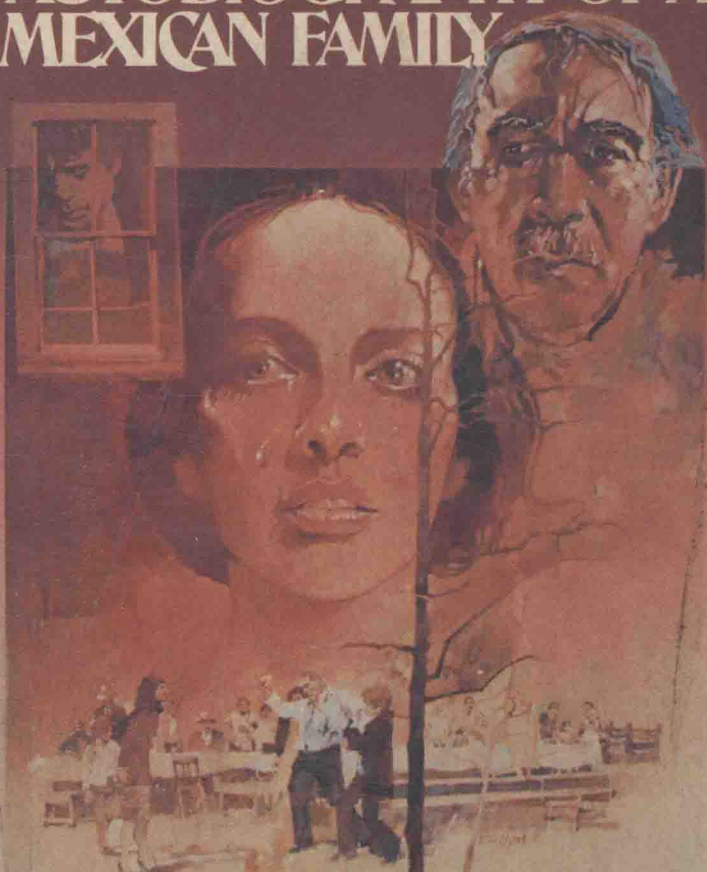


OSCAR LEWIS

The Children of Sanchez

**AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A
MEXICAN FAMILY**



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The Children of Sánchez

AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A MEXICAN FAMILY

O S C A R L E W I S



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The Children of Sánchez



I DEDICATE THIS BOOK
WITH PROFOUND AFFECTION AND GRATITUDE
TO THE SÁNCHEZ FAMILY,
WHOSE IDENTITY MUST REMAIN ANONYMOUS

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

THIS BOOK IS ABOUT A POOR FAMILY IN MEXICO CITY, Jesús Sánchez, the father, age fifty, and his four children: Manuel, age thirty-two; Roberto, twenty-nine; Consuelo, twenty-seven; and Marta, twenty-five. My purpose is to give the reader an inside view of family life and of what it means to grow up in a one-room home in a slum tenement in the heart of a great Latin American city which is undergoing a process of rapid social and economic change.

In my research in Mexico since 1943, I have attempted to develop a number of approaches to family studies. In *Five Families*, I tried to give the reader some glimpses of daily life in five ordinary Mexican families, on five perfectly ordinary days. In this volume I offer the reader a deeper look into the lives of one of these families by the use of a new technique whereby each member of the family tells his own life story in his own words. This approach gives us a cumulative, multifaceted, panoramic view of each individual, of the family as a whole, and of many aspects of lower-class Mexican life. The independent versions of the same incidents given by the various family members provide a built-in check upon the reliability and validity of much of the data and thereby partially offset the subjectivity inherent in a single autobiography. At the same time it reveals the discrepancies in the way events are recalled by each member of the family.

This method of multiple autobiographies also tends to reduce the element of investigator bias because the accounts are not put through the sieve of a middle-class North American mind but are given in the words of the subjects themselves. In this way, I believe I have avoided the two most common hazards in the study of the poor, namely, over-

sentimentalization and brutalization. Finally, I hope that this method preserves for the reader the emotional satisfaction and understanding which the anthropologist experiences in working directly with his subjects but which is only rarely conveyed in the formal jargon of anthropological monographs.

There are very few studies in depth of the psychology of the poor in the less well-developed countries or even in our own country. The people who live at the level of poverty described in this volume, although by no means the lowest level, have not been studied intensively by psychologists or psychiatrists. Nor have the novelists given us an adequate portrayal of the inner lives of the poor in the contemporary world. The slums have produced very few great writers, and by the time they have become great writers, they generally look back over their early lives through middle-class lenses and write within traditional literary forms, so that the retrospective work lacks the immediacy of the original experience.

