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Oscar Lewis

A Death in the Sanchez Family



OSCAR LEWIS

A DEATH IN THE
SÁNCHEZ FAMILY



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O. L.

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INTRODUCTION

THIRTEEN years have passed since 1956 when I began my study of Jesús Sánchez and his children, Manuel, Roberto, Consuelo, and Marta, in a Mexico City slum. The publication of my book *The Children of Sánchez* in 1961 did not mark the end of the study nor did it terminate my relationship with the family. Indeed, we have been in constant touch and not a year has passed without my visiting them. Many important changes have occurred in their lives. However, in this book I shall limit myself to relating a single dramatic incident, the death of Guadalupe, the maternal aunt and the closest blood relation of the Sánchez children.

Although Guadalupe was only a minor character in my book, she played a central role in the Sánchez family. Moreover, she, her husbands and her neighbours in the *vecindad* were better representatives of the way of life which I have called the culture of poverty than were Jesús Sánchez and his children, who were more influenced by Mexican middle-class values and aspirations. In December, 1962, one month after Guadalupe's death, I returned to Mexico to study the effects of her death upon the family. This book, based upon my tape-recorded interviews with Manuel, Roberto, and Consuelo Sánchez, presents three views of their aunt's death, wake, and burial.*

These three stories reveal the difficulties encountered by the poor in disposing of their dead. For the poor, death is almost as great a hardship as life itself. The Danish novelist Martin Andersen Nexö, writing in his autobiography about his early life in a Copenhagen slum, recalls that when he was about

* The youngest daughter, Marta, was not in Mexico City and did not attend the funeral.

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three years old he asked his mother whether his brother, who had recently died, was now an angel. His mother replied, 'Poor people don't belong in heaven, they have to be thankful if they can get into the earth.' The struggle to get Aunt Guadalupe decently into the earth is one of the themes of this book. A larger theme is how her death illuminated her life and how both her life and death reflected the culture of poverty in which she lived.

Guadalupe died as she had lived, without medical care, in unrelieved pain, in hunger, worrying about how to pay the rent or raise money for the bus fare for a trip to the hospital, working up to the last day of her life at the various pathetic jobs she had to take to keep going, leaving nothing of value but a few old religious objects and the tiny rented space she had occupied.

Guadalupe's entire life was one of deprivation and trauma. Born into a poor family in León, Guanajuato, in 1900, she was ten years old when the Mexican Revolution began and was twenty when it ended. Thus she lived through some of the most difficult years in the history of Mexico, when bloodshed, violence, hunger, and much suffering occurred. Her sad experiences, not unusual for those times, help us to understand her situation at the time of her death.

Guadalupe was one of eighteen children, only seven of whom survived their first year. Her parents were religious and had been properly married in church. They were illiterate and earned a living by making sweets which they sold in the plaza. The extended family was small and they had few relatives to help them. Both sets of grandparents were dead by the time Guadalupe was born. She did not know where they originated but they were probably part of the urban proletariat in León. Guadalupe's parents spoke no Indian tongue and, as far as we know, they followed no tradition other than Mexican folk Catholicism. Of her family, Guadalupe said:

The only relatives I knew were my *papá's* sister Juana and my *mamá's* sister Catarina. They lived a few blocks away. My Aunt

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Catarina was married to Juana's son, who was my *papá's* nephew, He was a porter who carried heavy loads on his back. He was tall and strong but the work finally killed him.

Guadalupe's parents spent a good part of the day working away from home. They arose at three o'clock in the morning to buy fresh bread which they sold in the plaza until noon, when they returned home to rest. At half-past four in the afternoon they left again to sell their sweets, often not getting home until two o'clock in the morning.

From about age five, Guadalupe, the eldest daughter, was left in charge of the house and of her younger brothers and sisters. The parents required all the children to rise at three in the morning to haul water for the garden before attending Mass at four. The boys spent the morning making sweets – squash and *camotes* baked with brown sugar and honey – and Guadalupe did the marketing, cooking, and other household chores. She had never been allowed to go to school or to play with other children and she recalled her childhood with a sense of martyrdom.

My *papá* was very strict and wouldn't let us accept anything from anybody, even from relatives. Never. Once I remember we were crying with hunger and my Aunt Juana gave us some beans and *tortillas* and my *papá* came home with his tray of sweets and said, 'Who gave you that?' and I had to give back the *tacos*. He was angry and made my aunt cry.

