have all been guilty of various counts of atrocious assault.

I asked Bernard what kind of person Jerry Stein was these days.

"Oh, just a guy, like any other."

He was evidently allowed in Jerry Stein's house and wasn't mistreated there. I was in such a state of shock that when he asked me who my best friends were during the 50s, by mistake I told him Jerry Stein's. While I was growing up in the neighborhood, NO black could have mentioned that name with the tone of voice Bernard used.

The Reverend Martin Luther King had a dream. He dreamed he saw the young black and white civil rights marchers and that this was the entire United States of America and his dream is being realized. With all the setbacks and leftovers from the past, the march goes on.

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As He Wished It

Eulalio Gomez (not his real name) was an organized crime figure who lived and died as he desired; in obscurity. He wanted no movies made about his life or ballads sung about him.

And he knew how to go about this. The base of his operations was strictly local. His legitimate enterprise was low profile. He owned no fancy night club nor did he manage a famous boxer but had a hotel and restaurant. He lived in no plush mansion but in a modest, middle class house. And he avoided any high risk activities. His “crimes” were strictly non-victim; the sale of contraband items, both imported and for export. He never kidnapped anybody nor did he traffic in drugs or stolen goods.

Many a child’s life was so much the happier for the foreign-made toys he made available (This is now legal.) and Mexico’s pre-Hispanic culture got to places it normally wouldn’t have thanks to the small archeological artifacts he sold to tourists.

That way, he made no enemies. Nobody was ever minus any property because of Eulalio Gomez. He never held people in captivity and cut off their ears and fingers nor can he remotely be blamed because somebody lost his soul in the world of drugs.

The day he died, nobody except his relatives and close friends noticed. He got a small obituary in one of his city’s newspapers in which he came out as a respectable business man, just as he wished it.

If the world’s Pedro Arizmendis, Paplo Escobars and Rafael Caro Quinteros knew how to use their brains, they’d take Eulalio Gomez as their model. However, anyone who would kidnap or sell narcotics has in his makeup, an extraordinary degree of self-destructiveness. It is no accident that small time drug dealers are often caught red handed with their “merchandize” because they attracted the authorities’ attention by driving over the speed limit.

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Don Nacho's Wake

During the seventeen years I knew Don Nacho, I saw him sober once. Don Nacho (not his real name) lived in a hilly neighborhood on the outskirts of Mexico City and was well-liked by his neighbors. He was a likeable sort in his way, a thin, olive-skinned man with a perpetual friendly smile except when he felt insulted.

He was always ready for a game of dominoes and when he had to pass, he'd tap one of his pieces on the table and say "papas" (potatoes). At first, I didn't believe him that he'd once been behind 99-0 and won (One hundred is the winning score.), but after I'd heard it repeated infinitely with no changes in the details, he convinced me it was true.

Don Nacho had many friends but only two real ones, one young man and myself and what I mean by that, we were the only ones to tell him to stop drinking. The last time I mentioned that to him, his grin turned into a scowl, he reached aggressively for his whiskey glass, brought it to his mouth so quickly he spilled some of it out, gulped it down and told me "See? What harm did that do?"

Well, two weeks later he found out. He went into delirium, they rushed him to the hospital and he came out in a box.

At the wake, family and neighbors waited around numbly and when his coffin was brought in, a wowl went up that must have been heard on the whole square block. During this burst of anguish, his daughter came out with the stupidest question I've ever heard in my life, "Why?"

That could be answered with a one syllable word, "booze", or the abuse of it. (There are people in this world who are ignorant to the point that they don't know what happens when you drink too much.)

When they opened the casket, his body couldn't be seen. You could dismiss out of hand, any theory that he was really Jesus Christ. What it was, they'd amputated both his legs in a futile effort to save his life, so it was all but impossible to view him at a certain angle under the light. On his face was all the anguish of the last moments (They don't embalm among his class of people). His mouth was contorted with the upper and lower lips lobbing in opposite directions.

Responsibilities the following day kept me from staying too long, but I

believe what I heard that his relatives, in order to drown out their sorrow,

drank themselves into a stupor.

From Wide Eyed Tourist to Citizen of the Country

By

Roberto Padow

There are moments in ones life that mark a decisive turning point. Often, you are unaware when it happens but nothing from that time on will be the same.

Such an instance it was for me on that rainy July night of 1965 when I stepped off the plane into the Mexico City Airport, completely disoriented, not knowing at all where to go or what lay ahead in this seemingly unending sea of buildings and bright lights.

My mission (to which I'd assigned myself) was to learn the Spanish language and assimilate into the culture. I'd been amply forewarned about its impossibility. Others supposedly better educated and wiser than I'd ever be couldn't.

