

A scenic landscape featuring a dirt path that winds through a valley. In the foreground, there are several large agave plants. A person wearing a hat and dark clothing stands on the path, looking towards the distance. The background shows rolling green hills under a blue sky with light clouds. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and rural.

échele ganas

DO
YOUR
BEST

A Life Left Behind

Laurence Salzmänn

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To the children of Sierra Norte de Puebla now in the United States and Mexico, so they may remember a past that their parents and grandparents struggled to change to make a better future for them.

A los niños y las niñas de la Sierra Norte de Puebla que viven en Estados Unidos y México, para que recuerden el pasado que sus padres y sus abuelos lucharon por cambiar con la esperanza de un futuro mejor.

Nochin okichpilmej huan cihuapipilj yehuan neminj ne Estados Unidos huan Mexico. Maj kinelnamikiskej yehuan tatajmej huan tatarabuelos tekkitiken miakj, huan kipackej ni nemilis.

L. S.

Photographs by Laurence Salzmann

Echeleganas: A Life Left Behind

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“Echeleganas” will be featured as an exhibition within the gallery of Philadelphia’s Magic Gardens, a museum and community arts center, from late April to mid-June 2012. “Echeleganas” will be a part of a larger celebration entitled: *De Pueblo a Pueblo* (from town to town), that will honor Philadelphia’s Mexican community by promoting greater understanding of traditional arts, language, and history of our southern neighbors. Participating organizations include: Casa Monarca, the Mexican Cultural Center, the Mexican Consulate, The Eye’s Gallery, Scribe Video Center, Casa Latina, International House Philadelphia and Penn Museum of the University of Pennsylvania.

For more information about Echeleganas, please visit at <http://Echeleganas.com>



Photographer’s Introduction Part I: Mexico in My Memory

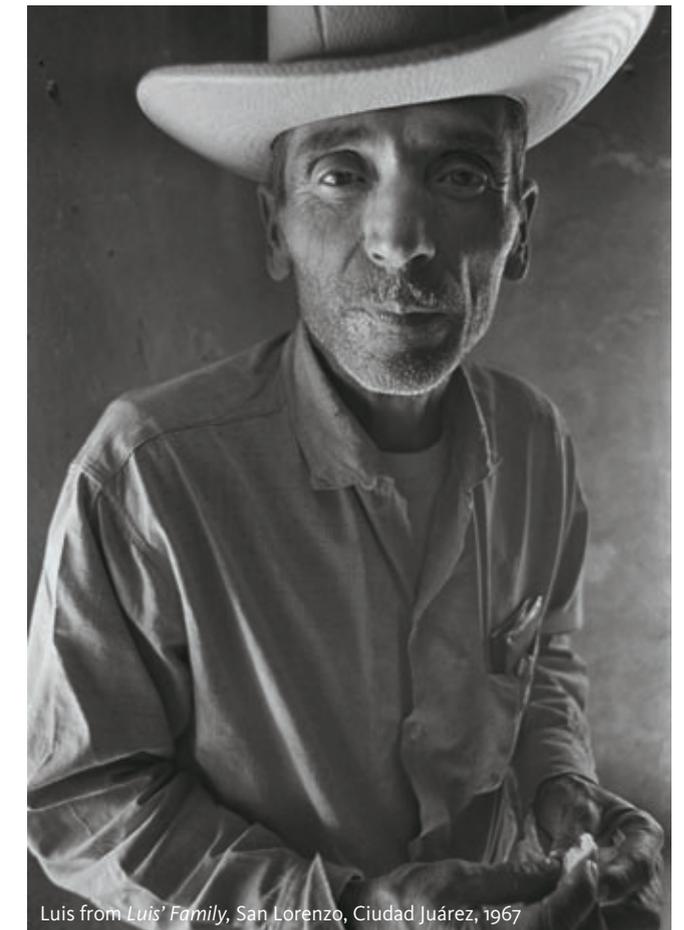
As a four-year-old in 1948, I remember waiting with my brother and sister to receive a long distance call from our parents to report their safe arrival in Mexico. They had been invited by a Mexican doctor friend of theirs to share in the driving of his 1948 Cadillac back to Mexico. My dad told me that when they got to Mexico and stopped for gas, people were amazed that the gas tank—hidden under the tail light—was accessed by pushing a button on the tail light.