The tape recorder, used in taking down the life stories in this book, has made possible the beginning of a new kind of literature of social realism. With the aid of the tape recorder, unskilled, uneducated, and even illiterate persons can talk about themselves and relate their observations and experiences in an uninhibited, spontaneous, and natural manner. The stories of Manuel, Roberto, Consuelo, and Marta have a simplicity, sincerity, and directness which is characteristic of the spoken word, of oral literature in contrast to written literature. Despite their lack of formal training, these young people express themselves remarkably well, particularly Consuelo, who sometimes reaches poetic heights. Still in the midst of their unresolved problems and confusions, they have been able to convey enough of themselves to give us insight into their lives and to make us aware of their potentialities and wasted talents.

Certainly the lives of the poor are not dull. The stories in this volume reveal a world of violence and death, of suffering and deprivation, of infidelity and broken homes, of delinquency, corruption, and police brutality, and of the cruelty of the poor to the poor. These stories also reveal an intensity of feeling and human warmth, a strong sense of individuality, a capacity for gaiety, a hope for a better life, a desire for understanding and love, a readiness to share the little they possess, and the courage to carry on in the face of many unresolved problems.

The setting for these life stories is the Casa Grande *vecindad*, a

large one-story slum tenement, in the heart of Mexico City. The Casa Grande is one of a hundred *vecindades* which I came to know in 1951 when I studied the urbanization of peasants who had moved to Mexico City from village Azteca. I had begun my study of Azteca many years before, in 1943. Later, with the help of the villagers, I was able to locate Aztecs in various parts of the city and found two families in the Casa Grande. After completing my study of village migrants, I broadened my research design and began to study entire *vecindades*, including all the residents irrespective of their place of origin.

In October, 1956, in the course of my study of the Casa Grande, I met Jesús Sánchez and his children. Jesús had been a tenant there for over twenty years and although his children had moved in and out during this time, the one-room home in the Casa Grande was a major point of stability in their lives. Lenore, their mother and the first wife of Jesús, had died in 1936, only a few years before they moved into the Casa Grande. Lenore's elder sister, Guadalupe, age sixty, lived in the smaller Panaderos *vecindad* on the Street of the Bakers, only a few blocks away. Aunt Guadalupe was a mother substitute for each of the children; they visited her often and used her home as a refuge in time of need. The action of the life stories, therefore, moves back and forth between the Casa Grande and the Panaderos *vecindad*.

Both *vecindades* are near the center of the city, only a ten-minute walk from the main plaza or Zócalo with its great Cathedral and Presidential Palace. Only a half-hour away is the national shrine to the Virgin of Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico, to which pilgrims flock from all parts of the nation. Both Casa Grande and Panaderos are in the Tepito section, a poor area with a few small factories and warehouses, public baths, run-down third-class movie theatres, overcrowded schools, saloons, *pulquerías* (taverns where *pulque*, a native alcoholic drink, is sold), and many small shops. Tepito, the largest second-hand market in Mexico City, also known as the Thieves' Market, is only a few blocks away; other large markets, La Merced and Lagunilla, which have recently been rebuilt and modernized, are within easy walking distance. This area ranks high in the incidence of homicide, drunkenness, and delinquency. It is a densely populated neighborhood; during the day and well after dark, the streets and doorways are filled with people coming and going or crowding around

shop entrances. Women sell *tacos* or soup at little sidewalk kitchens. The streets and sidewalks are broad and paved but are without trees, grass, or gardens. Most of the people live in rows of one-room dwellings in inside courtyards shut off from view of the street by shops or *vecindad* walls.

The Casa Grande stands between the Street of the Barbers and the Street of the Tinsmiths. Spread out over an entire square block and housing seven hundred people, the Casa Grande is a little world of its own, enclosed by high cement walls on the north and south and by rows of shops on the other two sides. These shops—food stores, a dry cleaner, a glazier, a carpenter, a beauty parlor, together with the neighborhood market and public baths—supply the basic needs of the *vecindad*, so that many of the tenants seldom leave the immediate neighborhood and are almost strangers to the rest of Mexico City. This section of the city was once the home of the underworld, and even today people fear to walk in it late at night. But most of the criminal element has moved away and the majority of the residents are poor tradesmen, artisans, and workers.

