

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

KAC-21

Getting By

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Dear Peter,

For the last two years Jesus Romero, a small, bent-over 70 year-old man has been arriving punctually at my door each morning at 8:30 A.M. He wears blue overalls, a baseball cap, and oversized black and red sneakers, and his nearly toothless grin - he has only three teeth in his top plate - is always friendly. But rarely does he say hello to me or ring my doorbell; silently he shoves three morning newspapers under my door.

Senor Romero first started distributing newspapers in 1928 at the age of 12. Back then he earned between seven and eight pesos a day; in those days, that was worth about 50 U.S. cents. When he got married in 1945, he was still earning the same amount - that was before Mexico suffered from inflation, which is currently running at 90 percent. Senor Romero claims that even though he now makes between 350 and 400 pesos - roughly \$2.30 to \$2.60 - his earnings don't go as far as they did in 1928.

"Back then we earned very little, but what we earned was worth more than our earnings today because things were much less expensive. For example, when I got married in 1945, I could cover all my living expenses with seven pesos - which is about what they'd been for the previous 20 years. Before I could save 10 or 20 centavos a day, but that was when 10 or 20 centavos could really buy something. Now just to buy basics, sugar or coffee, even 100 pesos doesn't buy you very much. Everything is so expensive that it's absolutely impossible to save any money. Now I work to cover my expenses, and that's all. But that's life."

Jesus Romero was born in the small town of Santiago, a few hours north of Mexico City. His father was a peasant farmer without land. When Jesus was 12 years-old, he, his parents, and his three brothers and sisters moved to Mexico City. Senor Romero claims that he could never learn to read in Santiago's elementary school because his teacher was Japanese and he couldn't understand her. In Mexico City he went to night school for a year; now he can "add and subtract a bit, and read more or less. But I never did learn how to write."

As far as Senor Romero is concerned, three major events have marked his life. The first was his marriage to Vicenta Angel Fidel, a cookie factory worker. Vicenta's parents abandoned her as a baby, leaving her to be raised by some distant relatives. She had had three children before she even met Jesus. Jesus stressed, however, that she had not married "that man". Jesus emphasized that he was her first and only husband,

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150 pesos = U.S.\$1

and that she had borne them two children. He proudly pointed out that his wife has not had to work since she settled down with him.

A major union victory is another event Jesus likes to talk about.

"It happened around 1960, or perhaps it was 1962. We decided to go on strike to win the right to be reimbursed for the newspapers we hadn't been able to sell. It was a very important victory because at times, when we couldn't sell all our papers, we lost so much money that we couldn't afford to eat...Often I was still peddling my papers at one and two in the morning.

"So we went on strike. But it didn't even last 24 hours. The newspaper companies recognized our demand, and within three days, we were being reimbursed for our unsold newspapers."

And then there was the car accident of 1966.

"As usual, I was pulling along my little cart piled high with newspapers, but for some reason the car driver didn't see me. I was hit very hard, and my leg - it was my left leg - was broken in many places."

For three years, Jesus was unable to walk; he and his wife had to live on the 120 pesos that his union gave him each week - worth roughly ten dollars - and whatever money his daughter could spare. As a maid, she was making 200 to 300 pesos a month. Even now, 17 years later, Senor Romero still walks with a marked limp.

Jesus very much likes his job, despite a demanding 7-day work week and daily walk of 10 kilometers.

"I don't have to get up too early; usually I get out of bed between 6:00 and 6:30 A.M. It just doesn't make sense to try to sell your papers too early - there's nobody out in the street to buy them. I usually sell most of mine between 9:00 A.M. and 12 A.M. What papers I don't sell by noon, I return to the company. Then I start selling the afternoon papers..."

"On average I sell about 60 papers a day. I used to sell between 100 and 200, but that was when they cost less, back when they cost 10 pesos (now they cost 30 pesos). But now fewer people buy papers.

"Once I worked on a construction site, a job my brother-in-law got me, but I decided to return to selling newspapers. Construction is hard work. You're on the site from 7 A.M. until 7 P.M., with only a one-hour break for lunch. My job is much better. Usually I've finished my work and am home by 5 P.M., in good time to eat a late lunch and watch some television. And when I don't feel like it, I take the afternoon off."

Senor and Senora Romero have lived in the same tin-roofed, two-room shack for 25 years. When they first moved in, their-monthly rent was 150 pesos; it's now 400 pesos, and the landlady wants to raise it to 1000 pesos, which Jesus claims, "it just isn't worth." He also pays 600 pesos a month for electricity, 150 pesos for gas, and 30 pesos for water. I asked him what they normally eat.