Who was I, the reasoning went, to think I was going to enter a place so different from anything I'd ever known and become part of it? I was not an anthropologist but a piano tuner and repair man, the only language I spoke was English and my experiences were limited to New York City. I was very much a product of the Midwood section of Flatbush in Brooklyn, obvious by the way I spoke and my defining moments thus far had been playing on my high school football team, where I didn't distinguish myself.

"I can" was the only answer I could offer. The feeling was in my gut.

Walking the streets during the next few days, it dawned on me that maybe my detractors were right. With everything looking strange and exotic, I may as well have entered another dimension. A feeling of intense isolation crept over me that I'd never known before. Unlike any other place in which I'd been, there wasn't a chance of my meeting

anyone I knew or stumbling upon anything familiar. I continued wandering about aimlessly, like a lost soul.

In that situation, there were two alternatives; getting as quickly as possible to the airport and admitting failure or moving forward into the unknown and seeing it through. After much vacillation, I decided upon the latter.

Obviously, a change in tactics was necessary. Up to that point, I'd gone around in circles in a business district. Nothing was to be learned there. Since I was from a neighborhood in Brooklyn, I would look for like places in Mexico City.

Using the trolley cars of those days, I rode back and forth on the same line to determine which areas looked typical. That being decided upon, I took the step of getting off at one, looking for a cheap restaurant (cocina económica) and eating a meal there. Spanish-English dictionary in hand, I looked up the basic words, struck up conversations with the customers (mostly about sports) and made my first friendships, some of which have lasted to this day.

Little by little, I was expressing myself better and one day, I received an invitation to visit a family. The high point was when we went together to the Guadalupe Shrine, Mexico's holiest religious sight.

By trip's end, I'd achieved my goals. I was conversant in the language and a city which started out as strange had ceased to be a mystery. Its terrain and people were part of my life.

There were subsequent excursions the following two summers but with the ice broken, getting to know the country became much easier. My dictionary slowly fell into disuse and what I'd done in Mexico City, I repeated in the provinces, principally Veracruz, Oaxaca and Chiapas. In San Cristóbal de Las Casas, I met my future wife, the former Gloria Morales Paniagua. It was after the last summer stay that I decided to live in Mexico permanently. Gloria undoubtedly had a lot to do with that.

The move was made in February of 1968. I got another send-off from the skeptics, the one that most stands out in my mind being "You are as American as apple pie and that's all you'll ever be". Paying no attention to this and other warnings, I went ahead

Well, it was true that living here was different from spending a few months. But the predicted disasters didn't happen.

My wife and I were married six months subsequent to my arrival and shortly after, I set up a piano tuning business in Mexico City and a "road service" which covers the aforementioned southern states. Together, we raised a son now 30, who lives in Japan where he works as a computer programmer.

Gradually, the country's folklore and happenings made their way into my state of being. Along with my family, I've celebrated the Day of the Dead annually (November 1st and 2nd), during which we remember our departed friends and relatives. We've been to many a fifteen year old girls' coming out party, dancing to tropical Veracruz harp music, the Chiapas marimba and romantic, popular songs. I've tried to break the piñata during Noche Buena (Christmas Eve) in vecindades, as well as having celebrated Independence Night on September 15 in various parts of the country.

I've grieved through bad times and was part of the rescue effort during the 1985 earthquake.

April 9 of this year was the crowning moment. That's when I became a proud citizen of this country. After having felt like part of the setting for so long, it's now official!

A good many years are still ahead in my life and what the future holds is anybody's guess.

Some disturbing events have taken place as of late which make me fear for Mexico's future. However, I am confident the good will triumph over the bad.

Jewish Life (New York and Mexico City)

By
Roberto Padow

I was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York where I lived a distinctly Jewish existence. To make clear what I mean, my family wasn't

religious. Along with my friends, we grew up eating pork and celebrated (if you can call it that) the holy days in our own way. We'd use them as an excuse to take off from school and during childhood, we'd go out and play baseball, even on the highest ones, Rosh Hashona and Yom Kippur. In our high school years, we dressed up in suits and socialized outside one of any neighborhood synagogues, generally never even entering.

Our neighborhood was overwhelmingly Jewish and as a child, I thought Cohen, Adler and Goldstein were American names. Some non-Jews did live there, generally Italian- Americans and they were accepted into the social circle. As we grew older and realized there was supposed to be some difference, we thought of them as honorary Jews.

