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# Mexicans in New York Search for a Toehold on a Crowded Ladder

By DAVID GONZALEZ

The Irish who moved to Mott Haven in the 1860's searching for jobs are long gone, but the memory lingers at St. Jerome's Roman Catholic Church. The altar and sanctuary walls -- in marble of green, white and orange-yellow -- are a sly echo of the Irish colors. Above, huge stained-glass windows depict Bible scenes, like Jesus feeding the multitudes.

"They told stories in pictures," said the Rev. John Grange, who grew up in the neighborhood and is now the church's pastor. "People didn't know how to read."

Now a new generation is looking heavenward to learn the old stories. They come from Mexico, crowded into the red brick apartments that face the church on East 138th Street in the Bronx, where stores that sell tacos, tortillas and chiles have opened in recent years. In the evening, they turn the church's asphalt parking lot into a plaza where children play soccer while their parents lean against a chain-link fence to chat and rest after a day spent working as dishwashers, cooks and janitors.

As the newest arrivals in a city whose economy and neighborhoods are renewed each generation by waves of new arrivals, the Mexicans are at the bottom of the ladder in community influence, living conditions and earning power. The plight of 57 deaf Mexicans held in servitude in Queens while they sold trinkets in the subway trains was an extreme. But the everyday hardships of such an existence -- from shoddy housing to poor pay -- struck a common chord among the masses of their countrymen for whom such indignities are accepted as the unofficial price of undocumented life.

Tuesday night, two dozen men and women held hands in prayer before meeting at St. Jerome's to discuss the deaf Mexicans. Dora Madrigal and her friends had at one time or another silently suffered at the hands of landlords, employers and thugs, she said, a fear born of being in the country illegally. But the deaf Mexicans finally went to the police when their situation became unbearable.

"They have been an example to us," said Miss Madrigal, who became a citizen last week. "Those who could not speak, complained. What happens to those of us who can speak, but don't?"

They stay in New York and work, joining the estimated 200,000 Mexicans in the city who are trying to survive in a land that for them holds the promise of a better life as it did for the Irish, Italian and Jewish immigrants before them.

Too new to have become hyphenated Americans or fearful because of their undocumented status, they have yet to form the kinds of local associations that unite them and advocate for better jobs and housing. Nor have they sought the help of older Mexican-American advocacy groups that, while active on a national level, have yet to make major inroads into New York out of deference to established Puerto Rican and Dominican organizations.

Instead, they have carved out niches in the city, and more recently moved beyond, to upstate New York and New Jersey, enduring indignities in the hope that hard work will prove redemptive. But changes in the city's labor market have led to many Mexicans, unlike their predecessors, being clustered in low-paying jobs in restaurants, delis and sweatshops that could thwart their progress into the middle class.

"For the people coming in now, their chances to move up through nonskilled work or on-the-job training are more circumscribed," said Robert Smith, a professor of sociology at Barnard College who has studied the city's Mexican community. "Not only because the manufacturing jobs have left the city, but because there has been such a huge surge in immigration to New York there are a lot of other people before them in line to take those jobs."

## A Trickle in the 40's, A Flow in the 80's

Mr. Smith's research has traced the Mexican immigration to New York to the early 1940's when two men from the state of Puebla arrived looking for work almost by accident. As word spread of their good fortune, others followed. Their numbers were fueled in the 1980's by Mexico's economic crisis, which hit Puebla especially hard, and now Poblanos account for about half of the Mexican immigrant population.

Mexican immigration boomed later in the decade when an amnesty resulted in formerly illegal residents sending for their families.

Mr. Smith said that he did not expect the North American Free Trade Agreement to generate enough manufacturing jobs in Mexico to offset the current migration. If anything, he said, he was seeing new immigrants coming from areas that had not previously sent large numbers of people.

"I don't think that Nafta will do anything to stop this," he said. "As you industrialize, you need less people to do the work. Also, investment will not be in places that have poor resources, the places that people are leaving. If it does anything, in the medium term, it will make it worse."

Jorge did not need to understand treaties to realize that his family would never escape poverty in Oaxaca as long as he made \$3 a day at his construction job. "You cannot do anything with that," said Jorge, who refused to use his last name because he has been living illegally in New York since arriving four years ago. "You cannot eat."

It took him three months to find a job in a factory painting clothing for \$3 an hour, he said. Although he had neither documents nor a command of English, it was not a problem.

"Where I worked, everybody spoke Spanish," he said. "Even the Jews spoke Spanish."

He now makes salads in a Manhattan restaurant, and the \$6 an hour he is paid has helped buoy his family back home.

"It was definitely worth coming here," he said. "I have a house in Mexico. My family is better off. I'm not ready to leave New York. I like it."

## In Land of Plenty, Not Enough for Some

But others are not so sure. The legions of immigrants who troop through the subways selling candy and their above-ground compatriots who sell fruits and flowers from carts complain that they are harassed by the police, overcharged by suppliers and assaulted by thugs. Some had tried to get licenses from the city, but the number is capped.

Jose Ramos, whose worn face belied his 38 years, had sold only two bouquets of red, white and blue carnations by 5 o'clock Monday afternoon. A customer handed him a ten-dollar bill and he had to scurry over to a coconut-ice vendor for change.