Papá was a very bitter man. He didn't allow visitors. The only ones who came to our house were the peddlers who bought boxes of sweets. *Papá* kept us locked in so that we wouldn't go walking around and entering people's houses. My brothers would fly their kites on the roof or they would run in the yard. I didn't play with them because they hit me. *Papá* was very careful with us. We never went to a movie or theatre or anywhere. He didn't like us to have friends and my sister and I weren't allowed to play with dishes or with dolls because he said with dolls we'd learn bad things.

My life was very sad. My clothes were made from little pieces of scrap cloth, and we used felt slippers instead of shoes. I wore a long

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skirt and a blouse with long sleeves. Even though they had as many colours as a bird, with a patch here and a patch there, I was very happy when my *mamá* made me a new skirt. We never heard music in our house, nor did we dance. As for *fiestas* or the Christmas *posadas*, we only watched them from the roof. That was one of my greatest pleasures. And it wasn't until we came to Mexico City that we learned about receiving gifts on the Day of the Kings.

When I went to the market I carried my youngest brother in my arms and the next-to-the-youngest (the jealous one) on my back and I held the basket in my hand. One day I was coming from the market and the police grabbed me because I wasn't in school. They said they were going to lock me up and I cried and cried until my *mamá* came. She and *papá* didn't send me to school because I was the only girl who could help at home. That's why I am no better than a donkey, because I can't read.

My sainted mother didn't teach me anything but I learned to cook and wash all by myself. If the beans weren't ready at eleven when they came home to eat, my *mamá* would hit me. If I broke a dish she would scrape my hands with the pieces so I would be more careful. I was more afraid of her than of my *papá*. He was more affectionate and didn't hit me as often as she did. I was his favourite, but he beat me several times with a wet whip. Just to hear him speak made me tremble. When he and my *mamá* quarrelled my *papá* would say, 'Those who want to come with me, come and those who want to stay, stay.' My older brother and I would always go with *papá* and *mamá* would get very angry. We would go out to the country for about a week selling Judas figures and sweets, and sleeping on the ground. When we went home again *mamá* would give us a long sermon.

I began washing my *papá's* clothes when I was four. I was so little my hands couldn't hold the big pieces. I'd wash first one leg of his pants, then the other. When I was six, he bought me a little *metate* and a jar of corn dough and I made his *tortillas*. We didn't iron the clothes but by the time I was eight I could smooth them out and fold them.

At eleven or twelve, Guadalupe's menstruation came as a great shock, primarily because she was afraid of being punished by her parents. She hid all day in a deep hole in the hope

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that the bleeding would stop. When her mother learned of it she said to her daughter, 'Don't be frightened, it happens to everyone.'

'To rich people, too?' Guadalupe asked.

When Guadalupe was thirteen, Fidencio, a man of thirty-two, broke into the house when her parents were away and carried her off at knife point. He lived on the other side of the street and had made advances to her ever since she was nine. He took her to a cave and raped her. She bled profusely and he brought her to his mother's house in Hidalgo. Guadalupe stayed in bed unattended for fifteen days until the haemorrhaging stopped. Her father found her and whipped her so badly she had to be in bed another two weeks. He told her he didn't like girls who were deflowered because they weren't 'worth anything any more' and he forced her to marry Fidencio in church.

Guadalupe's mother-in-law disliked the girl and forced her to grind six *cuartillos* of corn every day and make large piles of *tortillas* to sell in the plaza. Guadalupe was often beaten by her husband and he took her from one aunt to another because his mother refused to keep her. Guadalupe did not realize that she was pregnant until she was about to give birth. She thought that somehow an animal had gotten into her abdomen and that she was going to die, but she said nothing about it. Fidencio was a soldier in the revolutionary army and when he realized her condition, he got an army pass and took her back to his mother. Guadalupe was about fourteen when she gave birth to her son Luis.

Guadalupe's mother-in-law continued to mistreat her. She kept her half-starved, giving her only wild greens without salt. When word came that Fidencio had been killed, Guadalupe was told she had to go back to Guanajuato. Her brother-in-law, a teamster who carried loads of beans and corn to Guanajuato, refused to take her with him although the countryside was full of roving brigands. She had to walk all the way, carrying her child in her arms. It was the rainy season and

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Guadalupe could find no food for herself and the baby. They almost died of hunger and they would have drowned trying to cross a flooded river, but a teamster saved them by pulling out Guadalupe by her braids.

