Pedro P., Coyote

Judith Adler Hellman

With Mexico's economy seeming to hover chronically on the verge of collapse since the 1980s, it is no wonder that as many as 150,000 Mexicans are driven to migrate illegally to the United States each year. Scarcely a month goes by without one of America's big-city newspapers carrying a major story on the transborder journeys of Mexican and Latin American migrants in search of a better life or merely the short-term opportunity to remit greatly enhanced wages to loved ones back home. Increasingly, many Mexicans have come to participate in migrant circuits that enable them to live truly transnational lives north and south of the Rio Grande.

Sadly, much of the media's coverage concerns the deplorable conditions and risks that migrants face in their efforts to elude U.S. immigration authorities ("la migra"*) along the two-thousand-mile border. Every year hundreds of migrants are killed in accidents: they drown in overflowing canals, fall beneath moving trains, and suffocate in sealed railroad cars and automobile trunks. Others fall victim to human predators, many of whom carry guns and badges. According to Mexican immigration officials, illegal migration has become very big business: international syndicates have turned the smuggling of migrants into a criminal enterprise comparable in profits and ruthlessness to those of the drug trade. The coyotes, or* polleros *(border-crossing middlemen), who lead undocumented migrants (known as* pollos, *or chickens) across the line, frequently overcharge and then abandon their clients at the first sign of a run-in with the* migra. *Often coyotes leave their human cargo cooped up and in deadly peril, exposed to bandits or corrupt policemen who rob migrants of their savings and possessions. Not for nothing, then, has President Vicente Fox vowed to create a special office for the investigation of immigrant smuggling.*

Yet, as sociologist Judith Hellman tells us in her portrait of "Pedro P.," not all coyotes are unscrupulous opportunists. This Tijuana-based pollero *is a decent independent entrepreneur, whose business depends on word of mouth and his ability—literally—to deliver. Her account takes us with Pedro on his nightly rounds and sheds light on his values and aspirations as a potential migrant himself. Based on extensive interviews, Pedro's story is one of fifteen portraits Hellman provides in* Mexican

Lives, which chronicles the struggles of rich and poor alike to adapt to the changes set in motion by the nation's neoliberal reforms.

At six in the afternoon the crowd assembled on the Mexican side of the border fence begins to grow larger and turn jittery. Within an hour, darkness will fall and the most eager and restless of the migrants will make their move. Some will climb the twelve-foot corrugated metal fence. Others will pass under the barrier through one of the dozen or so holes that perforate its fourteen-mile length as it stretches from the Pacific Ocean at Playas de Tijuana, past the official border station, around the airport, up onto the Otay Mesa where the assembly plants cluster, and out onto the desert. Here the fence ends—far from the cities and connecting roads in canyons and badlands that no sensible person even thinks about crossing on foot.

At sunset the crowd swells. But almost any time of the day, immigrants can be found at "El Bordo," as this section of the fence is known. They nervously pace back and forth. They negotiate with the "coyotes," or "*polleros,*" who offer to guide them across. They peek through or over the fence to study the moves of the *migra*—the agents of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). They gaze up at the hill that rises steeply behind the U.S. border station where the border patrol's infrared scopes are mounted, ready to pick out migrants scattered—running and hiding—in the bushes below.

In the narrow strip between the border fence and the highway that runs along the edge of Tijuana, a half-dozen men and women march back and forth hawking tacos, tortas, candy, and soft drinks—food that sustains those migrants who sit by the fence all day, watching, waiting, and looking across into San Ysidro on the U.S. side. In the evening more vendors appear. These people sell the large plastic bags that migrants use to cover their shoes and legs as they wade, shin or knee-deep, across the Tijuana river. Only some of the clandestine routes to San Ysidro involve crossing the river, an open sewage ditch that rises in the mountains south of Tijuana, runs through the city in a concrete channel, and then makes its way northwest across U.S. territory to empty into the ocean near Imperial Beach. But the vigilance of the border patrol in the other sectors along the fence is so intense that increasing numbers of migrants and their coyotes are choosing to cross at the western end of the line, the path that involves fording the river and plodding through wetlands.