Two narrow, inconspicuous entrances, each with a high gate, open during the day but locked every night at ten o'clock, lead into the *vecindad* on the east and west sides. Anyone coming or going after hours must ring for the janitor and pay to have the gate opened. The *vecindad* is also protected by its two patron saints, the Virgin of Guadalupe and the Virgin of Zapopan, whose statues stand in glass cases, one at each entrance. Offerings of flowers and candles surround the images and on their skirts are fastened small shiny medals, each a testimonial of a miracle performed for someone in the *vecindad*. Few residents pass the Virgins without some gesture of recognition, be it only a glance or a hurried sign of the cross.

Within the *vecindad* stretch four long, concrete-paved patios or courtyards, about fifteen feet wide. Opening on to the courtyards at regular intervals of about twelve feet, are 157 one-room windowless apartments, each with a barn-red door. In the daytime, besides most of the doors, stand rough wooden ladders leading to low flat roofs over the kitchen portion of each apartment. These roofs serve many uses and are crowded with lines of laundry, chicken coops, dove-cotes, pots of flowers or medicinal herbs, tanks of gas for cooking, and occasional TV antenna.

In the daytime the courtyards are crowded with people and animals,

dogs, turkeys, chickens, and a few pigs. Children play here because it is safer than the streets. Women queue up for water or shout to each other as they hang up clothes, and street vendors come in to sell their wares. Every morning a garbage man wheels a large can through the courtyards to collect each family's refuse. In the afternoon, gangs of older boys often take over a courtyard to play a rough game of soccer. On Sunday nights there is usually an outdoor dance. Within the west entrance is the public bathhouse and a small garden whose few trees and patch of grass serve as a meeting place for young people and a relatively quiet spot where the older men sit and talk or read the newspapers. Here also is a one-room shack marked "administration office," where a bulletin lists the names of families who are delinquent in paying their rent.

The tenants of the Casa Grande come from twenty-four of the thirty-two states of the Mexican nation. Some come from as far south as Oaxaca and Yucatán and some from the northern states of Chihuahua and Sinaloa. Most of the families have lived in the *vecindad* for from fifteen to twenty years, some as long as thirty years. Over a third of the households have blood relatives within the *vecindad* and about a fourth are related by marriage and *compadrazgo* (a ritual relationship between parents, godparents, and godchildren). These ties, plus the low fixed rental and the housing shortage in the city, make for stability. Some families with higher incomes, their small apartments jammed with good furniture and electrical equipment, are waiting for a chance to move to better quarters, but the majority are content with, indeed proud of, living in the Casa Grande.

The sense of community is quite strong in the *vecindad*, particularly among the young people who belong to the same gangs, form lifelong friendships, attend the same schools, meet at the same dances held in the courtyards, and frequently marry within the *vecindad*. Adults also have friends whom they visit, go out with, and borrow from. Groups of neighbors organize raffles and *tandas*, participate in religious pilgrimages together, and together celebrate the festivals of the *vecindad* patron saints and the Christmas *posadas* as well as other holidays.

But these group efforts are occasional; for the most part adults "mind their own business" and try to maintain family privacy. Most doors are kept shut and it is customary to knock and wait for permission to enter when visiting. Some people visit only relatives or

compadres and actually have entered very few apartments. It is not common to invite friends or neighbors in to eat except on formal occasions such as birthdays or religious celebrations. Although some neighborly help occurs, especially during emergencies, it is kept at a minimum. Quarrels between families over the mischief of children, street fights between gangs, and personal feuds between boys are not uncommon in the Casa Grande.

The people of the Casa Grande earn their living in a large miscellany of occupations, some of which are carried on within the *vecindad*. Women take in washing and sewing, men are shoemakers, hat cleaners, or vendors of fruit and candy. Some go outside to work in factories or shops or as chauffeurs and small tradesmen. Living standards are low but by no means the lowest in Mexico City, and the people of the neighborhood look upon the Casa Grande as an elegant place.

The Casa Grande and the Panaderos *vecindades* represent sharp contrasts within the culture of poverty. Panaderos is a small *vecindad* consisting of a single row of twelve windowless one-room apartments which lie exposed to the view of passers-by, with no enclosing walls, no gate, and only a dirt yard. Here, unlike the Casa Grande, there are no inside toilets and no piped water. Two public washbasins and two dilapidated toilets of crumbling brick and adobe, curtained by pieces of torn burlap, serve the eighty-six inhabitants.

