

Chapter 18 – Anita and Tomás Behn Eschenburg – Mexican-Europeans Carrying on the Healing Traditions in Agua Blanca Canyon, Jungapeo, Michoacán

Prologue

I met this low-key couple at the Agua Blanca Canyon Resort hot spring in Michoacán. They were obviously in love – with each other and with Agua Blanca. This therapeutic hot spring hotel had always been one of my favorites because it was low-key, quiet and unpretentious. The people who came there came for the healing waters. These waters had been world-famous in the heyday of hot springs (the 1930's and 1940's up to World War II, until the development of modern drugs that healed people more quickly). A German, Henrick Peters wrote a booklet on the springs, claiming that they were as effective as European waters in curing, well, just about everything. A Franciscan friar, Juan de San Miguel, said, *The waters cure many ailments and even serve to prolong life*. Nearby was the more famous hot springs/spa San Jose Purua, which was built along the lines of a European hot springs as a healing hotel. San Jose Purua is a story onto itself, with intrigue, union troubles, international corporations, a web of deceit and a mystique, but that story is in my hot springs book, not this one. Agua Blanca's web site is <http://www.aguablancacanyonresort.com/en/index.html>

I'd not been back to Agua Blanca for many years after including it in my book, *Spas & Hot Springs of Mexico*. I'd not been to Mexico for a few years either. I'd abandoned Mexico, in a sense. I contracted delusions of altruism and devoted my life to writing and doing speaking tours about a self-help topic. I'd gone broke trying to save the world, which dampened my savior complex. As it turned out, I was not a messiah, but just a guy with a book and a message not enough people wanted to hear. So I returned to my roots – writing about and traveling Mexico again.

I had visions of updating my hot springs book, so Nicki and I trekked down to Michoacán which has an abundance of thermal water springs. Life always turns out the way it is supposed to. Had I returned to Agua Blanca a few years before, I'd have removed it from my book. The Agua Blanca had fallen on hard times, gone into disrepair and was nearly gobbled up by a soulless conglomerate that would have put up condos. It was my genuine love for Mexico and for this particular spring that forged the bond between me and Anita and Tomás. They both came to Agua Blanca when they were kids. They loved the place. The owner turned down much more money to sell this holistic spa to people who appreciated her and would treat her right. Their perspective is unique in this book. This is their story.

Their Story

Anita, you and Tomás have an interesting lineage. Your family originally came from Germany?

Anita - I was born in Mexico, both my parents were born in Mexico. My grandfather, on my father's side was born in Torreon.

My family from my mother's side that's a little more interesting story. He was from Hamburg, Germany. When he was a young man, he liked the good life and partying a lot. When he was maybe 20 or so, his parents decided he needed to learn the real life. They had friends in Chiapas in Mexico who had a coffee plantation. The only way to get there was by horse or a donkey. They wanted him to learn his lesson, so they sent him for a year to go and work there but he loved it so much he didn't want to leave. He went back to Germany to get a wife and he came back. They stayed and my parents, my mother, was born here. So that's how my mother's family ended up here. I guess Mexico is a country that either you love it and you stay or you have a hard time and you want to leave as soon as possible.

Yeah that's a great observation, I agree, that's what I see in people from the US who come here. I get a lot of people that think they're going to move to Mexico and I tell them go live there for a year before you make that big decision.

Anita- That's the best advice you can give them because it's hard to live differently. There are many beautiful places but they are different just looking at things than really living with the problems and things that are around you.

Do you know an author, B. Traven?

Anita (to Tomás)-You have a book from him, right?

Tomás- Yeah

I've read all of his books I think. He was a German who really understood the country and wrote magnificently about it.

[AUTHOR'S NOTE: B. Traven's life (probably born in 1890 – definitely died in 1969) is shrouded in mystery, which is exactly how the author intended. His best-known work to American audiences is his 1935 novel, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, which was made into a movie produced by John Huston in 1948, starring Humphrey Bogart and Walter Huston.

Traven's series of six books known as "The Jungle Novels" were set in Chiapas and highlighted the clash between the rights of the Indians and capitalism in the 1930's. Some also say they were an indictment of the failure of the Mexican Revolution to bring justice

to Chiapas. Traven espoused Socialist philosophies as a solution to the social injustices he chronicled.

