

Chapter 21 – Jose Luis – Newspaperman, Cross Border Observer

Jose Luis V Garza is a newspaper man who divides his time between the border cities of Reynosa, Tamaulipas and McAllen, TX. He publishes in both the United States and in Mexico. We have been on some press trips together and developed a friendship.

As it later turned out, we had a common bond – we were both friends of great newsman, Eloy Aguillar who had been the Associated Press bureau chief in Mexico City from 1979 - 2006. Eloy, who had a house in McAllen, Texas, was very kind and supportive of my writing about Mexico, even though I was hardly a journalist. Eloy was famous for being helpful and supportive to young journalists or even travel writers like me.

When Eloy came through McAllen in the 1980's, he would stop in at Sanborn's where I worked as a travel writer at the time. He'd take the time to come to my office and chat a little, ask me how it was going and what could he do to help me. He published my one and only real news story, about a flood in Nayarit. I always thought of that as a great honor.

At Eloy's funeral, Jose Luis gave the eulogy. Eloy had touched Jose's life too. Jose Luis said that Eloy was one of the few *Norteamericano* journalists who would correctly write and speak Spanish as well as any Mexican.

Since Jose Luis works on both sides of the border and lives on the border, he often flips back and forth between the two countries when discussing concepts. For truly bi-cultural people like him, the melding of the two countries is a reality.

Could you tell me a little bit about yourself?

I am fifty-nine years old. I am the vice-president of the National Association of Hispanic Publications. I am the chairman of the international committee of that organization. It is an organization of journalists who write mainly about Mexico. I was recently elected *Consejero* [advisor or member of the board of directors] *del Instituto del Mexicano en el Exterior*. [This organization (IME) defends the interests and rights of Mexicans living abroad]. There are 120 advisors of this organization, including ones from Canada. They make recommendations to the government of Mexico in regards to the Mexicans who live out of the country. This is not a paid position, it is honorary.

You live on the border now, but are you from here?

I grew up on the border of Mexico, a small town of San Miguel de Camargo. It later changed its name to Diaz Ordaz. I studied at the university in Tampico. I also lived in Monterrey. As a child, I lived here in the Valley [the Rio Grande Valley of Texas]. But I didn't like living in the Valley. I returned to Mexico. [Laughs].

Why did you prefer living in Mexico to the United States?

Probably, it was because it was easier to get a career in Mexico. Initially, I grew up with the medical business in my family. I thought it was easier to start in Mexico. At that time I wanted to be a medical doctor. [Laughs]. But I changed. I changed. I decided to be an attorney. When I was studying, I looked for a job to support myself and my career. I started to work in a newspaper. Then I never stopped [Laughs] working for newspapers. I also make a lot of contributions to radio.

A lot of Mexican people say that living on the border is much different than living in the interior, like Oaxaca or Michoacán. What do you think?

Yeah. Yeah. I think that many people refer to this part of the country, 'the third country.' It is so different. The exchange of culture. The interrelationship. The interdependency of the two countries. We are still citizens of our respective countries, the United States or Mexico, but in many ways we have the influence of the other country. In terms of government, the federal regulations are coming from areas and people who don't understand the border.

They can decide, they can make an opinion; they can authorize grants or money for the border. But they don't really understand what is happening here. With some exceptions, I think that the federal government misinterprets the special people who live on the border. Also on the part of education and culture, it is different. There are some traditions in the areas culture and tradition that are maintained that are different. It is happening in both countries. It is totally different the way of living here [in the Valley of Texas] than it is living in Michigan or Kansas, like it is different to live in the Mexican border cities than it is to live in Michoacán or Guanajuato, for instance. There are many people from those areas who spend part of their life in the United States and part in Mexico, but it is different – totally different.

As a journalist, do you think it is more difficult to be a journalist in Mexico than in the United States?