In Guanajuato, Guadalupe learned that her elder brother had been killed while defending a friend and that her father had died of anger and grief. Her mother had gone with the children to Mexico City to stay with her Aunt Catarina. Guadalupe and a friend whose husband had also been killed in the revolution went after them, begging food along the way and often eating only banana peels or the shells of prickly pears. When Guadalupe arrived, her mother didn't recognize her at first and cried to see her daughter so emaciated and ragged.

Guadalupe's mother and her five brothers and sisters, as well as Guadalupe and her child, all lived with Aunt Catarina and her children in a one-room apartment in a poor section of the city called *colonia* Morelos. It was a crowded working-class neighbourhood with many shops, markets, a few small factories and warehouses, public baths, third-class movie theatres, run-down schools, saloons, and *pulquerías* or taverns where native *pulque* was sold. There were few restaurants but many sidewalk kitchens that sold cooked food at low prices.

Guadalupe, her mother, and her sister Lenore supported themselves by selling cake and spiked coffee at a little stand on a street corner. Of her four brothers, two worked in a bakery, one in a *pulquería*, and one was soon to die of typhus. Guadalupe, too, had typhus but she recovered and continued to work at the coffee stand. Putting alcohol in the coffee was a legal offence and Guadalupe went to jail three times either because her mother couldn't pay the fine or because her mother's new husband wouldn't let her. Fearful of being sent to the penitentiary if she were arrested once more, Guadalupe, who was nineteen by then, looked for another job. She went with a friend of the same age and before long the two girls were tricked into going to a brothel. Guadalupe was impressed by

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the fine beds she saw there because she had slept on straw mats all her life. An old lady told them it was a bad place and chased them out, but Guadalupe said, 'How can it be bad if it has so many beds?' It wasn't until later that she understood what kind of a place it was.

After that, Guadalupe found a job as a chambermaid in a hotel, where she earned one *peso* a day.

When her son was five years old, Guadalupe's ex-mother-in-law, who was now living in Mexico City, asked to borrow him for a short time to see if he would help distract her remaining son from drinking. Guadalupe was having a hard time feeding the boy and she was afraid of her mother-in-law, so she agreed. She visited him every two weeks, bringing cake or fruit and a few *pesos* each time. However, her mother-in-law turned the boy against her and he would slam the door in his mother's face, sending her home crying. Finally, upon her brother's advice, she stopped visiting her son and he remained with her mother-in-law. Like his uncle, he became an alcoholic. Years later he died in a drunken binge.

Guadalupe learned from her mother-in-law that her deceased husband had been chopped up with *machetes* and dumped into a river. She had never loved him but she prayed for his soul and vowed to the Virgin of Guadalupe that she would never remarry because she had suffered so much as a wife.

Guadalupe then fell in love with Alfredo, who left his wife and child to go off with her. He became a lieutenant in the revolutionary army and she followed him to Matamoros, where he was stationed.

With that man I had everything I needed. He dressed me well; I wore high-heeled shoes and only my toes touched the ground when I walked. He gave me fifteen *pesos* a day for expenses, but when my *mamá* wrote to me that she was starving while I was eating he let me go to work just so I could send her money. I killed myself working. I got up at three o'clock in the morning to go to the mill and I made *tortillas* and cooked for twenty-two soldiers.

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I washed and ironed for General Amaro because he liked my work and paid me twenty-five *pesos* just for a uniform. There were times I sent my *mamá* money orders for thirty or thirty-five *pesos*.

Alfredo was good to me but he was very jealous. He didn't allow me to raise my eyes or leave the door open, but he chased after other women all the time.

Guadalupe was jealous, too, and Alfredo beat her for spying on him. When she became pregnant, he abandoned her. To keep from starving, she continued to take in laundry.

I'd go to the river with my big belly, carrying a load of laundry on my head and I washed for the soldiers all day, half submerged in the water. What a life I led. All I ate were *tortillas* made of white flour, fried onions, and a can of condensed milk.

