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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *EVICTED***

Soldiers AND Kings

**SURVIVAL and HOPE
in the WORLD of
HUMAN SMUGGLING**

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AUTHOR OF *THE LAND OF OPEN GRAVES*

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S O L D I E R S
A N D
K I N G S

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*Survival and Hope in the
World of Human Smuggling*

Jason De León

VIKING

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Some names and identifying characteristics have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved.

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FOR LORENZO

Are you living the life you chose?
Are you living the life that chose you?

|||||||||

JASON ISBELL

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Chiapas, Mexico



Esperando



Chiapas, Mexico



Pakal-Ná



"Decent people shouldn't live here." Lechería, Mexico



Dreamer. Tapachula, Chiapas, Mexico



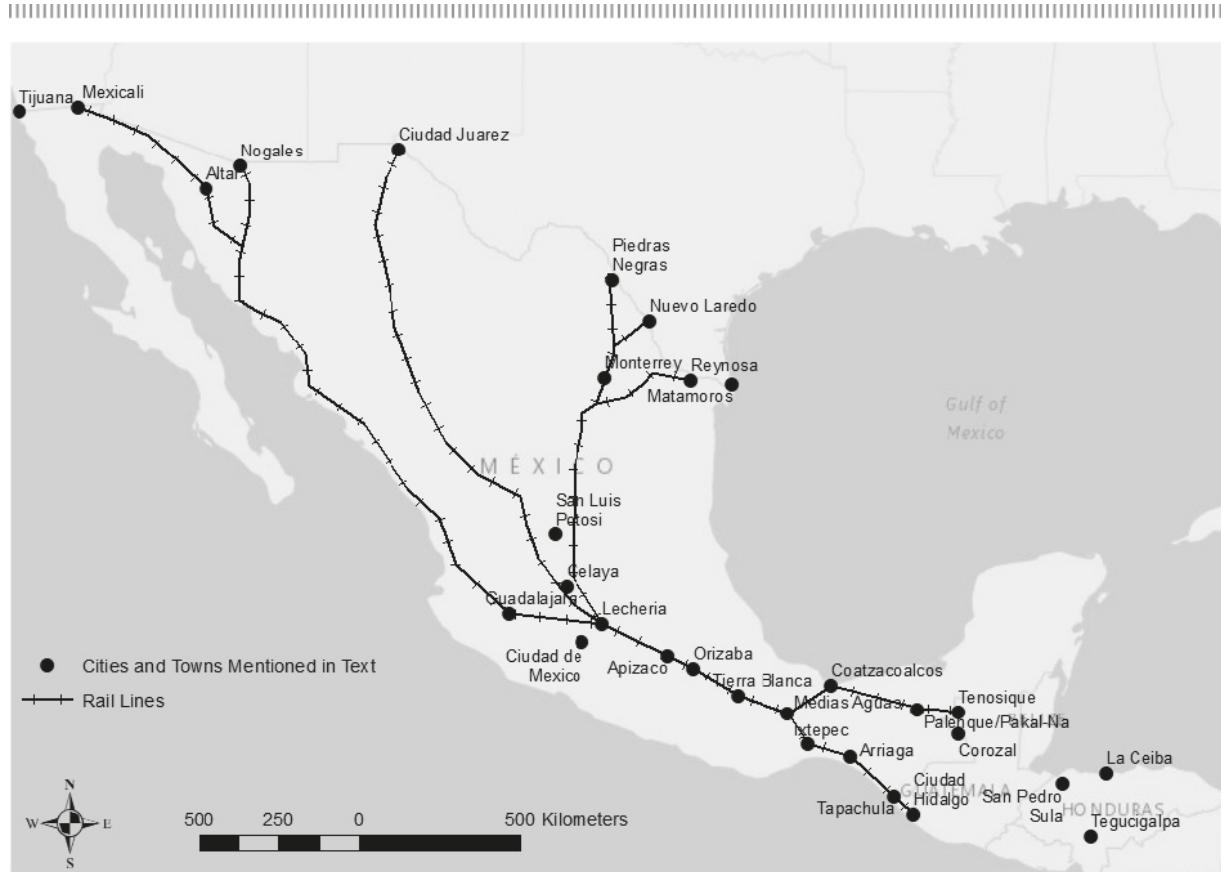
Las vías



Lechería, Mexico



Mormon in training. Pakal-Ná



The Migrant Trail through Mexico

MAP BY HAEDEN STEWART

Introduction

Roberto's murder doesn't warrant much attention. This is not surprising in a place like Honduras, where homicide has become woven into the fabric of daily life.^[*] Still, a local newspaper in San Pedro Sula manages to give him three sentences, although it gets his first name wrong:

José [sic] Roberto Paredes died Friday night at Mario Rivas Hospital. Family members reported that he had tried to travel *mojado* [illegally] to the United States but in Chiapas, Mexico, was stabbed during an assault and admitted to a hospital. After his discharge, he returned to Honduras and a few days later his condition worsened and he was brought to Rivas Hospital, where he died after several days.