Technically there is no big difference. Mexico has all the technology to make newspapers and electronic media as the United States. But we need to understand that all the media needs economic support. The marketing is the problem. And we need to be aware of that. In Mexico the media has a different source of income than in the United States. With some exceptions, in the United States, it is basically commercial. You need to understand the market, you need to understand the population, you need to understand who your reader is, or who your audience is. You need to try to produce the product they are demanding.

In Mexico there are many of the publications and members of the electronic media. They have the opportunity to get a big part of their income from the government through political spending or government spending. In Mexico, remember the parties have big amounts of money – millions of dollars (not pesos) – for spending on the activities of the

party. They have that kind of income, the Mexican media. That doesn't happen here. The politicians don't pay for anything.

In Mexico, the money is also coming from the government – in official announcements, they make some kind of contract to project the image of the institution, the mayor, the government or the president of the republic. They spend a lot of money on the media in Mexico. You have different economic support in the United States.

That is the part that is basic. But on the other side it is more difficult to be impartial, because there are some powers that are not part of the government or social structure, but they are there. One is the media [he laughed]. But there are some groups that have a lot of influence in many areas and sometimes they make it more difficult to be a journalist. The people of the media can't be impartial. They can't. Absolutely they can't.

Since you are quite involved in the immigration arena, what are the most important changes you have seen in Mexican immigration to the United States?

Let me explain it this way. The migration to the United States, many years ago, was mainly farm workers, poor people. That changed, to me, dramatically. The people coming today (not only Mexicans, but people from many countries), are more educated. Sometimes they are not working in their professions because it is more difficult to get accredited. Lawyers, for instance can only be admitted to the bar without re-learning everything in Louisiana because both Mexico and Louisiana operate on the Napoleonic Code of justice, which is basically Roman law used throughout Latin America.

But there are also technicians and others who have high cultural levels coming to the United States. Or there are people who come to live here to make international business and live here and in Mexico. And there are people coming to the United States who have the money and the resources to live here, who are coming because they feel more secure living in the United States than in Mexico. There are people who have had bad experiences in Mexico and are coming to live here.

What can you say about NAFTA (The North American Free Trade Agreement) and its effect on the border economy and the migration of Mexicans from the interior of Mexico to the border cities?

The NAFTA made some important changes in the relationship between the United States and Mexico (and Canada too). It enabled the establishment of new industries, new ways to make business between the two countries.

NAFTA was responsible for one of the big changes in the economy on the Mexican side. Twenty years ago, there were only twenty *plantas maquiladoras* (twin plants or plants to manufacture items that are then shipped back to their country of origin without payment of duty. For example, many automobile parts in US cars are made in Mexico, many US vehicles are assembled in Mexico, and then shipped back to the USA for final touches).

Today it is one of the more important economic forces on the border. They are bringing a lot of investment to both sides of the border.

They are also responsible for a lot of Mexicans moving from the interior to the border to work. I don't believe that a lot of them are coming to the border expecting to come to the United States. But one small part would like to live in the United States if they could. Most prefer to live in Mexico.

There is a lot of controversy on the benefits of the maquiladoras to the workers. Overall, is their effect a positive on their lives? Specifically, do you think that the people who have come from the interior have improved their lives, or are they not any better off than they were before they left their homes?

I think that they find a solution to their lives. For example, do you remember the economic crises in Mexico of 1994-95? In many areas of Mexico, especially in the interior states, the people didn't have the resources to do anything but agriculture. Many of the families and the young people of those areas, Guanajuato, Zacatecas and the other interior states were looking for work. They needed to find a job just to live. They needed something to cover their basic needs. [Laughs]. At that moment, the *maquiladoras* were a solution. So many of them migrated north to the border. They got married, got into new relationships with the local people, they get *Infonavit* houses. They are here to stay. I don't think many of those people are going back. That speaks more strongly than what I can tell you about whether their lives are better or not. They found something. They found a solution. But probably, if they had better options, they wouldn't have moved. But at that moment, it was a solution for them.

How would you define middle-class?