He was revered in Mexico and at one time the former President of Mexico, Luis Echeverría was rumored to be Traven. He drew laughs at a speech when he said categorically that he was not. Traven **may** have been a German or he **may** have been an American born in Chicago. He was known as Ret Marut, Hal Croves and Traven Torsvan at different periods of his life. Once in the 1980's I met a very old man who owned a fleabag hotel on Isla Mujeres (before everything became gentrified) who told me he worked with "Ben Torvsan" cutting mahogany in the Chiapas jungle. *¿Quién sabe?* All the old man could tell me was that "Sr. Torsvan" was very intelligent and was a *muy buena gente*. He spoke Spanish well for a foreigner and even spoke some Indian dialects. Traven was responsible for igniting my desire to learn more about the Mexican people beyond the superficial. If you want to know more about this fascinating character, I believe that *My Search for B. Traven* by Johan Raskin is an excellent resource.

Tomás-Yes, his anecdote about the Mexican mentality of the time was there was a merchant who wanted to buy something at the market, I think it was oranges. He asks, "How much for one orange?" "One peso," the vendor says. "How much for all the oranges?" The vendors replies, "I can't sell them all you. I can't do that because then I'd have nothing to sell tomorrow."

I've heard that story. So that originated with Traven?

Tomás- Yes.

Tomás, what I was telling Anita is I am doing this book for the University of Texas Pan American. It's a series of interviews with Mexican people, with different lives because I want to give the American reader a good impression of what it's like to be a Mexican today. I think that there are many things my people don't understand about Mexico.

Tomás- Many are ignorant in the lives of Mexicans.

I thought you all would be an interesting story. You met in Mexico City at the Swiss school? Well, tell me a little about that.

Tomás- Ok, but to finish up about my ancestors, I'm the third generation in Mexico. My grandfather migrated via the US to Mexico at the beginning of the last century. He helped to found the Swiss school in Mexico City.

Actually Anita and I sort of rediscovered Mexico because we lived quite a few years abroad.

Anita- I guess that is why I can say that Mexico has changed a lot. I think if you live in the country all the time it's hard to see, you don't see the little changes because you're here all the time. There are a lot of differences in twenty-five years.

Tomás- I was in Europe a couple of years, actually nine years, studying and then for work I was transferred to Europe by a company I was working with. Then I transferred to New York City and New Jersey. I spent time in Central America, in Panama. Our roots called us back and we all have family here and we felt that our kids would love getting rooted after living in different countries; they'd have a place to call home. We decided to come back home – to find a place with the idea of retirement pretty soon you realize it's the place to be.

Anita- The kids went to school to finish up high school at the American School. The Mexican school was good but our kids had not spoken Spanish. My grandparents always spoke German to us and to the kids so they don't forget it. My parents went to a German speaking school, and they did the same thing to us. The schools here, they don't speak German. I started going to school here, but there was only elementary school after that you had to go somewhere else. So we moved to Mexico City. My parents wanted us to learn in the German language. We spoke to our kids in German, but they never went to school for it. There was no German school in New Jersey and there was no German school in Panama. They spoke German at home but English was the main language. In Panama they started to learn a little bit of Spanish but they were not really fluent in Spanish when we came to Mexico. We were looking for a school that had high quality English so they didn't forget everything.

Most of the people I've interviewed are basically middle class people and almost all of them have sent their kids to private schools rather than public schools. You see that in the US too, but not to the extent, I think, that I see in Mexico. Can you kind of explain to me why that is?

Anita- The quality of education in the public schools here is really low.

Is that because the quality of the teachers or they have too few teachers or too many kids or can you define it in any way?

Tomás- I think it's the combination of things. One thing that you read all the time in the newspapers is that they have big problems with the teachers union. I don't know if you're aware, but the Mexican teacher's union is the biggest union in all of Latin America. It is very tightly controlled and not always concerned with the best interest of education. We never had our kids or ourselves in public schools.

Anita- I went to public school one year. [Laughs]

Tomás- We have two employees who are school teachers and they can't write. They can't write. If we accept that, and think that those kinds of teachers should be teaching our kids then we are in trouble. [He shook his head as his voice trailed off].