On their return, our parents brought for each of us a Mexican Mariachi costume, complete with a large sombrero and a serape. They had also bought a painting of a Mexican peasant in somber colors, à la Diego Rivera, which for many years graced our family’s living room. I still have the painting; the mariachi outfits were long ago eaten by moths.

At age 17, I set out on a cold February morning to hitchhike from Philadelphia to Mexico. I had dropped out of high school in the second part of my senior year, and wanted to improve the little Spanish I had learned in Cuba during the previous summer. An Argentine friend in Philadelphia had given me the name of his sister, who was working in Mexico City—my only contact. When I arrived there, she helped me find a basement apartment near Paseo de la Reforma. At the Instituto Mexicano Norteamericano, I attended an intensive Spanish course for one month. I visited the pyramids at Teotihuacán, and the Friday peasant market at Toluca. In the evenings I went with new acquaintances to hear mariachis serenading at Plaza Garibaldi.

My first visit to Mexico concluded with a trip hitchhiking through Mexico to Puerto Limón on the Pacific coast of Costa Rica, where I got a job as a work-away on a German refrigerator boat carrying Costa Rican beef to New York City. We passed through the Panama Canal and by the island of Cuba just as the Bay of Pigs invasion was unfolding. I was given the job of steering the boat under the watchful eye of the first mate, who kept saying to me “*Gerade aus*”—straight ahead.

Five years later, in 1966, I was invited to train for the Peace Corps at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. My training included an “in-country experience” in Mexico. Our group was taken to the city of Juárez where each of us was assigned to live with a family. Mine was a family of adobe brick makers. They lived in a *barrio humilde* (shantytown), outside of Juárez near the Rio Grande River. They were migrants from the state of Zacatecas. I started to photograph them. After I was “de-selected” from the Peace Corps—a story in itself—I decided to return to Juárez to make a photographic essay about the family with whom I had stayed during my Peace Corps training.



Luis from *Luis’ Family*, San Lorenzo, Ciudad Juárez, 1967

I photographed the men making adobe bricks in primitive kilns fired by old tires; Juana, the mother, making tortillas cooked over an open fire on a *comal* made of clay; the children working with their father, Alvino; and Luis, the man who owned the brick yard where they toiled. I titled the finished work “Luis’s Family.” My photographs were dark and somber, and revealed, in the clarity of black and white images, the impoverished conditions of the family. These early photographs resembled those made for the Farm Security Administration (1935-1944) by photographers such as Walker Evans and Arthur Rothstein.



From *Luis’ Family*, San Lorenzo, Ciudad Juárez, 1967

On my return to the United States, I continued to work on these images. The photography curator at the Philadelphia Museum of Art selected a group of my photographs for inclusion in their photography collection. I made up a dummy book and showed it to Diane Arbus in New York, hoping she might suggest a publisher for them. No one was interested. In retrospect, I now understand, the photographs were too sad.

Later, in New York I got a job with St. Luke’s Hospital to photograph and film residents of Single Room Occupancy Hotels. I attended a class at the Museum of Natural History, given by Margaret Mead. There, I met Oscar Lewis, the anthropologist whose book, *Children of Sanchez*, tells the story of an impoverished Mexican family through the eyes of one family. It resonated with

my images of “Luis’s Family.” Inspired by Lewis’ book, I attended a summer training program for anthropology students conducted by the University of Pittsburgh in 1969, in the state of Tlaxcala, Mexico. Our training included living in small villages on the slopes of La Malinche Mountain (named after a Nahuatl Indian woman who Cortés used as his translator, lover, and advisor in his conquest of Mexico). I was sent with Marion Oetinger, a fellow trainee, to live in the village of Santa Isabel, Xiloxlta, translated as “the place of the flowering corn” in Nahuatl, a language still spoken by the older people of the village. I set about to create a photographic ethnography of Santa Isabel. At that time, Santa Isabel’s life was still very traditional. Villagers tended their *milpas*, small plots of land on which they raised corn, squash and beans, and built their houses with adobe bricks with red tile roofs; they made *pulque*, a milk-colored, alcoholic beverage made from the fermented sap of the maguey plants that dotted the landscape, and also served as fences between each family’s plot of land. That summer we witnessed the Apollo moon landing on TV sets that had been newly introduced to the village—a striking contrast to the culture of the villagers, many of whom were still walking around barefoot and wearing clothing made from home spun flax. My photographs showed the traditional way of life—that was soon to change, like women washing clothes in the local stream....