Hmm. [He thought for awhile before answering]. There is no distinct segment of the middle-class in Mexico. The people who don't have economic problems, they can make a good living; they are the middle-class. A long time ago we called people middle-class those who were professionals. They did not have economic problems. But today, even people who have professions have economic problems. They are between middle and poor class, because they have a lot of credit to pay and inflation that we have never seen before. The crises in '94-95 was basically because many, many millions owed money to the banks in different ways. After that the change in the social structure of the people was very obvious.

Many people have told me that the middle-class is shrinking. Historically, in a country where the middle-class is weakening and the poor class is growing, conditions are ripe for social unrest, even revolution. Do you think there is any possibility of that in Mexico today?

No. No, I don't think so. We have some social problems, critical social problems, but not of the magnitude of revolution. It is different. So we have factions in Mexico who are not part of the ruling powers in Mexico, like the criminal organizations. The leaders of those

organizations are not in favor of such a thing either. They are like executives. They work like any business corporation, [long laugh] with a profit motive. Any organization, whether it is criminal or business, they want to make money.

What do you think is a solution for growing the middle class? For example, did the change from the one-party political system with only the PRI to the two or even three party system of today, make any difference?

No [said without hesitation]. For the middle-class to grow, people need more incentives, motivation to improve. And where do you think the people coming into the middle-class come from [several laughs] – the poor class. Why is the middle-class disappearing? Because they are not the best solution for having a good standard economy.

Many of the official programs, the social projects, for improving the lives of the poor are more in the media than in reality. They are more to give a positive image to the politicians. But some of the effects of those campaigns do filter down to the lower levels of the population. So basically, in order to grow the middle-class we are talking about making better the conditions of the poor people.

There are people who make several levels of distinctions about class – upper middle, middle-middle, lower-middle. I don't know that they all make sense. Maybe the high level of the poor class can be the middle-class, I don't know.

I have pretty much defined it as a family of three making at least ten thousand pesos a month, has a job, a place to live and a car. Does that sound good?

I think that it is lower than that. In one family of three, with the mother and father working, probably eight thousand is enough. But they can have a small house, probably *Infonavit*. They will pay for thirty years, probably ten times the value of the house.

What do you think of the educational system in Mexico?

Mexico encourages the educational programs for people to become technicians. That will solve one of the economic problems of the society, but technicians are not professionals. How many of the people in the junior high school are planning to go to technical schools? There are many jobs where they don't have to be skilled and can make enough money to live, like in the *maquiladoras*. They stay at that level and don't go to the next level. Maybe four or five out of one hundred go to the next level.

Why is that?

I am very familiar with both educational systems in Mexico and the United States. There are big differences. In Mexico there are not grants or scholarships like in the States. In the States a student who has the ability, he has the opportunity to go to school. They have the financial aid, the scholarships.

Does the 'distance education' (educación distancia – formerly telesecundaria) program work?

AUTHOR'S EXPLANATION – Distance education or *educación distancia* used to be called *educación telesecundaria*. It is a program designed to bring some education to the remote villages in Mexico without the resources to hire teachers. The concept is simple. There is usually a room with a TV and a satellite dish. The TV is tuned to a channel where a teacher goes through a series of lessons. The kids follow along. They cannot interact, but are supposed to follow in their workbooks. In today's Mexico, the Internet is beginning to replace this system, but some of the villages served by satellite are too remote to have Internet.

It is hard to say. It is not the best solution. But it is one way to give a chance to students in rural areas. It is never the same to have a TV giving you the information as it is to have a human being. But it is better than nothing at all.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This should not be confused with "distance education" in the United States (as well as in Mexico and other countries) as used by universities where classes are held remotely and broadcast live to different locations. That sort of distance education involves feedback. This sort does not. It is a TV set in a school room with an adult to maintain order, but there is no interaction.

What about the social programs that pay the parents to keep their kids in school?

That program helps. If somebody wants to educate their children it helps. But it only solves part of the problem. It is only half.

Are there other forms of financial aid for education beyond the secondary?

It is different than here, where you have the grants, the federal or state help to help a student get a higher education. There are some other schools for technicians and they pay to the students who study mechanics and so on. All that helps. But in general you have a lower level of education than in the States.