As one moves from the Panaderos to the Casa Grande, one finds more beds per capita and fewer people who sleep on the floor, more who cook with gas rather than with kerosene or charcoal, more who regularly eat three meals a day, use knives and forks for eating in addition to *tortillas* and spoons, drink beer instead of *pulque*, buy new rather than second-hand furniture and clothing, and celebrate the Day of the Dead by attending Mass at church rather than by leaving the traditional offerings of incense, candles, food, and water in their homes. The trend is from adobe to cement, from clay pots to aluminum, from herbal remedies to antibiotics, and from local curers to doctors.

In 1956, 79 percent of the tenants of the Casa Grande had radios, 55 percent gas stoves, 54 percent wrist watches, 49 percent used knives and forks, 46 percent had sewing machines, 41 percent aluminum pots, 22 percent electric blenders, 21 percent television. In

Panaderos most of these luxury items were absent. Only one household had TV and two owned wrist watches.

In Casa Grande the monthly income per capita ranged from 23 to 500 *pesos* (\$3 to \$40 at the current rate of exchange). Sixty-eight percent showed per capita incomes of 200 *pesos* or less per month, (\$16), 22 percent between 201 and 300 *pesos* (\$24), and ten percent between 301 and 500 *pesos*. In Panaderos over 85 percent of the households had an average monthly income of less than 200 *pesos*, or \$16, none had over 200 *pesos* and 41 percent had less than 100 *pesos*.

Monthly rent for a one-room apartment in Casa Grande ranged from 30 to 50 *pesos* (\$2.40 to \$4); in Panaderos from 15 to 30 *pesos*, (\$1.20 to \$2.40). Many families consisting of husband, wife and four small children managed to live on from 8 to 10 *pesos* a day (64¢ to 80¢) for food. Their diet consisted of black coffee, *tortillas*, beans and chile.

In Casa Grande there was a wide range of level of education, varying from twelve adults who had never attended school to one woman who had attended for eleven years. The average number of years of school attendance was 4.7. Only 8 percent of the residents were illiterate, and 20 percent of the marriages were of the free-union type.

In Panaderos, the level of school attendance was 2.1 years; there was not a single primary-school graduate; 40 percent of the population was illiterate; and 46 percent of the marriages were free unions. In Casa Grande only about a third of the families were related by blood ties and about a fourth by marriages and *compadrazgo*. In Panaderos half the families were related by blood and all were bound by ties of *compradzgo*.

The Sánchez family was one of a random sample of seventy-one families selected for study in the Casa Grande. Jesús Sánchez was in the middle-income group in the *vecindad*, earning a wage of 12.50 *pesos*, or one dollar a day, as a food buyer in the La Gloria restaurant. He could hardly support even himself on this amount and supplemented his income by selling lottery tickets, by raising and selling pigs, pigeons, chickens, and singing birds, and, in all probability, by receiving "commissions" in the markets. Jesús was secretive about these extra sources of income, but with them he managed to support, on a very modest scale, three different households located in widely

separated parts of the city. At the time of my investigation, he lived with his younger, favorite wife, Delila, in a room on the Street of the Lost Child, where he supported her, his two children by her, her son by her first husband, her mother, and the four children of his son Manuel. Jesús' older wife, Lupita, their two daughters, and two grandchildren, all of whom he supported, lived in a small house he had built in the El Dorado Colony on the outskirts of the city. Jesús also maintained the room in the Casa Grande for his daughter Marta and her children, his daughter Consuelo, and his son Roberto.

Except for an old radio, there were no luxury items in the Sánchez home in the Casa Grande, but there was usually enough to eat and the family could boast of having had more education than most of their neighbors. Jesús had had only one year of schooling, but Manuel, his eldest son, had completed the six grades of primary school. Consuelo had also graduated from primary school and had completed two years of commercial school as well. Roberto left school in the third grade; Marta completed the fourth.

The Sánchez family differed from some of their neighbors by having a servant, who came during the day to clean, do the laundry, and prepare the meals. This was after the death of Jesús' first wife, Lenore, and while the children were young. The servant was a neighbor or relative, usually a widow or a deserted wife who was willing to work for very little pay. Although this gave the family some prestige, it was not a sign of wealth and was not unusual in the *vecindad*.