Anita- Also if they want that job they have to buy the job. These people don't have the money to buy the job, so they must borrow it, I guess. Once they are in there, once they have that paper, I don't know what they get—

Tomás- They get tenure.

Anita — Then you have it for the rest of your life.

That's the same as the people who work at Pemex; the same kind of principle.

Anita- So you can imagine. I don't know if it's still like that but when I was a kid I had a classmate who, I later learned, when I was still finishing high school, he was already a teacher. I don't know how that could possibly be, but his parents just bought a bunch of jobs. I don't know, but that's how it works here, so you can imagine the quality

I'm not saying that all of them are like that. But we have, like Tomás said, these two employees, that have bad spelling and they are supposed to be elementary school teachers.

Tomás- It's not the logic of what teaching should be. A lot of learning here is memorized, not using the critical skills, to discern what's important. Nowadays in the area of internet where you have to have your own critical skills. That is a very big problem here. The economy is being developed.

Well, actually that's a criticism that we have in the US of our teaching. In many states we have tests that all school children take and if your class or your school passes a certain test then they get government funding, So the teachers now- this is the last 5 years or so- spend all the time teaching the kids rote memorization to pass these tests. Then they are not teaching them, like you say, the critical skills. So there's a similarity there that you may not have been aware of.

Tomás- It has something to do with the centralized system. Pretty much everything is centralized. It brings up that example of the Indian girl in the remote town or village. They have to learn things that have no meaning to them in their village. They don't get the reading material they need and that makes it even more complicated. They're not really trained on what they should know. They are not ready for their lives.

So your kids went to the school in Mexico City?

Anita- They didn't go to school in Mexico City. They went to school in Querétaro. They already spoke Spanish when we came here but obviously they were not that fluent, speaking English, but now they are pretty fluent in Spanish, too.

You were away for most of their lives, so when they came back to Mexico how did they view the country? They probably had a very interesting set of observations, as well as yours.

Anita- Sure, I mean first of all, ever since they were born we spent a couple of weeks in Mexico visiting family, so it was not all new to them but they never lived here. All three have said they didn't want to come. All three cried. They had their friends and didn't want to come here.

Tomás- It had nothing to do with Mexico

Anita- No, whatever the country, it was just they were teenagers and didn't want to leave their friends. They were leaving a place where they felt comfortable and they had friends and everything. After awhile all three agreed that it was the best move we have ever done.

Oh, great! Can you elaborate on that?

Tomás- Again it's the combination of different things. I think they realized Mexico is a country of great opportunities. One thing is that they felt welcomed; they felt at home right off the bat. The warmth and the friendliness of their peers, neighbors and it made it so much easier for them to integrate and they loved that.

Anita- Compared to Panama, the Mexicans are so much friendlier.

Really?

Anita- Oh yes, the Panamanians are nice, but they are not very friendly. At least in their language they are not and here in Mexico there is always a '*momentito por favor*'.

Tomás- Openly polite.

Anita- Openly polite. They go to the gas station or anywhere. When you live here you take it for granted but when you live somewhere else you- (to Tomás) Remember in Panama? We were shocked. At first we thought they were like that.

Tomás- Compare it with a New Yorker. Good at heart but not necessarily too polite. Also compared with their neighbors, Colombia and Cosa Rica, which are much more warm and friendlier.

Anita- Whenever we came back we realized how much friendlier people are here, at least in their ways. It's not that they were bad, we liked the Panamanians very much, but you have to get used to their abruptness and their way of speaking. You call somewhere and you ask for someone, if you're lucky, they say '*un momento*'. Here they say, "*un momentito, por favor*," you know, it's so much nicer here. You have to get used to that. They are so much more open and friendly here.

So the impression that you two had, having been away for so long... I mean having known Mexico in earlier days from growing up here, having been away and coming back,

what's different? I know it's hard to put 25 years of change into a few sentences but what were the main things that you noticed good and bad or indifferent?