The story gets most of the basic details right. Roberto was in Mexico illegally when he was stabbed. He later died in Honduras from his wounds. But he wasn't a migrant headed to the United States, at least not anymore. He'd given up that fantasy a while ago. For the past few years, he'd lived as a street urchin making a little money guiding fellow Hondurans on the Mexican train tracks as they made their way north toward the American dream. What he did for a modest living goes by many names in English and Spanish: smuggler, *coyote*, *pollero*, *pasador*. Interchangeable terms that refer to a person who is paid to help someone get across a geopolitical boundary while avoiding detection by immigration agents. Roberto, like many others in his situation in Mexico, preferred to call himself a *guía*, a

guide: a designation with potentially less negative semantic baggage and one that more directly reflects the work. He is the one you follow, the one who can potentially lead you through danger. The one thing you can't call Roberto is a human trafficker. People who are trafficked have that happen against their will, usually through force, fraud, or coercion. Those Roberto smuggled were willing participants who actively sought him out and paid for his services. I repeat, human smuggler and trafficker are very different things, a concept that popular media and the general public often fail to grasp.

One only needs to turn on the news to get the simple point that we are living in a worldwide migration crisis where poverty, violence, political instability, and climate change are forcing millions each year to leave their homes in search of a better existence. Given the rate that global inequality is growing, coupled with rising sea levels, increased drought, and the appearance of environmental monsters like super hurricanes, you don't need to be a soothsayer to predict that things are about to get a lot worse for all of humanity. The response of the Global North has increasingly been to harden its borders and pour money into migrant detention and deportation-industrial complexes. Build barricades. Fire tear gas and rubber bullets at mothers holding their babies. Put children in cages. Deny due process to asylum seekers. But history has shown us that border walls are no match for human determination and the will to live. Our species' survival has long been reliant on our ability to move across the landscape in search of resources and new habitats. Human mobility cannot be stopped. The human spirit cannot be broken.

As countries like the United States (and now places like Mexico) attempt to beat back migrants from their front door as if in a scene from P. D. James's *The Children of Men*, the human smuggling industry has ballooned. Sneaking people past border guards has grown from a mom-and-pop business into a billion-dollar global industry that will only become more important as parts of our planet grow to be less and less livable. Roberto, the *guía*, was a tiny cog in the behemoth economy of human smuggling. The media often portrays people like him as "bad guys" who prey on the

innocent. But the story is not so simple. As countries make it harder to cross their borders, migrants find it necessary to contract the services of someone like Roberto who can provide protection and safe passage. Arrest and deportation by law enforcement, robbery, kidnapping, extortion, and murder at the hands of transnational criminal organizations: these are the dangers migrants increasingly face. Many have come to see the labor of people like Roberto as necessary and sometimes lifesaving.

This isn't to say that *guias* can't also be thieves, traffickers, murderers, and/or rapists. They can potentially be all those things and then some, which will become apparent as this story unfolds. But people contract smugglers because they give them the benefit of the doubt that no matter what happens, they will eventually get to their final destination, even if it involves hardship and shelling out more cash than was initially agreed upon. All migrants have heard stories of evil smugglers who abuse clients, and a significant number of them have had their own terrible firsthand experiences. But still, migrants make social contracts in good faith with guides in the hope that they will be protectors and not rob them, sell them into slavery, or abandon them in the jungle, desert, or the back of a semitruck. There are just enough "good" smugglers in the world for the economy of clandestine movement to function, even with the constant risk of things taking a bad turn at some point on the journey.

In Western popular media, smugglers are often portrayed as potbellied Latinos with silver-capped teeth and slick hair. They reek of cologne and drive shiny trucks bought with the hard-earned (or borrowed) money of desperate people trying to get to *la USA*. Roberto defied these stereotypes. He was a skinny, banged-up Honduran kid who was often homeless and living hand to mouth. He rarely had more than \$20^[*] to his name and was often more desperate than his clients. He knew how to guide people along the train tracks and through the jungle because he came of age in those dreadful places. But he never saw huge piles of money. He never got to drive a car. He was not a kingpin or someone who called the shots. There was nothing glamorous about his lifestyle or his brutally short existence.

Roberto's modest grave is marked by a wrought iron plaque that bears his name, birthday, and date of death. Somehow the engraver managed to get his last day on earth incorrect. But many would say that the details don't matter. To most, Roberto is a nobody. Just another young man from Honduras with a history of substance abuse and violent behavior. He was someone destined for an early grave, and cemeteries across Central America are full of the skeletons of people just like him: children born into generational poverty whose bleak futures are predetermined before they can even speak; kids who live fast and die fast because those are often the only choices they are given. Roberto is one of those kids. But he is not a nobody. He is a young person with dreams and aspirations who carries hope with him until the very end. Roberto is important enough that people will wail at his funeral and pray for his soul. Someone will scratch "I love you" in the wet concrete that is poured over the top of his tomb.

I will come to know Roberto as a soldier trying to survive on the train tracks in Mexico. He confides in me that he wants out of the smuggling game. It's gotten out of control. Death is breathing down his neck. He wants to run far away and reinvent a life for himself that doesn't include guns or knives or desperate people doing desperate things. Roberto asks me for help to escape his nightmare. I will have my chance to save him, but I will fail and he will die. The train tracks will take his life, and I will forever carry guilt for the things I didn't do.

As I sit on Roberto's grave in rural Honduras, I ponder the surrounding lush countryside. It's an awe-inspiring landscape that holds no future for so many people who must head north and roll the dice: migrants who will follow the train tracks across Mexico and pray that whatever is waiting for them at the end of the line is better than the cruel hardships and early death that they are running from in Honduras. This book is about Roberto and others like him who get caught up in the smuggling game. People on the train tracks who go by a thousand nicknames: Kingston, Flaco, Alma, Papo, Chino, Santos. People whose birth names are often mysteries until the end, when they are inscribed onto tombstones. In this book you will learn about the lives of smugglers and their intimate relationships with death. Destitute