"We eat chicken or chicharron (fried pig's skin), beans and soup...that's what we usually eat. Milk, hardly ever. My wife also feeds my son's children; they almost always come over for lunch. Although I never make it home in time to eat with my grandchildren, my wife puts aside my portion. And sometimes I like to cook for myself."

Despite his 70-years, Senor Romero has no intention of retiring. The fact is, he can't afford to. If he did, his weekly pension would be 450 pesos.

He talks disparagingly of Mexico's rulers, but he speaks

without rancor or resentment. I asked him what he thought of the new presidential administration of Miguel de la Madrid:

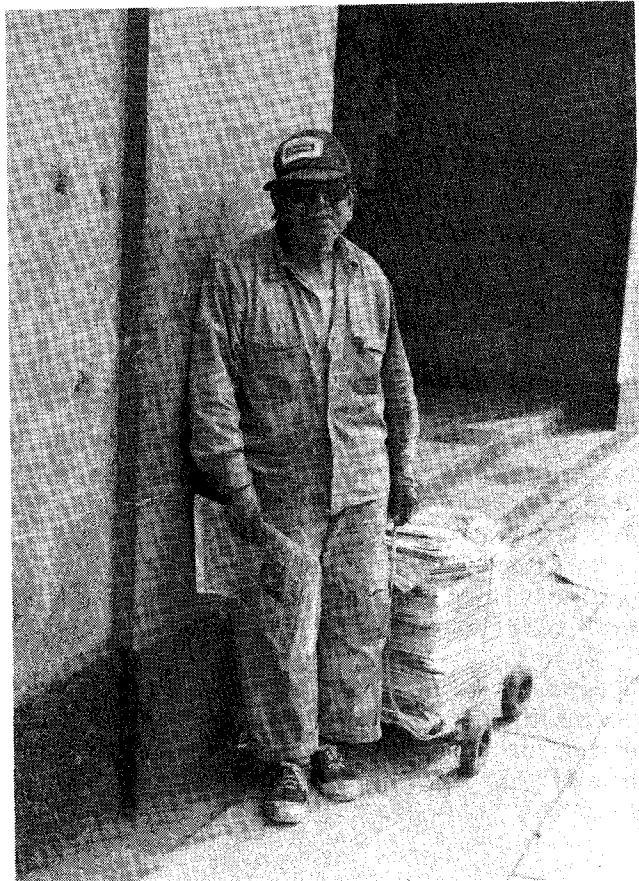
"It's still a bit early to tell. But prices keep going up and up and up, and that's what I don't like. Of course, we also have to pay all that money our country owes abroad, to the United States."

"But is that the fault of the new president?" I broke in.

"No, it was the last one who stole all the money, all that money he borrowed from the United States. He didn't invest any of that money in our country, did he? It's a shame he wasn't like the other presidents - they always took a certain amount of money, but now they take everything they can. They say this last one left the country's treasury and central bank almost empty. And with all that money, he traveled to the United States on vacations. You'd think he'd be too embarrassed to do such a thing, wouldn't you? But no, not him, he's become a millionaire, his relatives too."

Nonetheless, Senor Romero is hopeful both about his own future, and that of his country. He told me last Saturday that next week he was going to talk to his union to see if they could get him an apartment in one of the government's housing projects. Asked if he thought things would get better in the months ahead, he replied:

"I think so, God willing, bit by bit things will get better. As long as we can get by, we'll be happy...And sometimes people give me money in the streets, without my even asking. And that helps."



Tlanepantla used to be a town about 20 miles north of Mexico City; now it sits well inside the limits of the metropolis, right in the hub of the capital's industrial zone. The zocalo or central square of Tlanepantla - filled with meticulously groomed gardens and surrounded by magnificent colonial buildings - is undoubtedly one of the most picturesque in the city. In sharp contrast, less than four blocks away stands one of the capital's many squalid slums.

The streets in the slum aren't paved, and the shacks where the people live have been constructed from scraps of discarded metal, clapboard, cardboard, and tar paper. Train tracks run down the "Main Street", and a garbage-filled, rat-infested river marks the slum's most southern boundary. A paint plant and a plastic doll factory further upstream regularly fill the river with their chemical wastes. While the pungent odors that emanate from the contaminated water might well be causing serious breathing disorders to the 600 squatter families who live in this slum, most of the residents are more fearful that the river might go up in flames. Only a few weeks ago, it did catch fire less than a kilometer further down stream.