Anita- One thing that kind of shocked us a little bit is that everybody saying *tu*. When we left Mexico you'd say *tu* to your friends, to your family or to young people but everybody else... you would never say *tu* to them, you would always say *usted*. That changed when we came back. I don't know when it changed, but it was all of a sudden it's like what happened here? Even the children say *tu* to their teachers, which we think is awful. That's how it changed here. They are not learning these kinds of things? It's hard to explain to someone because in English you don't have that kind of thing.

True, it's you to everyone.

Anita- But the language, this is something that changed, in how they talk to everyone.

I've noticed that in my short time. I'm still a foreigner but still, in visiting, I thought tu was being more commonly used.

Tomás- I think it's fair to say that the world is changing. I guess you can understand it being a part of a trend and hopefully it will be challenged. That is something that I hope will change. The Mexican is prouder. Indians, they will look into your eyes with an openness, that's positive, and that's changed for the better. It goes hand in hand with this *tu* thing after awhile, with these barriers of formal behavior.

This leads into a delicate question but some people I've interviewed have told me that the Mexican personality has been one of servitude. These are mostly older people who have said this. Is this servidior mentality changing, more of a pride, is coming more powerful?

Tomás- In our experience everywhere we go it seems like they're old-world now. They felt that they were subdued.

I didn't quite completely understand because it's hard for my mind to understand completely, but what I think they were saying is they were very conscious of class.

Tomás- Pretty much. Mexicans are very class sensitive, even more so than racist

Obviously you like living here more than any other place you've lived.

(Tomás and Anita together) -We belong here.

Anita- Here we are home, we own the place. It's different in other places; even if you own a place you are really not home.

That's what I want to communicate to my readers. Everyone in every country understands a sense of being home, that's where we belong, but I don't think too many

people can put it into words . It may be too broad a question, but can you try to put it into words so that I can explain it?

Anita- I would put it... one thing I'd say, while we were living in the US, and I don't think it is a matter of language because we don't speak perfect English. We were able to communicate. It was so easy to meet people and to speak to everyone you meet. I was standing in line at the supermarket and people would talk to me when I was with my kids or whatever. I remember the one time I met someone at the train and she knew we were rather new in the States and she started talking to me and the next morning she asked if we wanted to spend Christmas with them. And for us, Europeans, are very family intimate. We felt very, very honored for those people to invite us for Christmas. We were not there for Christmas anyway; we came to Mexico. We went out with them some other night and we really had a great time. We invited them over, and then that was it. I remember inviting people and not getting invitations back. It was kind of strange. Here in Mexico it's very open, maybe even too open. Everybody says *mi casa su casa*. It's kind of ... when they want to tell you their address they don't say *yo vivo* there and there, they say *tu casa está* there – your house is wherever.

Tomás- There's what you're saying, a change we've noticed more in the last 5 or 6 years. You notice that much more now. It's significant. To make people feel comfortable and feeling at home is a big part of feeling comfortable. Mexicans are very open if you open to them. They notice right away when you make the effort. Tell your readers to try to speak the language and they'll see a big difference in how they treat you.

My personal experience is exactly that because I'm interested, and my Spanish is better than it was 40 years ago. Not very good words but I had a good heart and I think people felt that. My feeling... well this isn't about me.

Tomás- It doesn't have as much to do with the language, but could be the readiness to show that we're interested in your country. Maybe that has also something to do with the prototype of tourist. The thing right now is Americans, to them, that they come to this country and everyone should speak their language and the Mexicans resent it.

Do a lot of tourists from various countries still do that? Do they come and expect everyone to speak English or French or whatever?

Tomás- Americans, English, yes.

Anita- English mostly, because I know a lot of others, French or Germans or whatever, they are not used to going other places, and everyone speaks their language. But all over the world there are some people that speak English. I guess it's ok if you travel, you can't expect every tourist to learn the language where they're going to go.

Tomás- It's not the language itself. We traveled to quite a few countries. We spent weeks in China. We could not communicate with people. We noticed the people tried to understand our hand signs, or from a phrase book, looking up the phrases in English. It's

not the language itself, it's the willingness to get involved and show interest in the person or the culture.

You show the interest, not by the words.