Would one of the solution be to increase teaches' salaries?

I think the salaries of the teachers are very different. A teacher does not have the same status as before. I remember when I was in *secundaria*, teachers with brand-new cars. I don't see that now. I think that they don't have the income to give them the standard of living they had twenty years ago.

Some people have told me that the teachers are not as well-educated as twenty years ago.

I don't know that that is true. But, as you know, a few weeks ago the government tested all the teachers in the country. They found that out of eighty-seven questions, teachers who got only one or two right. [Laughs]. Some got five or six good answers! [More

laughter]. I think that not all of them should know all the answers, but they should know more than they did.

Some people say that that test was an example of how Mexico has changed. First of all, they say that test would never have been given. And, if it had, the results would never have been made public. If there was a problem, the government would have covered it up. Others say that it was used as a political tool. What do you think?

There are many politics involved. This could have been given to embarrass the union. The leader of the teacher's union, everybody knows that she is a millionaire, that she has a lot of power, that she has her own party. How can somebody with that kind of power be a leader of the common people?

The other part is that in Mexico (and the United States too) there are politicians in education positions. They are not educators. I understand that the people who are in education leadership need to understand about politics, but I don't think that the politicians should handle the education. It is even more complicated. Around the unions there is more money, more influence than is easily explained.

Is it possible for a teacher (like a Pemex union worker) to "sell" his job?

Oh yeah, that is very common to sell the position. It is a business proposal. If somebody is ready to retire, he proposed to somebody to get a position (not his or her specific position, but a job in the area). But the specific job is not sold, just a guarantee of a job in the same area of work.

OK. And how does this work in the Pemex union?

It is similar. Again, somebody must be retiring. In Pemex, they have levels, I think up to thirty-three, but am not sure. The salary is based on the level. These levels are based on education for professional positions or experience for technical positions. Somebody can transfer to somebody's family, but to a junior level.

So someone is has to retire to transfer the position?

They are supposed to. But it happens that is not always the case.

How have the unions changed over the past decades?

Actually the unions don't have the influence they used to have in the eighties. In the 1980's the unions were very powerful. They decided who was going to work. Not only that, but they decided who were the officials of the government. [Long laugh].

Yeah. They were very powerful in politics too. For example, congressmen, mayors, senators were decided by the unions.

But the Pemex union's power got broken with the arrest of 'La Quina' no?

[AUTHOR'S NOTE: "La Quina" was the nickname of Joaquin Hernandez Galicia, the head of the Pemex oil workers union who was arrested in 1989 by then President Carlos Salinas de Gotari on weapons and murder charges. He was found guilty and sentenced to thirty-five years in prison.]

[An immediate "Yes" was his first reaction, followed by a moment of thought]. Not actually. It is not as powerful as before, but it still had influence. For example in the areas of Tampico Madero, the mayor is coming from the union. And it is true in other towns.

In their days of the union's strength, the PRI had all the positions in Congress, now the PRI has one-third. They could have five or six congressmen from the union, two or three senators. There was some payment from each organization. The other unions also had power to elect politicians when the PRI was the only party.

Everybody I've talked to say the family is the most important part of Mexican society. But can this have negative aspects as well? For instance if one member of the family is doing well, will the other members be jealous and try to bring him down?

No. I think it is just a different way of living than you are used to in the United States. You can find people who are that way in Mexico and others who are not. Just like in the United States, not all Mexicans are the same.

When Mexicans come to your country they probably think that the Mexicans who are already living here are very liberal and that is many times not true. Also if you take into consideration that many were Catholic when they came to the US and changed their religion to a stricter, more Biblical, more different way. They changed totally. That is a big change.

In the area of religion – there is a movement of mainly fundamentalist or Bible-based religions sending missionaries to Mexico. They seem to be having success in recruiting new members. Some say this is because they offer hope. Others say that on a very practical basis they really help the people. They help to build houses, schools. They help to educate people. Sometimes they even get involved in local politics. Other people say that they come to small towns and disrupt the social structure. They interfere with the existing relationships and cause more problems than they are worth. What do you think about all this?

