

Immigrants from the south live here too

By Brian Levinson

Dolores Hernandez Maldonado was smuggled into Mexico twenty years ago, but she remembers it like yesterday. In May 1984, Hernandez, her two young children, and more than 20 other Salvadorans escaped their war-torn country, moved through Guatemala and across the border into Mexico.

Among her first experiences in Mexico was hiding in a Chiapas graveyard overnight, wondering how the men — snoring loudly — were able to fall asleep. Later, at a construction site, the group was nearly caught when the Mexican “*migra*” arrived with search lights and sirens.

The Salvadorans made their way north, stuffed into each other’s laps in a large truck driven by a Salvadoran trafficker. Food was eventually passed around, and to everyone’s dismay, it was bread covered in hot chile. “My god, when does anybody eat chile in El Salvador,” Hernandez remembers with a smile. They all tossed their food out the window.

Luck ran out in Guadalajara. Somebody tipped off the city police, who rounded up the immigrants and sent them packing. Hernandez, because she carried her young children, was allowed to stay in the country. She never would see the others again.

Today she boasts an FM-3 work visa, and is less than a year away from obtaining Mexican residency. But she has not lost her Salvadoran pride. She wears t-shirts with the blue and white flag, and her living room wall is decorated with spectacular natural scenes from back home. She also married another Salvadoran immigrant, Oscar Perez.

The two of them make their home

in El Batan, a colonia in the northern part of the city. They hold twice-a-month reunions for the expat Salvadoran community, complete with typical foods and traditional music.

Though perhaps better known for its expatriate population in the United

States, Mexico boasts a large number of immigrants like Perez and Hernandez within its own borders.

Guatemalan, Honduran and Salvadoran consulates here in Guadalajara have each registered several hundred, sometimes thousands, of transplanted citizens who are living in the metropolitan area and Jalisco state. By most estimates, there are at least an equal number of undocumented Central Americans in the region.

The Guatemalan Consul in Guadalajara, Armando Cruz, estimates that 80 percent of Guatemalans in Mexico are either headed to the United States, or had the intention of doing so — in search of the “American dream.”

“The Mexican dream,” he said, “is what happens when the money runs out, they see Spanish is spoken here, and the climate is very nice. They plan to stay here for a time, save a little more money, and maybe in 10 or 15 years continue on to the United States.”

Salvadoran-born Douglas Ceren is co-founder and president of the *Asociacion de Salvadoreños*



Photo by B Levinson

Salvadoran Douglas Ceren is still very attached to his native country. He works hard to maintain a strong expat community, and promote Salvadoran issues in Guadalajara.

Residentes en Jalisco, which boasts 700 member families — many of them, he notes, are comprised of Salvadoran expats and their Mexican spouses.

Ceren himself left El Salvador in 1981 with his family during the first year’s of the civil war. He is a communications and electrical engineer for a computer firm. Other Salvadorans in Guadalajara, he said, work as doctors, engineers, administrators, in addition to those who have factory and construction jobs.

As a Central American at the University of Guadalajara, he encountered some discrimination from fellow students. Though times have since changed, he admits that Salvadorans must still confront stereotypes, particularly with the growth of *Mara Salvatrucha*, a notorious Salvadoran gang that has spread, and recruited, throughout North and Central America.

“The Salvadorans that arrived in Mexico in the 1980s were stigmatized as guerrillas. In the 1990s we were thought of only as people en route to the United States. Now in

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the 2000s they think we are all Maras," he said.

For its part, the Mexican government has been able to create a more welcoming environment for foreigners, according to Ceren. He expressed gratitude for aid provided by Mexican authorities following El Salvador's tragic 2001 earthquake. As for immigration, he said, "In the past ten years, the foreigner — wherever he may come from — feels more free to normalize his papers with the government."

Those words were echoed by the Salvadoran Consul Joaquin Koloffon, who said the Mexican government has shown itself very willing to legalize Salvadorans, and those who remain undocumented have only themselves to blame.

But Koloffon, like Armendo Cruz at the Guatemalan Consulate, is a Mexican citizen who has been hired from abroad to fill his part-time diplomatic post. Certain members of the Salvadoran community — who refused to be named — said Koloffon has not expressed a strong commitment to his immigrant constituency.

Patricia Villamil Guevara, the Honduran consul in Guadalajara, is a native of Honduras. She painted a less positive portrait of immigrant life in Mexico. Hondurans, she said, are usually "helped and accepted by Mexican citizens, but the immigration agencies in Mexico are often times iron-fisted and authoritarian."

Undocumented immigrants often cross the Suchiate river from Guatemala into Chiapas, Mexico's southernmost state. Villamil recounted stories of Mexican *coyotes*

— human traffickers — at the border who offer passage all the way to the United States for 3,000 dollars but then abandon the immigrants somewhere in Mexico.

There are high rates of crime along Mexico's southern border. Villamil has been approached by several victimized immigrants. One woman was detained at the border and robbed by uniformed officials who refused to identify themselves. They took her cell phone, called her relatives in California and demanded a wire transfer of money in order to secure her release.

Those not captured at the border might hop on the north-south train that runs through Guadalajara. Fearing arrest and without money to pay the fare, they jump off the train before arriving at the Guadalajara station. Some wind up in the hospital with broken legs. They are sent back across the border after recovery.

The immigrants rarely carry identification and only a few pairs of clothes. If they decide to stay in Guadalajara, they must settle for jobs that pay below the 45-pesos-per-day minimum wage. Regularizing papers, said Villamil, is quite difficult, but becomes easier if one marries and has children with a Mexican citizen.

Without papers, there is no assurance of being able to remain inside the country. More than 120,000 undocumented workers were deported back to their home countries in 2002.

"Mexicans are angry with the United States because of the treatment of their undocumented workers," said Villamil, "but they do not pay attention to how their own government treats Central American undocumented workers." □