I had a picture of Alfredo in his uniform and I would kneel before it as if he were a saint, crying and praying to hear from him again. 'Speak to me, Alfredo . . . just say one word.' My girl friend said he had bewitched my brain with a dark spirit and she took me to a Spiritist who cured me. I burned Alfredo's picture and didn't cry for him any more. I had loved him but he paid me back badly. After that I didn't believe in anybody.

She gave birth to her son Salvador in the camp and had a hard struggle to support herself and the baby. But she loved the child and did not complain. 'God forgive me, but I never loved the first baby the way I loved little Salvador.'

She followed the army, cooking beans and making *tortillas* for the troops during the day and barricading her door every night to keep out the soldiers. When they were disbanded, she and her son went to Veracruz, where she had been offered a good job as a maid. When she arrived the *señora* told her there was no money to pay her. Guadalupe worked without pay for three months, then fell ill with malaria. Swollen and shaking with chills, she went back to Mexico City on a military train.

When Guadalupe arrived she found that her mother and two brothers were no longer living with Aunt Catarina. She had forced them to move by awakening them at four o'clock every morning and making them wait outside in the cold

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while she washed the floor. Finally they moved into a little room of their own for which they paid only four *pesos* a month rent in exchange for janitorial services. The roof was only half covered and whenever it rained they would all get wet, but Guadalupe had no choice and moved in with them.

Guadalupe was ill with malaria for seven months without being able to find a cure. Her brother treated her with a mixture of sugar cane, *jicama* roots and water but it made her worse because they were 'cold' foods. Her mother kept her in the sun and gave her a quart of green alcohol to drink with strong coffee; then they tried *pulque* with ground *pirú*; they put a mouse on her neck and they beat her brother in her presence to frighten her, but she didn't get better. Ashamed to eat without working, she went out to beg for food. One day a woman in the street took pity on her and cured her with *nopal* leaves, chile, and honey. By that time, however, because most of the remedies had contained alcohol, Guadalupe had acquired a taste for drinking.

When Guadalupe found a job making *tortillas* in a *tortillería* at \$1.80 a day, she and her family moved to her brother Pedro's room on the Street of the Painters, where he was living with his common-law wife. Guadalupe stayed there for some time, then moved in with Lenore and Jesús Sánchez, her new brother-in-law. While Guadalupe had been away, Lenore had had an affair with a railroad worker who abandoned her and left her with a baby. Lenore found a job as a dishwasher in the La Gloria restaurant, where she met Jesús Sánchez and became his common-law wife.

Guadalupe had always believed that her mother favoured her younger sister Lenore and was jealous of her.

I worked to support my little mother, but she was very hard on me, may she rest in peace! My little son and I would cry because she didn't bring out lunch to the *tortillería*. She would forget all about us, but she never failed to bring a *taco* to Lenore. I asked my Aunt Catarina, 'Ay, Auntie, am I not my mother's daughter?

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Why does she love only Lenore?' My aunt would say that I had bad luck and that I must resign myself to it.

Guadalupe was about thirty years old when she met Ignacio. He was twenty. He sold newspapers and every day he passed by the *tortilleria* where Guadalupe worked. They became sweethearts and a year later began to live together as man and wife. However, because of her vow, Guadalupe refused to marry Ignacio.

Ignacio was living with his father and sister in a room at No. 6 on the Street of the Painters, where he brought Guadalupe and little Salvador. Later they moved to a room of their own at No. 30 on the same street. They had only a straw mat to sleep on, two blankets, and a soap box to hold their clothing, but they were happy and didn't complain. Guadalupe took in laundry and raised a few chickens and doves to help support her son. Ignacio worked from early morning to late at night to earn a few *pesos* selling newspapers. Salvador refused to go to school or become a carpenter's assistant as his mother wanted him to. Most of the time he played in the street while both parents worked. However, occasionally he helped Ignacio sell newspapers.

Guadalupe and Ignacio developed the habit of drinking *pulque* every night. As Salvador grew into his early teens he, too, began to drink. He was a quarrelsome, aggressive youth and was generally disliked. When Guadalupe and Ignacio were forced to move because their *vecindad* was being torn down, they had no one to turn to but Prudencia, the second wife of Guadalupe's brother Alfredo. Prudencia agreed to take in Guadalupe and Ignacio but she balked at Salvador. Salvador moved in with his parents anyway, bringing down upon them Prudencia's anger and abuse. She tried to force them to leave by locking them out, even when it was raining, but they had no place to move to and they would meekly stand huddled under newspapers until she relented and let them in.