Yeah. In some communities they are like that [cause problems]. In some communities they are not welcomed. But in others, they go from door to door and eventually find someone to believe. When you go from low, or nothing, and pray to get something, you are happy. But they feel that Mexican people are an opportunity. There are many, many religions in Mexico today, but the majority is still Catholic. But these new religions are growing because they are coming from no members to more members.

Some people have told me that in order to understand today's Mexico, you have to understand the past, the Conquest. Yes?

Not only in Mexico, but in any country. You have to understand where they came from. We people of the same age [forties – sixties] assume that the young people know the same things. But that is not true. And we need to understand what they know.

One thing I have heard from people who have children who get advanced degrees, either in Mexico or abroad, is that they often get better job offers in Canada or Europe or the USA. Do you think they will come back to Mexico?

Unfortunately, in Mexico, there are not enough high-level jobs in Mexico. Some people with advanced degrees can make better careers in the United States or other countries. There are people from all around the world coming to the United States to work in specialized areas. But the people who have a lot of knowledge, they need to find the field to work with their knowledge. And Mexico doesn't have that.

I have talked to some middle-level executives who say they are very dissatisfied because they get their education, they advance, and they can only go so far because they are not a member of the family that runs the organization. Is this true?

Yeah. Yeah. I have been talking with some people with the same idea. A friend of mine is an engineer, a brilliant engineer. He speaks perfectly English, French and of course, Spanish. He got his degree in London. He was one of the first cybernetic engineers. And he faces this.

In the United States we believe that a person with skill and determination can work hard and become a success, especially if he starts a small business. Do Mexicans think the same way?

In this case, it depends on the person and the circumstances. It doesn't matter what the country.

Would you like to comment on the current political situation?

I think that in Mexico we are in a very critical situation. The president is confronting problems that they never had to confront in Mexico before. He has to deal with the same factors of power in the country as leaders before – political organizations, business organizations, government organizations, but also criminal organizations. We really don't know who is part of that [criminal organizations] and at the same time part of the government.

Do you think that imports from China have a greater impact on Mexico today than imports from the United States?

Yes. Yes. [Emphatically, without hesitation]. Many industries have been affected – the textile industry, clothing industry, plastics industry and others. Many of the products are made more cheaply in China than in Mexico. The best example is that now sixty percent of the Mexican flags are now made in China. [This brought forth the longest laugh of the interview].

Is the leather industry affected? [I asked this question because a hospital executive I talked to in Leon, the unofficial leather capitol of Mexico told me that I was wrong, that the industry was very healthy. I mention this to show that no matter how much you think you know about Mexico (or any country), it is always a good idea to ask several people to arrive at the most likely answer].

Yeah, yeah. [More laughter]. In many ways.

You know the misconceptions that Americans have about Mexico. What would you like to say to my readers to help them overcome these?

There are many people coming to the United States who have a lot of education and culture. Also there are a lot of people who have skills in technology. These are people who decide to leave their homes and go to another country. They need to have something to offer the country they immigrate to. Many, many years ago the only people who came to the United States came to harvest the fields, the *braceros*. Also there are many Mexicans who own corporations that own companies in the United States.

Do you think that most of the people who come illegally (the ones who work in construction, food service and so on), that their real desire is to go back to Mexico or to stay.

They come because they don't find work in Mexico. Second the conception or idea of the migrant [from Mexico] is different from the migrant who is coming to the United States from other countries, like Viet Nam, Cambodia etc. Those people are saying goodbye forever to their countries. The Mexican is coming and he is thinking that one day he will go back with a big truck and nice clothes and money. Or he is thinking he will go back with a high university degree and increase his social class. But they are always thinking they will go back and see their country – because we are neighbors [laughs].

Thank you for your time.

Al contrario, [on the contrary] thank you for your interest in my country.

END OF INTERVIEW

