

## Chapter 30 – Miguel Angel Rivera, Living History, Muzquiz. Coahuila

### Prologue

The likelihood of a tourist stumbling into the small town of Muzquiz, Coahuila is somewhere south of slim. I ended up there because a friend has a ranch and invited me for a weekend to get away from the stress of writing this book. It didn't turn out that way. We had dinner with a local patriarch of the area, Miguel Angel.

Miguel Angel Rivera G. is 63 years old. He's a rancher and contractor in Muzquiz. He has a Horatio Alger story and a deep understanding of his area of the country. While he did not want the interview to be about him, he did say it was okay to give a synopsis of his life. He started working when he was fifteen years old for a surveying crew. Because all the other laborers could only make their mark with a thumbprint and he could write, the boss took an interest in him. He helped him to advance and to get more schooling. Miguel Angel eventually worked in mining, ranching, for the city of Muzquiz and is now a rancher and a contractor; mostly doing construction jobs for the city.

He is cognizant of his country's history and the tracks that it weaves in today's society. Although this is not a history book, and Miguel's stories are personal opinions, I thought it would be interesting to hear a Mexican talk about his own country. His is the most political of my stories and the only one that strongly addresses the *narcotraficante* issue.

### Interview

*Muzquiz, Coahuila is your home. You are very proud of it. Can you tell us a little about the area?*

People here started to live out of agriculture, cattle, and then mines. Since we didn't have any miners we had to get some miners from San Luis Potosí, and Zacatecas and many of those towns were formed from people who came from other places.

*Mining seems to be the big industry here. What other kinds of businesses are there?*

Well, there are different types of mines. Coal is our main mining industry, but there are also copper mines, lead mines and silver mines.

*You are very passionate about your country's history; could you give me a synopsis?*

Porfirio Díaz abused the nation and he had a big ego. The thing is that he liked power and when he got some power he wanted more. A lot of people didn't like the way he was – not just the

lower classes but also the high society, the middle-class and even the ranchers did not agree with the way he was.

The leaders of the Revolution came from the more educated classes, but the majority of the people who joined the revolution were humble people. They would go to assault the *haciendas* instead of begging for help so they could eat, as they had done all their lives.

So after being so oppressed they freed themselves and went to the big houses with nice furniture and destroyed them. The promise of the Revolution was to finish off discrimination. Before that, the owners of *haciendas* treated lower-class people like slaves. It was just an issue of respect.

*And the railroads?*

At that time, in 1910, when the Revolution started, México had about 200 or more railroads which were built to bring goods for the factories in coordination with the manufacturers. When the Revolution was over, it left devastation and around one million deaths.

*So today in modern Mexico is it more difficult to make business than in past years? Did NAFTA hurt or help Mexico as you see it?*

I believe that it was approved too quickly, without enough study of the effects. It was like a mania to belong to a free trade treaty overtook the analysis that needed to be done. Our government should have done a deeper and accurate assessment of the differences between the US and us. We were not in any condition to have a treaty at that time.

I have a very general concept. I'm not a politician but I am not ignorant of what is happening. There are a lot of treaties that were made and signed that I disagree with. I remember there was a German worker here in Mexico that the Americans didn't want to keep because he cost them double. The quality of his work or what we [Mexicans] wanted didn't matter. It was only that he was more expensive to the American bosses, so they let him go.

*It sounds like there is some unfairness in the system.*

Yes. In Mexico (and I'm sorry to say this) the unfortunate ones are the average Mexicans. I mean there is a level of people deciding things, that I think involves people from the Capitol. There will always be that resentment against those, like in the Revolution and now we Mexicans, still have it.

It is the poorer people who are very affected. God forbid that we could end up with a fool like Hugo Chavez as a leader. That would work against us, and that is why we all try to fight for reason. We get our own politicians with aspirations; for example Lopez Obrador. Many were very optimistic that he would win. We all want a prosperous Mexico and we are very conscious that we want to leave our children something good to inherit.

Mexico is a country with many resources, natural and human alike. We have so many resources. Mexico is so rich in natural resources that if we would use them all well, all of our problems would be gone. We have tremendous resources of silver, gold, fishing, wood, coal, copper, everything, really.

The mines of Sonora are a positive example. They have a lot of copper, so the enterprises have survived all right but, and big entrepreneurs and investors have grown and created more jobs for the people.