Anita- We always made the effort to at least learn the words to say 'good morning', hello', 'thank you', 'please'. These little words make a big difference- I think so. And we notice if you don't speak any Spanish at all but you come in the morning and say *hola* or *buenos dias* or you ask for something and she gives it to you and you say *gracias* or *por favor*, even if you say it wrong it doesn't matter, but show that you're giving an effort. Even if you only know those 2 or 3 words, it makes a big difference.

And smiling, I think at least in this culture. In other cultures it doesn't work too well. In the US or the Mexican culture- the Latin culture- smiling is good.

Tomás- Mexicans appreciate having good eye contact. You can laugh all day long but if you look into peoples eyes here in Mexico they might even understand. I think Mexicans are very intuitive, they read people, they read peoples hearts. It's amazing, and maybe not so much in Mexico but in other countries.

*That brings to mind the last thing I usually ask everybody, although we probably already covered it, but if all of my readers were sitting back here and you could communicate to them what it is about living in Mexico that they don't understand. You can say 'look, this is what it's like to be a Mexican today and this is why it's so good for us and we want you to understand this'. Could you put that into a few sentences? I want them to understand the soul or the heart of the Mexican people from your perspective because they have the wrong impression of the Mexican people; they know only the *mojado* or the *servidor* person who waits on them. Like if I were trying to explain to Mexicans or Germans what it's like to be an American, it'd be very difficult but I'd do my best to say how it is.*

Tomás- I think it has a lot to do with the warmth and generosity of Mexicans. You want to get closer to them and to look beyond the *mojado*. Get in closer to them and get to know them you'll know the humanity.

Anita- Mexicans are multi-cultural. I'm Mexican, and I feel Mexican in my heart, but people look at me and they don't think I'm Mexican. I am and I feel that way. The real, real Mexicans are very few anymore and most are from a different European background; Spanish, German, or whatever. Obviously most of them have the Spanish background. All Mexicans are warm and friendly and open people and they are very willing to learn new things. It's not like, 'this is the way we've done this always'. The Europeans are more like that- 'that's the way we've always done it, so that's the way we're going to do it'. The Mexicans are not like that. They're very spontaneous.

Tomás- Their life has been very difficult to understand culturally or socially. The openness to see how other people live. It's always challenging. Other parts of the world are so different to them and they wonder about the ways that others live.

My feeling is in the US we tend to say there is a right way and a wrong way to do something, be it in business or human relations. We tend to be more black and white- either it's this way or it's that way. My feeling is in general Mexican people can see different ways of doing the same thing, is it maybe correct to say they don't judge much, right and wrong? Whether something works or not.

Tomás- I can agree with that. I always marvel how tolerant Mexicans are. Patient.

Anita- We've lived here for 4 generations and we still can't be as patient as many Mexicans are. For instance, when I want to go do something at the bank. Maybe it's not only because we have it in our blood, but because we've lived away and it works different in other places. You have to learn that you can't expect to do so many things during the day. Sometimes you can, but you always have to wait somewhere for a long time, and you have to be very patient.

Tomás- You are starting to see that now people are starting to complain or protest that they don't open another teller, another window. You can be at the bank where they have 30 people waiting for 3 cashiers. That is slowly changing.

Entrepreneurship. You've worked for companies around the world rather than for yourself right? I assume you knew entrepreneurs in the US and Europe. Would you say that it is more difficult to be an entrepreneur in Mexico or it's easier than in the United States?

Tomás- From the standpoint of opportunities, there are more opportunities here. The market is not as saturated. From a clear cut, transparent framework of laws and regulations it's more difficult. Not everything is clear here, The rules change or can be bent by you or someone else.

Anita- And the thing here is like is most of Latin America, we even told all the children, here it's important you have connections, that you have friends in certain places.

It certainly helps. I've been told that Mexican law is written so it can be interpreted in several ways, there is not always one correct way. It's not so black and white. The language is so vague. Not that it's done on purpose.

Tomás- Many laws, there's so many inconsistencies, so many contradictions. We do have the minimum wage by law. You can't live on the minimum wage. It's not even a minimal wage, it's not realistic. So many other things should be banished because otherwise we can't live. Lawmakers are still tied up.

It's still a country in transition?

Tomás- Absolutely.

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