The movement of Mexican migrants has not always taken this form. During World War II, Mexicans were encouraged to come to the United States to meet the labor shortages produced by the war. In the 1950s, U.S. agribusiness successfully lobbied for the creation of a *bracero* program that brought hundreds of thousands of seasonal farm workers to harvest crops through the Southwest. But even as the *braceros* were arriving in the United States under government contract, the first large waves of illegal immigrants began to flow across the border. And when the *bracero* program was terminated in 1965 under pressure from organized labor in the United States, illegal migration from Mexico continued because the demand for cheap labor never slackened.

The illegal migrants of the 1960s and 1970s were mostly peasants who sought work in the fields of California and Texas. Generally, they did not come on their own. Rather, they were recruited by agents who traveled through the poorest rural areas of central Mexico collecting farm laborers and loading them into open trucks. The labor contractors transported the peasants to the border, packed like chickens in a poultry truck. This is how the migrants came to be called chickens, or *pollos,* and the agents, *polleros.*

Once at the border, the methods used to bring the undocumented workers across were crude because vigilance was light: they were loaded into the back of trucks, concealed with cargo, or marched across the desert backlands. Some died on the way.

Today increased surveillance at the official border crossings and the effort to interdict drugs makes it impossible to bring people across concealed in the trunks of cars or vans. The work of the *pollero* has changed drastically and become differentiated and specialized. A team of coyotes generally works together to complete the transfer from Tijuana to Los Angeles. Moreover, the *pollero* no longer recruits his clients in rural Mexico and hauls them to the border. The would-be migrants are now mostly urban people who reach the border cities under their own steam, traveling by bus, train, or even airplane. Once they arrive at the *frontera,* they cross on their own or engage the services of a coyote to get them into the United States.

While migrants cross at all the major border cities, half of all undocumented Mexicans who make their way into the United States do so at Tijuana. This westernmost border town is almost twice as far from the densely populated regions of central Mexico as Nuevo Laredo. . . . Moreover, the Tijuana crossing is more difficult and dangerous than some of the others. In Ciudad Juárez, for example, the streets run right up to the river that separates the Mexican city from El Paso, Texas. Here people just take off their shoes, wade across, put their shoes back on, and stride into a neighborhood on the other side. But the migrant who crosses in Texas is still more than a thousand miles from Chicago, not to speak of New York. In contrast, crossing at Tijuana puts the migrant within three hours of Los Angeles and the greater Los Angeles

metropolitan area of fifteen million. For this reason the majority of migrants come to Tijuana and find a *pollero* to help them evade capture by the eight hundred INS agents assigned to guard the U.S. border at this point.

I am at the fence with a *pollero* named Pedro P. He has been recommended to me as a "coyote's coyote"—a man with a nearly perfect record of success at his trade. Once, in 1988, in what still stands as the crowning achievement of his career, Pedro single-handedly guided twenty-three *pollos,* including seven children, over the border and across the river, delivering them safely to the K-Mart in San Ysidro, where a truck was waiting to take them to Los Angeles.

This evening Pedro has five paying customers at the fence. He plans to move them in a group sometime after 8 P.M. It is a slow night for Pedro, who sometimes makes as many as three separate trips in an evening. When he is running at full throttle, he takes the first group of *pollos* under the fence just after sunset, escorts them as far as San Ysidro, passes them along to his contacts on the other side, returns to Tijuana to pick up the next group, and repeats this routine twice more before the sky begins to lighten at dawn.

Pedro had just such an evening the previous night, working three shifts before returning at 5 A.M. to the house in a working-class neighborhood in the center of Tijuana which he shares with his wife, Patti, and his four children. Under the circumstances, I had trouble making contact with Pedro, although, as instructed, I left messages at a café, a pinball parlor, a billiard hall, an autobody shop, and a bar, all on the street where I had been told I would find him. As it turned out, Pedro had slept in after his night's labors and did not stop by to check his messages until noon. But even though he got off to a late start, Pedro managed to line up some business for the evening: five men from Durango who hoped to reach East L.A. by the following afternoon.

Pedro is thirty-two, tall, and dressed not in the leather jacket, designer sunglasses, and gold jewelry he can afford but in a windbreaker, cotton shirt, worn jeans, and a baseball cap. There's nothing slick about Pedro; he looks like the people he guides to the other side. His appearance, he says, inspires confidence in the migrants who come to him on the recommendation of friends and family. Pedro looks like someone they can trust. He looks like someone from their hometown.