Ethnically, we all identified very strongly with the Jewish people to the point that most of us were ready to fight over any perceived insult, real or imagined. Our parents had been raised in poor neighborhoods and though ours, the Midwood section of Flatbush, was economically integrated with box- type apartments on certain blocks and two story lawn houses on others, (often bought with fat mortgages) much of the poverty culture remained. It was a symbol of prestige if you could beat the others up and the toughest one on the block had many friends.

To be sure, the way of thinking and feeling was mixed. Jewish culture is complicated and so was our neighborhood. There were the book-worms, (nerds as they're now called) the athletes, the roughnecks and the whole assortment that made our part of Flatbush what it was. The neighborhood library which was frequented by many but so was the illegal bookie joint as well as the limousine that took people to and from the race tracks.

Looking back, what stands out most is that in our bones, we didn't feel like a minority but rather, that New York City was ours. We intermingled Yiddish words with our vocabulary, sometimes thinking they were part of the English language, non-Jews included. When we did venture to Times Square or some other cosmopolitan section, we saw bagel, bialy and knishes shops everywhere.

With few exceptions, none of us went into the predominantly Irish sections of the city, mostly in Queens where we dimly perceived a hostile world out there. And as we grew older, we were quite aware

simply by watching the television that we weren't exactly welcome in the country at large.

But our neighborhoods, the summer camps some of us went to (Jewish) and the resorts where we both took vacations and worked were sturdy sanctuaries. We were completely secure there.

Here in Mexico City, I haven't lived the same kind of life and must make my observations exclusively from Jewish contacts in my line of work.

The Jews here are a clear minority and this is keenly felt even in Jewish areas. Until recently, they were conglomerated almost exclusively in the Colonia Polanco. In the near-by State of Mexico, they could be found in Lomas de Tecamachalco and Hacienda de Echegaray and nowhere else. Most keep to themselves and have no non Jewish friends, who wouldn't be welcome among them.

Jews were poor on arrival here as in the United States and lived in Colonia Roma but almost none remain. Either by conscious design, or chance, they've shed completely the sub-culture of the lower class Jew. I've known professionals, many merchants and yes, some intellectuals but no ruffians or gamblers. Based on that, one could possibly conclude Jewish life is superior here but it lacks the color of the New York neighborhoods. Missing is the folksy manner with its distinctly Yiddish overtones.

With this constant awareness of minority, inevitably accompanied by withdrawal, one result is that Jews up to now haven't made any significant contribution to the culture. Many individuals have stood out in the field of entertainment, where Jews are well represented, but the Jewish input, apparent in the United States especially in the art of comedy, is lacking here.

Even in sports, an excellent common denominator, the pattern is pretty much the same. There is one "Israelite Sports Center" to which many with such talents and inclinations belong, but in the karate tournament in which I participated, I'd have had to look in the mirror to find one. I was once told that if a Mexican soccer team goes up against an Israeli one, the Jew here will root for Israel. (I had heard Jewish people at a gathering talk a lot about Israel's soccer team during one of the World Cup tournaments but attached no importance to it at the time.)

None of this, of course, just happened. When I first arrived here, anti-semites were an overwhelming majority, making the fear of hostility well grounded. Swastikas on walls or Nazi flags from cars were common sights. Many who flew those flags or drew those designs didn't know what they stood for but many did. Hitler had more than his share of admirers. However, the withdrawal didn't help matters as prejudice diminishes only when people get to know one another.

Much of this is in the process of change, brought about by the T.V. showing of "Holocaust" some years ago. Nazi paraphernalia is rarely seen these days and very few think well of Hitler. If this turning point could be brought about merely by a television production, so much more can come by the Jew bursting out of the shell where he's hidden himself all these years and hopefully, this process is already under way.

Little by little, more Jews are living in parts of the city where heretofore they were unrepresented. This must continue until you find Jewish people scattered throughout. If as well, more Jews move to the provinces, it will go a long way toward eliminating prejudice nationwide.

In my opinion, a lot more participation in our national life is very necessary, which means a visible Jewish presence on Independence Day (September 15 and 16), and even in certain Catholic religious which blend with secular life. I was happy when Gabriela Goldsmith was one of the singers on Virgin of Guadalupe Day, which falls on December 12 (After all, wasn't the Virgin Mary Jewish?) and hope one day, Jews will celebrate Christmas (We did in Brooklyn in our own way.) and visit the graves on the Day of the Dead (November 1st and 2nd).

With more participation on every field will come greater acceptance and the Jewish people will become an integral part of Mexican life within a not too distant period of time.

And for all it's worth, one last bit of advice to Jews here; during the next World Soccer Cup competition, whatever you do, root for Mexico.