I was introduced to the Sánchez household by one of my *vecindad* friends. On my first visit I found the door ajar, and as I waited for someone to answer my knock, I could see the rather dreary, run-down interior. The little vestibule which housed the kitchen and the toilet was badly in need of painting and was furnished with only a two-burner kerosene stove, a table, and two unpainted wooden chairs. Neither the kitchen nor the larger bedroom beyond the inner doorway had any of the air of self-conscious prosperity I had seen in some of the better-to-do Casa Grande rooms.

Consuelo came to the door. She looked thin and pale and explained that she had just recovered from a serious illness. Marta, her younger sister, carrying an infant wrapped in a shawl, joined her but said nothing. I explained that I was a North American professor and anthropologist and had spent a number of years living in a Mexican

village studying its customs. I was now comparing the life of city *vecindad* families with that of the village and was looking for people in the Casa Grande who would be willing to help me.

To get things started, I asked where they thought people were better off, in the country or in the city. After a few questions of this nature, which I had used to advantage in previous interviews, I began at once with some of the items on my first questionnaire. These called for the sex, age, place of birth, education, occupation, and work history of each family member.

I was almost finished with these questions when the father, Jesús Sánchez, walked in brusquely, carrying a sack of food supplies over his shoulder. He was a short, stocky, energetic man, with Indian features, dressed in blue denim overalls and a straw hat, a cross between a peasant and a factory worker. He left the sack with Marta, spoke a few words of greeting to Marta and Consuelo, and turned suspiciously to ask what I wanted. He answered my questions in short order, stating that country life was far superior to city life because the young became corrupt in the city, especially when they did not know how to take advantage of what the city offered. He then said he was in a hurry and left as abruptly as he had entered.

At my next interview in the Sánchez household, I met Roberto, the second son. He was taller and a shade darker than the other members of the family and had the physique of a trained athlete. He was pleasant and soft-spoken and gave me the impression of being unusually polite and respectful. He was always polite to me, even when he was drunk. I did not meet Manuel, the elder brother, until many months later because he was out of the country at the time.

In the weeks and months that followed, I continued my work with the other sample families in the *vecindad*. I had completed the data I needed on the Sánchez family after four interviews, but I would frequently stop at the Sánchez house to chat casually with Consuelo or Marta or Roberto, all of whom were friendly and offered useful information on *vecindad* life. As I began to learn something about each member of the family, I became aware that this single family seemed to illustrate many of the social and psychological problems of lower-class Mexican life. At this point I decided to try a study in depth. First Consuelo, then Roberto and Marta agreed to tell me their life stories, stories which were taped with their knowledge and permission. When Manuel returned, he also co-operated. My work

with Jesús began after I had been studying his children for six months. It was difficult to gain his confidence, but when he finally agreed to allow me to record his life story, this further enhanced my relationship with his children.

Because of the need for privacy in obtaining an independent version of each life history, most of the recording was done in my office and home. Most of the sessions were recorded individually, but on my return visits to Mexico in 1957, 1958, and 1959, I managed to have group discussions with two or three family members at a time. Occasionally, I recorded at their home in the Casa Grande. However, they talked more freely when they were away from their *vecindad*. I also found it helpful to keep the microphone out of their sight by attaching it to their clothing; in this way we could carry on our conversations as if it weren't there.

In obtaining the detailed and intimate data of these life stories, I used no secret techniques, no truth drugs, no psychoanalytic couch. The most effective tools of the anthropologist are sympathy and compassion for the people he studies. What began as a professional interest in their lives turned into warm and lasting friendships. I became deeply involved in their problems and often felt as though I had two families to look after, the Sánchez family and my own. I have spent hundreds of hours with members of the family; I have eaten in their homes, have attended their dances and festive occasions, have accompanied them to their places of work, have met their relatives and friends, have gone with them on pilgrimages, to church, to the movies, and to sports events.

The Sánchez family learned to trust and confide in me. They would call upon me and my wife in times of need or crisis, and we helped them through illness, drunkenness, trouble with the police, unemployment and family quarrels. I did not follow the common anthropological practice of paying them as informants (not informers!), and I was struck by the absence of monetary motivation in their relationship with me. Basically, it was their sense of friendship that led them to tell me their life stories. The reader should not underestimate their courage in bringing forth as they did the many painful memories and experiences of their lives. To some extent this served as a catharsis and relieved their anxieties. They were moved by my sustained interest in them, and my return to Mexico year after year was a crucial factor in increasing their confidence. Their positive image of the