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Salvador took a common-law wife, with whom he had a son, but she ran off with another man, taking the child. Salvador drank more than ever and one day, caught alone and drunk in the street, his wife's lover stabbed him to death with an ice pick. Salvador was twenty-four when he died. Prudencia refused to allow the coffin in her house, so it was placed in the courtyard and the wake was held outdoors. Years later when Prudencia's son went to an insane asylum, Guadalupe said, 'Yes, we pay for everything we do in life. God is slow but he doesn't forget.'

Ignacio and Guadalupe moved to the Panaderos *vecindad*, where for fourteen *pesos* a month they rented apartment No. 1. It was a large room and the only one with a window. The *vecindad* itself had a fence and a front door and was in better condition than at the time of our study. When the fence broke down, the landlord had it removed, leaving the *vecindad* completely exposed to the street. He did not replace it until 1962.

Guadalupe's mother and two brothers were unhappy living with Pedro and his wife and they moved in with Guadalupe and Ignacio. Guadalupe's brother Lucio soon took a neighbour, Julia, as his common-law wife. They lived together for only a short time because Lucio died of drink. Not long thereafter, Guadalupe's mother died of cancer and her other brother left.

With the exception of the one brother who died of typhus, all of Guadalupe's brothers died of drink. Even her father was drunk when he died. Guadalupe and her sister Lenore also drank. Her mother was the only one in the family who abstained. Lenore suffered from liver trouble and other conditions which were aggravated by alcohol. Her sudden death at twenty-eight, when she was pregnant with Jesús' fifth child, may also be partially attributed to drink.

Guadalupe took care of her dead sister's children until her brother-in-law, Jesús, found another wife. He had made advances to Guadalupe and at one time suggested that they

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live as man and wife to keep the family together, but she had refused.

If I had been different, I would have accepted. Jesús was strict and serious and liked to have other women but he was a good provider. With Ignacio I suffered the blackest pain because when it rained, he couldn't sell his newspapers and we didn't eat. Then, for two years he left me for another woman and came back sick and dirty and full of lice. He had seven women besides me but I was the only one who could stand him. Jesús might have won out but after having been with Ignacio so many years, how could I accept?

Guadalupe and Ignacio continued to live in the Panaderos *vecindad*, although the landlord divided their large room in two and rented the front part, containing the window, to a shoemaker. The remainder, still called No. 1, was a small dark room with a tiny anteroom for a kitchen. In the nine years they lived here, they managed to furnish it with a narrow iron bedstead and spring, but no mattress, an old wardrobe, a small wooden table, a shelf for an altar, a large chair, and two small stools. All of these were bought second-hand. There was a blanket, a pillow, and a sheet for the bed, a second-hand charcoal brazier for cooking, a few clay pots, jars, cups, glasses, and plates and spoons but no table knives or forks, no clock, and no radio at the time of our study. Guadalupe's collection of religious pictures, some hanging in frames, others tacked to the wall, was the largest in the *vecindad* and a source of great pride to her. Two of the pictures had been passed down from her grandmother and she considered them heirlooms.

In this humble home the Sánchez children had sought temporary refuge at various critical points in their lives; Manuel at fifteen when he decided to live in free union with his first wife, Paula, Roberto when he was released from jail and again when he needed a home for his first woman, Consuelo when she left her father's home in a fit of jealous rage towards her young stepmother and again when she was out of work, and Marta who came with her three small children when she was

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abandoned by her first husband. Guadalupe and Ignacio were always ready to share their little floor space and whatever food they had.

The Panaderos *vecindad*, where Guadalupe lived, consisted of a row of fourteen one-room adobe huts built along the left side and across the back of a thirty-foot wide bare lot. The lot was enclosed on two sides by the walls of adjacent brick buildings and in front by a recently built brick wall with a narrow open entrance that led to the courtyard. The only pavement in the yard was a walk of rough stone slabs laid by the tenants themselves, in front of the apartments. Five of the dwellings had makeshift sheds, constructed by setting up two poles and extending the kitchen roofs of tarpaper, tin, and corrugated metal over the low front doorway. The sheds were built to provide a dry, shady place for the artisans who lived and worked there. Piles of equipment, tin, bundles of waste steel strips, wire, nails, and tools kept on old tables and benches cluttered the covered space. Towards the rear of the yard, two large cement water troughs, each with a faucet, were the sole source of water for the eighty-four inhabitants. Here the women washed their dishes and laundry and bathed their children. In the back of the lot two broken-down stinking toilets, half curtained by pieces of torn burlap and flushed by pails of water, served all the tenants.