More important, Pedro explains to me, his choice of clothes is critical in the event he and his *pollos* are picked up by the *migra* as they make their run for San Ysidro. If they are apprehended, Pedro's goal is to remain undetected as a *pollero* among the *pollos.* As long as the *migra* does not take him for the coyote in the group, and assuming none of his customers "finger him," as he puts it, the consequences of his capture by the border patrol are minimal. Along with his clients he signs the form waiving his right to a hearing, he is loaded into the bus that takes them back to the border station and is deposited on the Mexican side. Depending on the hour and emotional state of the group, Pedro and his charges are likely to try again that same evening.

If, on the other hand, Pedro is identified as the *pollero,* he is in big trouble:

> The *migra* is going to catch you from time to time. It's inevitable. It happens to everyone—to me, perhaps, less than to others because I've been very lucky and I don't take too many chances.
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> Once, however, I was caught with my pollos and the gringos decided—I don't know why—that I had to be the coyote for the whole group. I think one of the agents recognized me as someone he'd picked up before. My clients were sent back to Mexico, but I was put in the San Diego city jail.
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> The next day I was transferred to the Federal Penitentiary in Pecos, Texas. This is the place where they take coyotes, drug smugglers, and *contrabandistas.* But I can tell you one kind of person you don't find serving time in Pecos. That's the Americans who employ the illegals. These guys are smart and they pass along the risk to "labor contractors" who vouch for the workers, saying that their papers are all "in order." It's the contractors who end up in Pecos charged with falsification of documents and transport of illegal aliens.

ON THIS OCCASION, Pedro was charged with transport of illegal aliens and held for thirty days. He says he was not mistreated during his incarceration.

> To tell you the truth, I would rather spend a month with the gringos in Pecos than one day in a Mexican jail. Other coyotes have told me some bad stories about beatings and other stuff that went on when they were in custody in the U.S. But, in my case, the only thing I suffered was worry for my wife and my kids, who didn't know what had become of me and had nothing to live on while I was gone.

PEDRO IS CONCERNED he may be caught again. The penalties for a second offense are severe. For this reason he is meticulous about briefing his five clients before they begin their attempt to cross. If they are caught, it is imperative that everyone behave in a way that suggests that they are just six guys from Durango who have decided to make it across together.

> In the ten years I've worked as a *pollero,* I've brought thousands of people across—men, women, and children. And in all those years, no one has ever ratted on me. Mexicans are good people in this way. Besides, no one has any reason to finger a coyote who deals honestly with his customers.

This question of integrity is one that Pedro returns to again and again in our conversation. Pedro explains that virtually all his business is based on recommendations and repeat customers. Some clients reappear every year in January after returning to Mexico from Los Angeles to spend Christmas with their families. Almost all his clients are referred by friends and relations he has "passed" before. Pedro says,

> The stories you hear about coyotes who rob the *pollos*, who collude with *asaltapollos*, the bandits who assault the *pollos* while they're in no-man's-land—all these things really do happen. You hear about coyotes who rape the women they have promised to deliver safely to the other side, or who abandon people who have broken a leg or twisted an ankle jumping over the fence. These stories are true. But it is only a few *polleros* who do these things. This is a business like any other; you're going to find all kinds of people, good and bad, doing this work.
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> My business is based on trust, on the recommendations of people I have passed to the other side. Folks come to me because I have a reputation for skill and reliability. I work with very competent people in San Ysidro—guys in whom the *pollos* can have confidence. People think of me as someone who is serious, who doesn't take stupid chances. I would never do anything that would put my name at risk.

PEDRO GOT HIS START as a coyote by assisting relatives and friends from his village who sought his help to get across. Sent to Tijuana as a boy to live with an aunt and uncle, by the time Pedro was a teenager, he had sneaked into the United States more times than he could count. By the age of seventeen, he had washed dishes in San Jose, picked cherries in Washington State, and scrubbed floors and washrooms in a large office building in downtown Los Angeles. Each time he crossed the border, Pedro says, he came to understand more about the movements and strategies of the *migra*. Once back in Tijuana, based on what he drew from these experiences, he was able to guide others—first his brothers and cousins, and then an ever-widening circle of acquaintances from his home region in Durango. Pedro says that when he realized he had a flair for getting people across, he turned professional.