"One never comes here seeing the reality, so you think it's easy," said Mr. Ramos, a former farm worker who arrived in New York a year ago. "The people who come here see there is no work, so they take what they can, they take whatever they're paid. You sell all day and make \$10, how can you survive? You can't."

Yet they manage by crowding into apartments where each room houses a family or in crumbling basements where they sleep in shifts. Many immigrants said that while competition for jobs was already fierce, they were increasingly worried about how tighter immigration laws would affect them. One reason New York had become a preferred destination was that its immigration authorities were seldom seen as a threat.

The recent Federal court decision that overturned the city's policy of not disclosing immigration status when residents sought services has also increased the fear and uncertainty. Ilze Betins, a social worker who directs El Faro Beacon Youth and Family Services in Spanish Harlem, said that many of her Mexican clients were already so fearful that they almost never gave out information like addresses and telephone numbers.

Eddie Baca, the executive director of the Local Development Corporation del Barrio, said that while the intent of the new policies was to root out illegal immigrants, they would accomplish the opposite. The need to make a dollar and the appetite of employers for cheap labor are too great, he said.

"It's a pipe dream," said Mr. Baca, who is of Mexican descent. "They're not going to leave."

Faced with a growing Mexican community in the city and what they perceive as a hostile political climate toward immigrants nationally, some of the more established Mexican-American organizations are considering expanding in New York.

The National Council of La Raza, which began as a Chicano advocacy group but increasingly has taken a pan-Hispanic approach, has been working with some New York nonprofit groups to reach out to the new immigrants, who themselves may be unfamiliar with what help is available.

"We are going to have to try and speed up the timetable a bit," said Charles Kamasaki, a senior vice president. "That's true with any group coming from a more authoritarian system where there is not a tradition of nonprofit organizations. It takes a while, at least a generation."

Looking to the Church For Comfort and Unity

Many immigrants said that apart from the soccer leagues started by the Mexican Consulate in the city, they seldom had contact with consular officials, whom they described as too bureaucratic and insufficiently involved in the communities. But many have turned to local churches for help with everything from housing to jobs.

Five years ago, hardly anyone attended the Mass on the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Now the December celebration of Mexico's Madonna attracts 1,000 worshipers, families with children who cram the church for a mariachi Mass.

"There's really no difference between them and the Irish," said Father Grange. "They eat rice and we ate potatoes. But the church is still important. You respect your parents and you try to study."

They are hard workers, he said, whose desire to earn a living had left them vulnerable to accepting starvation wages. In response, Father Grange started a cleaning service which now employs 100 Mexicans who make \$10 an hour. Other parishioners have formed a savings group where they contribute \$200 a month. Now they intend to pool their money in a health care cooperative.

"We're organizing as a group to have some unity," said Lucia Sanchez, a longtime parishioner. "Too often what happens happens, and everybody curses their luck. There has always been discrimination, but not like now. People don't want Mexicans. They don't respect Mexicans."

In Brooklyn, Fabiola Villagomez feels a bit cursed herself. She had told her dying uncle she would stay in Puebla and finish nursing school. She promised not to marry Gustavo, the country boy she had met while caring for her uncle. But Gustavo charmed her into breaking her blood vows to utter the vows of matrimony.

She lives in Bushwick with her husband in a room they rent in another Mexican family's apartment. He works in a clothing factory, saving for the house he is building back in Mexico. She stays at home, bored, wondering why she ever came to New York City in 1995 with no documents and no diploma. Her only job was a few months in a paper factory where she said she made \$50 a week.

She stood in the shadow of the elevated train on Broadway, saddened by the recollection of her act of betrayal. She wore a New York City T-shirt, emblazoned with images of the Statue of Liberty, the World Trade Center towers and the masks of comedy and tragedy. Those, too, seemed like broken promises.

"I had imagined this city to be a palace, something beautiful," she said. "Not so much cruelty, racism or the ugly things in this country."

Still, some days she walks into Woodhull Hospital, if only to keep alive a stubborn hope.

"I go in just to watch the nurses and the patients," she said. "I close my eyes and imagine myself giving injections."

Photos: The Rev. John Grange of St. Jerome's Roman Catholic Church in the Mott Haven section of the Bronx leading Mexicans and Dominicans in prayer. (pg. A1); La Hacienda restaurant on 116th Street in Spanish Harlem is one of several Mexican-owned businesses there. Mexican children playing soccer in a lot at St. Jerome's Roman Catholic Church on 138th Street in the Bronx. Behind them, the apartment block where many of them live. (Photographs by Angel Franco/The New

York Times)(pg. B4) Graph: "A CLOSER LOOK: Mexicans in New York" According to the United States immigration and Naturalization Service, between 1990 and 1994 there were more immigrants from Mexico than any other country. Of the 416,769 Mexicans admitted, 8 percent settled in New York City. Here is a look at that population. Graph shows percentage breakdowns of the top 5 countries of origin of immigrants to the U.S. and to New York. It also shows where the Mexican immigrants in New York live. (Source: "The Newest New Yorkers," 1990-1994 report, New York City Dept. of City Planning)(pg. B4)