From *Tlaxcalan Sketches*, Santa Isabel, Xiloxlta, 1969



From *Tlaxcalan Sketches*, Santa Isabel, Xiloxlta, 1969

At a Visual Anthropology conference in 1971, I met Ayşe Gürsan, a Turkish anthropologist who was planning a trip to Mexico to study the peasant market systems of Puebla, Tlaxcala and the Oaxaca Valleys. I volunteered to be her photographer and translator. This cooperative work led to our marriage, and a long history of collaboration on other projects. An important lesson I learned from Ayşe was being both patient and observant in carrying out fieldwork.

These early experiences in Mexico were the beginning of my photographic career, rooted in humanistic themes that I hoped would create paths of understanding between cultures. From anthropology, I borrowed the participant observation model of spending many, many hours with a community to photograph them, and where

possible, learning the language of the group with whom I was working. These points of departure began long ago and came to characterize my method of work in the following years, when working on projects in Romania, Turkey and Cuba.



From *Tlaxcalan Sketches*, Santa Isabel, Xiloxoxtla, 1969

Photographer's Introduction Part II:

Origins of the “Echeleganas Project”

Fast forward to 2002. A neighbor in Philadelphia who was working on his house asked me if I knew where he could find skilled workers to help him in his construction. I thought for a bit, then suggested that he visit a Mexican restaurant where I had seen a man doing tile work. That man turned out to be Luis Pérez, who came from Xonocatla, a village in the mountainous region of Puebla state's *Sierra Norte*. Traditionally, the people of *Sierra Norte* lived from subsistence agriculture. To earn extra income, the villagers migrated out to find work. In the 1940s—they had gone to the nearby state of Veracruz to pick coffee beans. Others relocated to Puebla City and Mexico City. From mid 1980s onward people from the state of Puebla began to go to the United States. New York and Philadelphia were the favored destinations. Some enterprising villagers among them set up an informal system of lending money, with interest, to pay the “coyotes” (people who smuggled Mexicans across the border). These “coyotes” charged \$1,800–\$3,000, including passage to the city of one's choice. Once they arrived in the US, they found employment in construction, food services, landscaping and as housekeeping. Soon almost every family in the *Sierra Norte de Puebla* had a child or relative in the United States. Wages in *Sierra Norte de Puebla* are \$10–\$18 or less per day. In the United States, depending on the location of work, type of job, number of hours worked, and the amount of money saved, a newly arrived Mexican worker could earn between seven to ten times more than what he or she would have earned in Mexico. And, if the person was *juicioso*, (clever), as they like to say in Mexico, they could save up enough money in a period of four to five years to secure a better future in Mexico. Even with the minimal wages earned in the US, there would soon be enough money to have a house built back in the village, buy a pickup truck, perhaps start a business, help parents and other family members left behind, and to contribute to the support of village traditions. Thus the “American Dream,” the freedom and the promise of prosperity and success, could become a reality, even for our Mexican neighbors.

There are, of course, risks and misfortunes awaiting those crossing our borders illegally, like being killed in the desert on the way to

the US, or being robbed and beaten by less well-to-do people on arrival. Another likely misfortune might be being picked up by the *migra* (U.S. Immigration authorities), and sent back to Mexico or to a remote prison to await deportation.

Another possible risk is losing one's marriage after being away from home for long periods of time: for example, a man's wife might get tired of waiting for her husband and seek companionship with a neighbor; or the husband might find a new exciting love on Cupido Latino—a dating web site.

When I started to remodel my photo studio in Philadelphia, Luis introduced me to Alberto, who in turn, introduced me to his brothers Ciro, Ramón, and the cousins Adán, Hermán, Martín, Bonifacio, Lino, and Pilar. They were all excellent workers guided by the principle of doing their best. They gladly did any assigned task, even with a smile. Alberto fixed the 130-year-old lock on my house that the local locksmith had written off as impossible. Ana G., our housekeeper, invited me to visit her village in Tonalapa (meaning “the place of sun and water” in Nahuatl), and to stay there in her newly built but empty house. Adán, who had helped me to remodel my studio, invited me to attend his wedding in Xonocatla (meaning “the place of onions” in Nahuatl). With many presents tucked into my bag, I flew to Mexico and caught a bus to the town of Libres, Puebla, the gateway to many villages of the *Sierra Norte de Puebla*.