Pedro's approach to business is shaped by the fact that he works on the basis of personal recommendations. While other coyotes make the rounds of the cheap hotels, stand around in bus and train stations, or patrol the area around the fence looking for clients, Pedro tells me he just hangs out in one of his usual spots downtown, and waits for people to come around asking for him. "This saves me a lot of sweat," he explains:

> Apart from everything else, I don't have any hassles with other coyotes. Some of these guys can get real nasty if they think you're out looking for *pollos* in what they consider to be their corner of the bus station or their section of the fence.

When a potential client makes contact with him, Pedro requests the phone number of the friends or relatives who are supposed to be underwriting the trip. He then phones Los Angeles to check that these people have the cash on hand to pay his associate when he delivers the *pollo* to Los Angeles. Pedro prefers to operate, as he puts it, "C.O.D.," because this arrangement reduces the risk in several ways. The migrants have less to lose if they are set upon by bandits at any point in the journey, and Pedro himself is not carrying large amounts of cash at the vulnerable moments he is conducting his group from the fence to San Ysidro.

Once the contact is made with the sponsors in Los Angeles, Pedro briefs his client, sets a time and a place to meet, and takes the individual or group to the fence by taxi. Here he is joined by Jaime, his partner. Jaime's job is simple: when night falls and Pedro is ready to move the group, Jaime goes under or over the fence to draw the attention of the *migra*, while Pedro passes his clients under the fence at another point. Pedro always moves his people under the barrier. Although it constrains his range of choice in selecting a spot to cross, he says it is much faster and safer for the *pollos*.

Once over the fence, Jaime either runs forward or ducks back under the fence, whatever it takes to give Pedro the chance to move his *pollos* out of the range of the *migra*'s surveillance. Pedro explains,

> With the *migra* it's always a game of cat and mouse. You study their moves, you figure out how many men and what kind of equipment they're using that night. And you rely on the fact that you know that they know that they can't stop everyone who decides to cross on a given day. The trick is not to be one of the people they catch that day.

When Pedro reaches San Ysidro, he escorts his clients to a prearranged spot, where he is met by the coyotes who will take them on to Los Angeles. At this point, Pedro usually takes his cut of the total fee (one hundred dollars per head), which is an advance on the three hundred dollars his associates will collect on delivering the *pollos* to Los Angeles. When Pedro "sells" the *pollos* to other coyotes, he turns around and heads back to Tijuana, either to escort another group or to go home. Generally speaking, in an increasingly differentiated profession, Pedro specializes in "leaping the fence."

When business at the fence is slow, Pedro will take his clients all the way

to Los Angeles, the San Fernando Valley, or points north. On these occasions Jaime is waiting in San Ysidro with a van, and the group proceeds north on Interstate 5 until just before the INS checkpoint at San Clemente, an hour up the highway from the border. The checkpoint is a serious obstacle because, when it is in operation, all traffic is slowed to a crawl. Then, anyone who looks likely to be transporting undocumented immigrants—anyone, in short, who looks like Jaime at the wheel of his van—is pulled over for inspection.

When the checkpoint is in operation, Jaime drops Pedro and the *pollos* at a point south of San Clemente. Pedro then proceeds overland with the group through the hills above the highway. Jaime collects the group at a prearranged spot north of the checkpoint.

> The *migra* knows all the regular overland routes that we can use, and they patrol these with horses and helicopters. So we just have to invent new routes. To do this work, you have to believe that there's got to be one last way the *migra* hasn't thought of yet. The other thing to remember is that the people we guide are very needy. They're very desperate. So they'll put up with a lot to reach Los Angeles.
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> Once past San Clemente, we can relax, especially as we get closer to East Los Angeles, where everyone speaks Spanish and looks like us. My job is to deliver the client safe and sound to an address in East L.A. Then I collect my $300 and leave. If, three minutes later, the guy I just dropped off sticks his head out the door to put out the garbage and is grabbed by the *migra*, that's not my problem. I just bring him there. Staying out of the way of the *migra* afterwards—that's his problem.