*What can you say about the credit situation?*

A few years ago, the banks opened up the availability of credit. Many people filled out forms for loans. Now entrepreneurs have a global bank that keeps records, that has certification. If you ask for a loan, they can check your credit right away. If that is good, then they ask you what is your project. I say humbly, that I want support for my projects and people who will support me. I tell them what I have is worth so much, and they'll give me the loan.

There is another commercial bank here in Mexico that when you submit a project you have to submit a guarantee. Let's say you have an enterprise that is worth 5 million dollars. You will have to guarantee two and a half million in order to get the loan, because they have to protect their investment.

About two weeks ago I was reading a new program that is barely kicking in. For example, it's about the protection of the people and if there is a lot of damage in a small town from storms, there will be remodeling, like stones or trunks that keep the water from running away from the terrain's pond. There are some programs and they don't cost you a penny. You only fill out a form and show a few property documents and they will give you the loan, like one million pesos for the job you need to do or simply for a few ponds or whatever. I have, for example, an industry or an enterprise and I want you to loan me money, knowing that I have something and this is backing me up, because you will have something in return if I do not pay you back. Here, I don't have nopales (cactus) or bushes to feed the cows. There is none, but they are native here. I'm going to reforest my land. Those are the new government programs.

There is another dependencies in which you only have to help with your participation, and they will loan you about one million pesos, but people are afraid to get into that.

*Your nephew is in a Colorado mining school right?*

Yes, he already finished.

*But he wants to work in the US or does he want to return?*

Look, like we were commenting the other day – unfortunately this region is about seven or eight hours from the city of Monterrey. So let's say that someone who has a degree over there and even another job, they won't come back because we don't have the regions here. Maybe we have job opportunities but not with the specialty in which they graduated.

For example, my son finished school here and he went to the US because his wife is an American citizen. Because of that my son Miguel got his residency – a residency that as you and I know its subject to a certain behavior [AUTHOR'S NOTE: among other things, a legal resident can be deported if convicted of a crime].

When you are a resident you can work. Miguel worked and studied at the same time; he got his masters degree. All the good enterprises are over there [USA] and since he is been studying over

there he has a really good grade point average. [Miguel Angel practically beamed with pride] Fortunately he was in the top five graduates. Those five got invited to have a tour to mining operations in Colorado, New Mexico, Nevada, Utah, and Wyoming.

*Does he have any fear from the young people that are more intelligent and educated that go from Mexico to the other countries where there aren't enough educated people, so they prefer to live in Mexico?*

I have always been a supporter of the philosophy that the young people would go to study, but then they would come back here to their home, so we would have more prepared people. But although there was a time when there was an opportunity with this man that was a governor some time ago, nothing came of it. We don't really have the infrastructure to attract our young people to come back to work.

Parents try to give a good education to their children, but they need to have a better way of life. Not just workers in construction or in a cheap circus. So we give them the push that if they desire to get up and do something good for their homeland, that would be good because that is the purpose.

But sometimes they leave the school because they start to work in Monterrey, Saltillo, or Torreon, and they don't continue their education. Now, the one who prepares in the US; I have always said that if you leave and you bring home new ideas, you are very welcomed. Even when I go to the US, I enjoy driving on the roads and I always pick the best from over there, like a different way of building a fence or a nice corral. I will bring the idea home and make it here.

*What can you say about the different regional attitudes in Mexico?*

Look, here in Mexico we have the problem that even though the distribution of resources by the federal government is very equitable, there are still difficulties. I know the whole Mexican Republic. I respect the ideas and habits of others in different parts of the country, as well as they respect mine, but there is a very real saying that expresses the truth as I know it.

“While the south sleeps, the center yawns and the north works.”

It is not just because I'm from the north but the northern states have a lot more advantages than the other states. Take, for example, Veracruz, Chiapas, and Tabasco. They are very prosperous, productive, and the soil is very fertile. They have a lot of water, a lot of rain. We [in Coahuila] don't have a lot of rain, and we are used to working hard, so the life is very extreme. We have very cold winters and very hot summers. This kind of forces us to be tough, and that gives us strength to continue because that's the way it is. If nobody wanted to struggle, this area would be deserted – just as in the USA. Alaska would be deserted because it is very cold.

But here we are in comparison of all those south areas that are very fertile and productive, and other regions in México that are very agricultural like Sonora, Sinaloa, and Chihuahua. They are very productive with wheat, cotton and other crops. In this region, we have a flat terrain in which some water reservoirs exist. We have wells of six to eight meters deep to get water for irrigation. I'm going to put about 2,000, 3,000 or 10,000 hectares of land two hours from here into production if I can get some capital. I've learned that that's where the money is, like in the US – in the big ranches. But I have also seen small ranches that have become big ones, as in my case.