Over the course of five years, I was to make many visits to this region. Each visit deepened my knowledge of the way of life there and allowed me to make the photographs and videos that are now part of “Echeleganas.” The villagers welcomed me to share their daily rhythm of life. I think they were flattered (*encantados*) that someone from the United States where many of their children and relatives had gone, came to visit them, and inquired about their way of life.

They had as many questions for me as I had for them: “Don Lencho (my Mexican nickname), why do your countrymen try to chase us out of your country? Aren't we nice to you here?” asked Carmine.

“Why would you want to deny our children a chance to have a better way of life, to send money home to improve the life of their parents here?” asked Enendino. He continued, “Don’t you understand, our sons and daughters go to *el Norte* (name given by Mexicans to the United States), because there is no chance for them here to earn a decent living; if only our presidents would understand that, there could be an agreement. Are we not all children of God?”

Their statements resonated with me. But what could I do to change the laws governing our immigration policies that criminalized people who crossed our borders without work visas? I believe building walls and fences, and prisons to house the illegal Mexican workers is perhaps beneficial to the fence and prison builders, but certainly not for the people I had met. Could we not administer a more rational, organized plan to give them work visas? As I continued with the “Echeleganas” project, my hope was that the photographs and the video would open a path for a thoughtful dialogue among the American people on the subject of immigration, and give a face and identity to a group of people who are unknown to us. As the Bible teaches us, knowing someone face-to-face helps to dispel fears we might have about them. Why did I entitle my project, “Echeleganas?” When I asked the villagers to send a greeting to their relatives in the States through the videos I was shooting, in tandem with my photographs, they always extended their gentle counsel of “Echeleganas,” literally meaning, “Do your best.” Indeed, their expectation was fulfilled; in most cases the workers from *Sierra Norte de Puebla* did their best in the United States, by “trying harder” which is another meaning for “Echeleganas.”

The benefits of doing their best and trying harder can be observed in many of the new homes and businesses in the villages of *Sierra Norte de Puebla*. The homes often mimic those of American houses, complete with arched roofs and bay windows. The difference is that all construction is done with cement blocks and poured cement. Often the old style kitchen is reproduced in the new house, with its open wood-burning stove and oven. In the kitchen, elderly women still beat out their *nixtamal* (boiled corn) for tortillas in the same way that their grandmothers did. The fava bean, a staple of their winter diet grown locally, is still shelled and peeled one by one for winter dishes. The *metate* (*grinding stone*) is used to crush up peppers and

tomatoes for the spicy sauces that add zest to the foods. Also some age-old labor traditions continue: for example, the practice of *faena*. A practice that goes back to pre-Colombian era when the village men joined together to do public works for the benefit of their community. In the same spirit, when the cement is poured for the roof of a new house, friends and family volunteer to help in much the same way as the Amish join to raise their barns. Their payment is a complimentary lunch and the conviviality that comes with food and drink shared among friends.

Sometimes the newly built houses like the one where I lived in Tonalapa remain vacant for years awaiting the return of their owners. Such is the case with Ana G.’s house. When I asked if and when she might be returning to live in her village, her answer was that she didn’t know. Now her two children work in suburban Philadelphia. Would returning to a remote village where they had not lived for a decade, still be of interest to them? Nevertheless, Ana likes to say, “All I do here now is work, work, and work.” In the meantime, her house in Tonalapa remains empty as a testament to her hard-earned wages.

The overall economic well being of the villages in the Puebla region is seen in the increased number of cars and pickups now on the roads, and the many new businesses that have been established. Over the years, the Mexican government has invested funds to improve the infrastructure of the villages, furnishing schools with computer labs, and medical clinics with doctors. (Only 45 years ago electricity came to the area.) Before these advances travel between villages was by donkey or foot. The younger people do not remember these old times, but the older people do.

When I first visited Tonalapa there was no internet there or in the surrounding villages. Cell phone service didn’t exist. When a person got a phone call it was announced over a loud-speaker, and he had to present himself at a certain time, at a privately owned phone booth near the village square. Now there is cable TV in private homes and internet service at local schools and libraries. Change is very much in the air in many aspects of life; young village men are dressed in hip hop clothes, complete with appropriate haircut, while their mothers still keep their traditional aprons and braids.