Pedro explains that the rates charged the *pollos* vary from $250 to $350. The exact price depends on age (children travel for less) and distance. Three hundred dollars is standard for Los Angeles; $350 will take you to the San Fernando Valley. For a good deal more money, some coyotes—working through contacts at southern California airports—provide connections to destinations throughout the West. Pedro claims that he can get me to Chicago in two days if that's where I need to go. But, he adds, 99 percent of his work involves the standard Tijuana–L.A. run at the standard price.

Pedro says that it was once the case that women, like children, were charged less than men:

> The *polleros* used to give a special rate to the women and the kids because they were crossing as part of a family. But now a lot more women are crossing. About a quarter or a third of the people I guide are women. And they're not traveling with their husbands or on their way to join husbands who are waiting in Los Angeles. These women are on their own, and they're headed to L.A. to look for jobs. And they get good jobs, too, because most of them have more schooling, more preparation than the men. So now, most coyotes charge them the same rate as men. . . .

Having learned what the *pollos* pay, I ask Pedro if he doesn't make bundles of money each week. . . . Pedro replies,

> It's true that I can take in thousands of dollars in a week—sometimes a thousand in a single night. But I also have my expenses. Apart from the calls to L.A., I pay a twenty-five-dollar finders fee to anyone who sends me a customer. I pay twenty bucks for the taxi to the fence. Whatever is left of the hundred per pollo I collect in San Ysidro, I split fifty-fifty with Jaime.
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> At the end of the day, I make a lot of money, but I have some very big hidden costs. The federal judicial police, the state judicial police, the municipal police—you name it—they come around as often as once a week to shake me down. They know more or less what I make so they want as much as a thousand dollars a pop. And, believe me, they get a lot more than that from the drug runners.

Pedro says that even members of the Grupo Beta are now "on the take." This elite corp of federal police was formed to coordinate with the INS to halt the worst abuses that occur on the border—the rapes, armed robbery, and murders. Pedro points out that the Grupo Beta has made the border zone safer for everyone. But, he says, some of the agents have been corrupted:

> It's logical, isn't it? These guys are supposed to protect the *pollos* from the *polleros*. Thus, they are in a perfect position to extort bribes from the coyotes because they have all kinds of information on us: where we live, where we cross, where we recruit our customers. The Grupo Beta is supposed to be especially honest and upright. But the temptation to shake us down is too great for some of these guys. They come around to your house and either you pay up or they expose you to their buddies, the *migra*.

I ask Pedro if he is ever afraid. He says,

> Of course, I'm often afraid. Everyone who does this kind of work is afraid. I'm scared of the police on this side and the *migra* on the other, and the bandits who attack you in between. The worst thing is the bandits, because they carry knives and guns, and they go after you when you're on your way back from San Ysidro and you have all the money you earned that night in your shoe.

A border patrol round-up of illegal immigrants. (Photo © Ken Light.)

Pedro says that his wife worries a lot and prays a lot. Patti attends an evangelical church and he often attends with her, although he still considers himself a Catholic and continues to go to Mass.

> As for my children, they're too young to worry. The oldest boy is ten. They don't really understand what I do for a living. But Jaime's kids are older, and his wife tells them that their father works in a saloon and that's why he comes home so late and why they can't visit daddy at work.

I mention to Pedro that I have noticed that most of the coyotes are men in their twenties or early thirties, and I ask him how long he sees himself doing this work. Pedro shakes his head and replies by describing to me the jobs he has held in Mexico and what he earned at each: ten pesos per day working *ejido* lands as a *jornalero;* fifteen per day in construction; forty pesos as a cab driver. In the United States he has worked as a dishwasher, busboy, waiter, janitor, checkout cashier, custodian, bricklayer, plasterer, and bar bouncer.

He has also picked cherries, apples, grapes, peaches, strawberries, oranges, grapefruits, tomatoes, lettuce, and squash.

He says,

> I continue to work as a *pollero* because it is the only job I can get in Mexico where I can make really good money. My problem is that I don't want to live on the other side. I don't want to bring up my kids in the United States. I want them to live here, in their own country, where they can feel proud of who they are.
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> But I'll tell you what my dream is. My dream is to get papers: to get a real green card, not a fake. Then I could work in construction on the other side, and live here in Tijuana with my family. I'd like to operate the heavy equipment. I know how, and you make great money doing that in the U.S. I'd just go across every day to work, and then I'd come home to Tijuana at night. I could be really happy with that kind of life. Not just economically OK, but really happy, really content.