*One direct question, what are the good things about living in México and the bad things in comparison?*

I think that is my responsibility to express what I feel in order to communicate with the American audience.

Although our government is always focused with Mexico City and its immediate surroundings, we are strong and we are the same people we have always been. So despite what the government in Mexico City does, we have our own principles and we keep our traditions.

The good things are only that we have a country with many resources, and I consider one of our best resources is our human resources. What we are lacking is a regimen of a more strict culture of work ethic. From this region, the unskilled laborers or immigrants are hired in the USA because they go do good labor, but under a strict regimen. In the pre-Revolutionary times, it was like the *hacendados* would give them a fish to eat for a day and they would not give them something for the next day. So, unfortunately, people are not prepared or educated, and this is our biggest problem. Some people don't even know how to read, so we are not going excel when we have people who don't know how to read or write.

The good, I consider that we are now getting governments of different political parties. The people are very politically conscious and they know which type of government they want to vote for. The people decide which type of government should rule.

The government right now is trying to intensify education in schools. Job opportunities are being created with a different mentality – a higher level, where there are a lot of prepared people. The new mentality is that a lot of people from the bottom are trying to achieve success, so there won't be any illiterates. I sincerely say that these things are very good. We have a government that brings very good intentions, and we, the people, we trust in them so we will try to vote to continue having this type of government.

As I was telling you, the good things in Mexico are the natural resources and our people. With an adequate administration and an adequate constitution we can succeed. We have different resources like fishing, mining, cattle, and so on. With all of this we will try to excel.

The bad is that previous governments left us a very bad heritage. Instead of fighting crimes and drug dealers and all that, they made an underground deal with them. On the surface life looked peaceful, but for that illusion, the government gave them our country.

Now the new government has arrived with a mentality of not making deals with that kind of people. They think about fighting the drug dealers, but with some lack of intelligence or an adequate strategy to be able to fight the *narcotraficantes*. That is what I consider bad, like in other countries that have already had that experience, like Colombia. So it's going to take us maybe a whole decade of very expensive war and many deaths, many lives taken. But now there is no going back.

Something that has changed is that before, we maybe made an agreement with the drug dealers, that the drugs would not stay in Mexico. Unfortunately that is not the case today. Before, México had a lot of drug trafficking but not much drug use, because Mexico was only a road to get to the US. And now a lot of it stays here and the rest leaves, and now it is contaminating our children,

our grandkids and all of our family. Now it is not just a fight that belongs to the government. Now we as conscious citizens need to collaborate and fight this evil, because if we stay with our arms crossed, we will lose our kids and our country. So that's what I think is bad about México.

*So in general are you optimistic or pessimistic of the future of Mexico?*

I say that is something that we are living right now, the being at a crossroad. We need to overcome this problem. We cannot let the other groups be above the rule of law. They need to know we are competing with them, but they have a tremendous amount of control, and that is what Mexico should have. Why not fight back?

There are three levels of government: the federal, the state, and the municipal. And the one that is most likely to win this fight is the federal because it is not as personal. The weapons of fear and terror are much more effective on the state and municipal levels. The *narcotraficantes* can tell the local people, "We know how many live in your house so now you are going to collaborate with us, or we kill them."

For me, like most Mexicans, I think family comes first right? I will protect my family, even though it means doing things against my principles and my will. So there is no way to attack the drug lords while protecting our families. Unfortunately, that is the case right now and we are living it here. We thought we were free from all of that, after the Revolution. But we are not. We are not.

*Thank you for being so forthright*

I am an old man. I don't have time to dance around the truth. I hope this helps your readers know more about how Mexicans think.

## **Author's Comment**

I left Miguel Angel feeling perplexed. He had really controlled the interview, more so than any of the other people I'd talked to. That was a good thing, in that my desire was never to control, but only to act as a conduit for people to tell their stories. But this old man, in a small backwater town, had provided me with more to think about than many others. And yet, he had done so with such old-fashioned grace and gentility that I felt as if I had been talking to someone from an earlier time, a more genteel era.

My friend Joe Fletcher drove us back to his home in Muzquiz and I was unusually quiet and thoughtful. I think Joe was glad of that small miracle.