By now, a whole generation of *Sierra Norte de Puebla* villagers has lived or is living in the United States. I wonder how many of them will return to the life led by their fathers and mothers? Will our immigration policies change? Will there be an amnesty? Will we ever stop needing the services provided by villagers from remote regions of Mexico, and other countries in the world? “Echeleganas”

merely begins to pose and continue to explore some of these questions—with its still photos and video components to give a voice to people and their changing lifestyle that is remotely visible to mainstream America.

Laurence Salzmann



On my first visit to Sierra Norte de Puebla, I stayed for a few days with Nicolás Moreno and his family. Their son Alberto worked for me in Philadelphia. Zaragoza, 2004. (Left to right: Maribel, Engracia, Petra, Laurence, Nicolás, Procoro, Alfonso).

































































Front Cover: Don Pascacío looking out over his fields, Tonalapa, 2006.



Endpaper: View of the Peak of Orizaba seen from Bella Vista, 2006.



Page 8: Girls returning from Graceli's Quinceañera party, Plan de la Flor, 2007.



Page 9: Catalina Alvarez with her Calla Lillies. She was on her way to her grandson Adán's wedding, Xonocatlá, 2005.



Page 18: Waiting for gasoline after political meeting, San Francisco, Ixtacamaxtitlán, 2005.



Page 18-19: Posters for Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) candidates for city and state offices, Tonalapa, 2005.



Page 19: Street discussion, San Francisco, Ixtacamaxtitlán, 2005.



Page 20: Aurelia Galicia with her dogs, Xonocatlá, 2006.



Page 10: Irene's wedding party gathered at her house for a luncheon after her wedding ceremony, Zaragoza, 2005.



Page 11: Irene Fernández with her ring carriers, Xonocatlá, 2005. 



Page 12: Amanda Lima's Presentation Party, Tonalapa, 2007. 



Page 13: At their first communion the children wore a color said to symbolize purity. Mirador, 2007. 



Page 21: Daniela Guevara, Tonalapa, 2007.



Page 22: Members of Lorenzo's Loricós soccer team trying on their new uniforms for the first time, Tonalapa, 2008. 



Page 23: Building a new house for a villager who is still in the United States, Tonalapa, 2008.



Page 24: Maguey Plant, Tonalapa, 2007.



Page 14: Lorenzo Vásquez 10 children all help with his farming, Mirador, 2007. 



Page 15: New houses are almost always built with cinder blocks, Mirador, 2007.



Page 16: Pedro Allende and Emanuel Periañez, San Andrés, Tepexoxuca, 2006.



Page 17: Saint's Day Feast, San Andrés, Tepexoxuca, 2006.



Page 25: Milpa, with Maguey plants, Tonalapa, 2007.



Page 26: Flowers paid for from Philadelphia for Saint's Day Celebration, Tonalapa, 2007.



Page 27: Virgin del Pilar, Mirador, 2007.



Page 28: Chicken hawk, Cosamaluca, 2007.



Page 28: Home altar for Rosario, Tonalapa, 2007. VIDEO



Page 29: Little crown of dried flowers and corn ears, Tonalapa, 2006.



Page 30: Preparing chickens for a wedding feast, Xonocatla, 2005. VIDEO



Page 31: Community Health Fair, Mirador, 2006.



Page 40: Welcome sign for celebration of San Isidro Labrador, Mirador, 2007. VIDEO



Page 41: First Communion, Mirador, 2007. VIDEO



Page 42: Side path, Mirador 2007.



Page 43: Cecilia León Flores and her escorts (*chambelanes*) before her *Quinceañera*, Plan de la Flor, 2006. VIDEO



Page 32: Juana picking corn, Tehuinxco, Guadalupe Victoria, 2007. VIDEO



Page 33: Enedino loading wood, Cosamaluca, 2007. VIDEO



Page 34: Sheep between two maguey plants, Tonalapa, 2007.



Page 35: Inocencia Zavaleta with her chicken, Mirador, 2006.



Page 44: *Castillo* – towers for fireworks for San Isidro Labrador, Mirador, 2007. VIDEO



Page 45: Adornments for San Isidro Labrador, Mirador, 2007. VIDEO



Page 46: Punching Bag at Festival of San Isidro Labrador, Mirador, 2008.



Page 47: Basketball court, Tonalapa, 2007.



Page 36: Enedino, Cosamaluca, Tonalapa, 2007. VIDEO



Page 37: Benjamin with his wife Concha and daughter, Cosamaluca, Tonalapa, 2007.