Antonia Recindes is one of the slum's first settlers. At the age of 15, she moved there with her parents. That was 54 years ago. At the time, her father was appointed by the government's railroad company as vigilante del rio - the river guard. When he retired, that post was eliminated.

Antonia's friend, Marta Moreno, is a 43 year-old mother of two who moved into the slum 18 years ago because, as she put it, "out there in the countryside, those who have land can eat, the rest can't. We had no land, so we came to the city. Here life is also difficult, but at least we can feed our children."

From the moment I first met Antonia, I knew there was something special about her. Part of it was her mischievous smile, her bright eyes and that she wore her grey hair long and plaited. While in the countryside, peasant women tend to wear their hair in this way, braids are rarely worn by women who have lived in the city as long as Antonia has. Also, unlike the others in the neighborhood, Antonia's shack is surrounded by dozens of colorful flowers planted in tin cans of varying sizes. By the side of her tiny home stands a cage, which is almost as big, filled with live turkeys. In Mexican peasant society, livestock are usually raised not for consumption by the family, but for sale in times of dire need - for example, when a family member falls ill, or a drought demolishes the year's corn crop. Antonia's turkeys serve the same purpose.

For the last four decades, Antonia has led her fellow squatters in their demand to be allowed to stay on the land. To curry favor with the government officials, she has done endless hours of volunteer work for the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). Her tasks have included everything from taking census to organizing numerous acarreados - large groups of people carted to the PRI's political rallies to give an appearance of popularity to its candidates.

"When the governor was running for an office, I would often return from working on the campaign between one and two in the morning. My son would say, 'What are you doing mother?' I would tell him that each of us, in our own way, had to struggle to get by. But then he'd ask, 'And what are they ever going to give you for your work? They won't pay or give you anything.' "

Antonia is less pessimistic than her son. In fact, recently she has made repeated visits to the mayor's office, desperately hoping that he or one of his underlings will give her a job.

"I just want to work, doing whatever they want me to do. Perhaps I could work as a gardener. The government has many gardens throughout the city...I think I've helped them a great deal; now it is time that they help me."

I asked Antonia if her political work had paid off.

"No, not at all, not yet...But at least they haven't thrown us off our land."

Antonia is a widow who lives with her oldest son. He used to work as a mechanic for a newspaper publishing firm. But last December, he was laid off.

"He's down and out, senorita, the only work he could find was selling popsicles. What with the cold weather we had until recently, he sold very few. And he's not the only one who suffers, his six children do too. And they're too young to help him: the oldest is nine years old, the youngest is three...When I've got a few extra cents, I give them to him. I tell him, 'take this my son, perhaps it can help a little.' Sometimes the people that he used to work for tell him that they'll soon be able to use him again; then other days they tell him that there's not a chance."

Marta's economic situation is equally precarious. For the last three years her husband has worked at the Masa Flour Mill; in January, however, he was fired together with many other workers. Since then, Marta has had to sustain her family.

"I go looking for laundry to wash, and even though I look hard, I don't find much work. They often tell us to wait, or to come back, but in the end, they don't give us any work...Usually I am able to find three or four dozen articles to wash a day, at 60 pesos a dozen. But with that money, I can only afford to buy the most essential foods - sugar, beans and tortillas, sometimes a bit of rice, a few packages of soup, that's what we eat...Everything is very expensive, our earnings just aren't enough. For example, I can no longer afford to buy meat for our children."

Marta had barely finished her sentence when Antonia piped in saying, "As long as they don't increase the price of tortillas Marta, as long as there are tortillas to fill with nopales or other wild vegetables or just anything, then we'll get by...What with today's high prices, it's no wonder that people can't afford to pay us to wash their laundry anymore. Everything is so expensive. You know, I used to get suitcases full of laundry - enough to fill this passageway. Now I'm lucky if two or three dozen pieces of clothing come my way."

Just as I was preparing to leave, Marta's daughter arrived. She was quite pretty with her down-turned grin and pulled-back black hair.

"This is my nine-year-old daughter Maria. As you can see, she is very short and thin; by her size you might think that she was only six-years old. In good times we could not feed her well," she said sadly, stroking the girl's hair, "and now with this crisis, both she and her brother will become even more malnourished."



Above: The author with Antonia's family

Right: Antonia and her turkey