The rest of the lot, strewn with stones and filled with unexpected holes, was crisscrossed by clotheslines held up by forked poles. In the daytime, the lot was filled with children in ragged clothing and ill-fitting shoes, or barefoot, playing marbles or running between the lines of laundry, heedless of the warning shouts of the women. Children barely able to walk and still untrained, sat and crawled in the dirt, often half-naked, while their mothers watched them from where they were working. In the rainy season the yard became muddy and so full of water that it sometimes flooded the low dwellings.

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The Panaderos *vecindad* was poorer and much inferior in every respect to the Casa Grande, where the children of Sánchez lived. Panaderos had no paved courtyard, no garden or trees, no gate at the entrance, and no patron saint to guard it. The families in Panaderos had practically none of the luxury items of those in the Casa Grande. As one moved from the Casa Grande to Panaderos one found fewer beds per person and more people who slept on the floor; cooking was done with kerosene or charcoal rather than with gas, people ate only one or two meals a day and used *tortillas* and spoons rather than knives and forks, *pulque* was preferred to beer, and more clothing and furniture was bought second-hand rather than new. To go from Casa Grande to Panaderos was to move back in time – from cement to adobe, from aluminium to clay pots, from antibiotics to herbal remedies, from doctors to native healers.

Of the twenty-five heads of families in the *vecindad*, only nine were born in Mexico City. The other sixteen came from towns and cities in the states of Morelos, Mexico, Hidalgo, Queretaro, Guanajuato, and Aguascalientes. The average length of residence in the capital was 26.2 years; the range was from twelve to forty-nine years. Most of the original residents of the *vecindad* came in extended family groups or soon helped relatives to find apartments there. Because of the low fixed rent and other economic factors, the tenants did not move away without good reason. The average length of residence in the *vecindad* was about fifteen years.

The basic productive unit in the *vecindad* was the family, with the father, mother, and children all contributing to their support. Forty-six (57.7 per cent) of the eighty-four inhabitants were working, either at full- or part-time occupations. There was an average of 3.3 workers per household. Male heads of households made up 24 per cent of the total work force and because their earnings were small and irregular, with much of it being spent on drink, every one of the wives and all but one

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of the children over ten years of age, also worked. Women and children made up 76 per cent of the work force.

The economic activities and technical skills of the adults were basically similar to those of their parents who migrated to the capital. The men were mostly unskilled or semi-skilled labourers, artisans or vendors; none were factory or industrial workers and with the exception of news vendors, none had joined labour unions or any other organized groups. There was a wide variety of occupations with great instability of employment. The heads of households and their parents had a total of 168 occupations, thirty-eight of which were distinct. The younger men had twice as many different occupations as their fathers, indicating an increase in occupational opportunities and perhaps, too, greater difficulty in earning a living with a single occupation.

There were, at the time of our study, twelve different occupations for men and women in the *vecindad* and most families worked in two, three, or four of them. The occupations were: street vendor (of towels, alcoholic beverages, cooked food, and candy), newspaper vendor, shoemaker, shining shoes, mechanics helper, tinsmith, toymaker, bicycle mechanic, leather worker, washer woman, making a lottery game, and shop clerk. Work was done at home in ten of the dwelling units. There were five artisans who produced articles in very limited quantities. For women, selling was considered the most desirable work; washing clothes, as Guadalupe did, was the least desirable. Yet the clotheslines were almost always hung with laundry and there was much competition for a place at the wash tubs.

The great poverty of the Panaderos *vecindad* was revealed by the low rentals, the crowding, the low per capita income, and the low value of the material possessions of the tenants. The rentals were from twenty to thirty *pesos*, or \$1.60 to \$2.40, per month.* Thirteen of the fourteen dwelling units had only

* The current rate of exchange was 12.50 Mexican *pesos* to one U.S. dollar.