Page 38: *Faena*, community work, Tonalapa, 2005. VIDEO



Page 39: Road into Zaragoza, 2007.



Page 48: Primary school children under cypress tree, Tonalapa, 2007.



Page 49: Don Carmelo with his rooster, Tonalapa, 2007. VIDEO



Page 50: *Quiote* – Flowering stem of Maguey plant, Tonalapa, 2007.



Page 50-51: *Quiote* – Flowering stem of Maguey plant, Tonalapa, 2007.



Page 51: *Quiote* – Flowering stem of Maguey plant, Tonalapa, 2007.



Page 52: Cutting corn stalks, Tonalapa, 2007.



Page 53: Corn stalks in smoke, Tonalapa, 2007.



Page 54: “Live and In-Parts Chickens,” Mirador, 2007.



Page 62-63: Petra with her younger sister Benita, San Andrés, Tepexoxuca, 2006.



Page 63: Early corn, Tonalapa, 2008.



Page 64: Chery, Brandon, and Fidel picking plums, Tonalapa, 2006.



Page 65: Goats belonging to Gavino, Tonalapa, 2007.



Page 55: Chicks ready to be sold, Tonalapa, 2007.



Page 56: Brandon with his grandparents Juana and Carmelo, Tonalapa, 2005.



Page 57: Cresciana spoke only Nahuatl and at age 24 learned Spanish. Tonalapa, 2008.



Page 58: Old house with laminated roof, Tonalapa, 2007.



Page 66: Burning goats hairs, Tonalapa, 2007.



Page 67: Streamers to scare crows, Cosamaluca, Tonalapa, 2007.



Page 68: Afternoon beers, San Francisco Ixtacamaxitlán, 2007.



Page 69: Candelaria with her turkeys, Xonocatla, 2008.



Page 59: New house with American influence, Tonalapa, 2007.



Page 60: Adrián with his goats, Tonalapa, 2007.



Page 61: Doroteo with his mother Anastasia and son Edgar, Tonalapa, 2006.



Page 62: Road leading to Mirador, 2006.



Page 76: Adrián Guevara with his dog Rex, Tonalapa, 2008.



Page 76: Carmen López, often brought us fresh eggs laid by her chickens, Tonalapa, 2008.



Back Cover: On way to Fidel and Alicia’s wedding, Tonalapa, 2007

About the Video “Echeleganas”

“Echeleganas” focuses for the most part on the village of Tonalapa, situated in the northern region of the state of Puebla. Tonalapa forms a microcosm of the many hundreds of villages that are located in Mexico’s Sierra Norte de Puebla, a region nearly 100 km long by 50 km wide, which extends into the state of Hidalgo.

The “Echeleganas” video enlivens Laurence Salzmans’s “still” photographs featured in his similarly-titled book. In the video people tell their stories in a series of interviews using their own vernacular. While the older villagers reminisce about their lives and the history of their culture, younger people speak about employment in the United States and the effects of their labor on the Sierra Norte de Puebla region.

In the video, we first meet Carmen López picking green beans in her fields. She asks, while pointing this way and that way: “Where are you from? Why do your people want to chase us away from your country? Can’t you see they only go there because they need to work so they can earn money to feed themselves? *Aqui somos bien pobres* (here we are very poor).” Crescenciana, whose first language

Adrián Guevara became Laurence’s unofficial assistant helping to cart his cameras around and providing an ongoing interpretation of events that they witnessed together.



Carmen López, who we affectionately nicknamed the bean lady.

was Nahuatl tells us while shelling her fava beans, how she learned Spanish in her twenties to secure a job as a maid in Mexico City. “How would I be able to work there if I only spoke Mexicano?” (another name for Nahuatl), she asks. Adrián, who is Crescenciana’s grandson, tells us why dogs are man’s best friends, and introduces us to his own dog Rex. Fidel, Adrián’s father, who recently returned from several years of employment in Colorado, gives an account of how he was able to accumulate crucial funds through his United States job to improve his family’s life in Mexico, a task, he says would have been hard to do in Mexico where low wages do not permit much saving.

The narratives of “Echeleganas,” paired with Salzmans’s stunning photographs and videos*, allows viewers of all cultures to better understand the remarkable people of Sierra Norte de Puebla.

*Photographs with a video counterpart are indicated in thumbnail section with a video camera  VIDEO symbol.

If they are not to be found on the DVD which is included with Echeleganas book, they can be found at: www.echeleganas.com