



Laurence Salzmänn

Tlaxcalan Sketches

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Tlaxcala looms large in Mexican history, because Hernán Cortés stopped there in 1519 to enlist the support of the Tlaxcalans for his conquest of the Aztecs (Mexico) in Tenochtitlan, thus changing the history of Mexico forever.

Some 450 years later, I spent the summer of 1969 in the village of Santa Isabel Xiloxotla, Tlaxcala a village of some 1,000 people on the lower slopes of La Malinche, an inactive volcano. The villagers of Santa Isabel practiced a way of life similar to what Cortés had seen over 400 years before. People were wearing clothing woven from local plant fibers, harvesting the same crops: corn, squash and beans, washing their clothes in nearby streams, extracting the sap from the maguey cactus from which to make their pulque, and celebrating feast days of Gods of the past, now reincarnated as Catholic Saints.

Paved roads were soon to make the surrounding villages of the Malinche Mountain quite accessible from nearby larger cities like Puebla and Tlaxcala; television sets were introduced during the summer of 1969, allowing the villagers to see the first landing of men on the moon.

The peak of the Malinche mountain loomed over the village horizon and was often enshrouded with a cloud cover that threatened to bring rain but seldom did. Rain or lack of rain was a major concern for the villagers who saw their corn plants withering before they had a chance to grow taller and produce corn. Xiloxotla in Nahuatl, (Classical Nahuatl was

the language of the Aztec empire and used as a lingua franca in much of Mesoamerica from the 7th century AD until the Spanish conquest in the 16th century), means place of the flowering corn. Today there are fewer and fewer people left that still speak it.

An invitation from the University of Pittsburgh's department of Anthropology to participate in a summer field training program had brought me to Tlaxcala. Each one of our group was assigned to live in a small village. I was assigned along with Marion Oettinger to live in the village of Santa Isabel, Xiloxotla near to the city of Tlaxcala, also the capital of the state of Tlaxcala.

Each Saturday morning we convened at the Hotel Tlaxcala for a lecture given by Hugo De Nutini, a Chilean anthropologist who was a professor at the University of Pittsburgh. Professor Nutini, (whom we jokingly called Jugo de Naranja — orange juice), lectured to us about the structuralist theories of Claude Lévi-Strauss. What I most remember about these lectures was Nutini's young, beautiful Mexican wife who sat at his side enraptured by every word he spoke. I fantasized that one day if I were to become knowledgeable about Claude Lévi-Strauss I might also have a young, beautiful Mexican wife to listen to me.

In the afternoons we were given guidance on how to conduct anthropological field work. We were encouraged to create a mini-field project that we would be able to accomplish during the time we had to live in the village. I chose to create a photo ethnography of the village. To this end, I photographed the

villagers at their daily tasks, and hung out with the men of the town at a small store selling Dos E's beers which had replaced pulque, a milk-colored, alcoholic beverage made from the fermented sap of the maguey plant, as the preferred drink.

It was an idyllic summer. We slept on straw mats on the floor of the town's baroque church. The church dated to the 17th Century and had many beautiful hand-carved wooden saints; I cooked garbanzos (chick peas) that I sautéed with a little onion and hot peppers on a small kerosene stove; we woke up each day to the sounds of roosters crowing and the nearby mill grinding the corn mixture that would become the tortillas eaten in the village. Once a week an itinerant gypsy with a truck with a large speaker mounted on it would ply the dusty roads of the village announcing for all to hear the film that would be shown later that night.

I remember the night of the first moon landing. I had borrowed a villager's flimsy bike to ride the few miles to the larger town of Santa Ana, Chiapampan chased part of the way by various village dogs who were trying to bite my legs as I pedaled. In Santa Ana I got to see on television that crowning moment of human history when Neil Armstrong became the first earthling to walk on the moon.

Two summers later I met Ayşe Gürsan, a young Turkish anthropologist who had received a summer grant from the University of the Arts (then Philadelphia College of

Art) to undertake a study of Mexican crafts and traditional Markets of the Puebla-Tlaxcala and Oaxaca Valleys.

She needed a photographer and translator to help with her project. I volunteered for the job. We met up at the Hotel Tlaxcala in Tlaxcala and proceeded to the village of Santa Isabel, Xiloxotla. Ayşe was interested in studying the weekly market systems of the Puebla Oaxaca valleys and the local crafts that were sold at these weekly markets. The market systems dated back to pre-Colombian times.

Santa Isabel became our base of operation for the first part of our study. We spent many a happy hour taking long walks through the village and to nearby villages to visit local crafts people. On weekends we visited local markets where many of these crafts were offered for sale. Most have since been replaced by factory made goods imported from China. Unlike Hugo de Nutini I did not succeed to have a beautiful Mexican wife but married Ayşe Gürsan, the beautiful Turkish woman who I had accompanied to Tlaxcala in the summer of 1971.

N. B.

Tlaxcalan Sketches looks back at a work done over forty years ago. These photographs recall a memory of time no longer to be found.

Laurence Salzmann
August, 2012







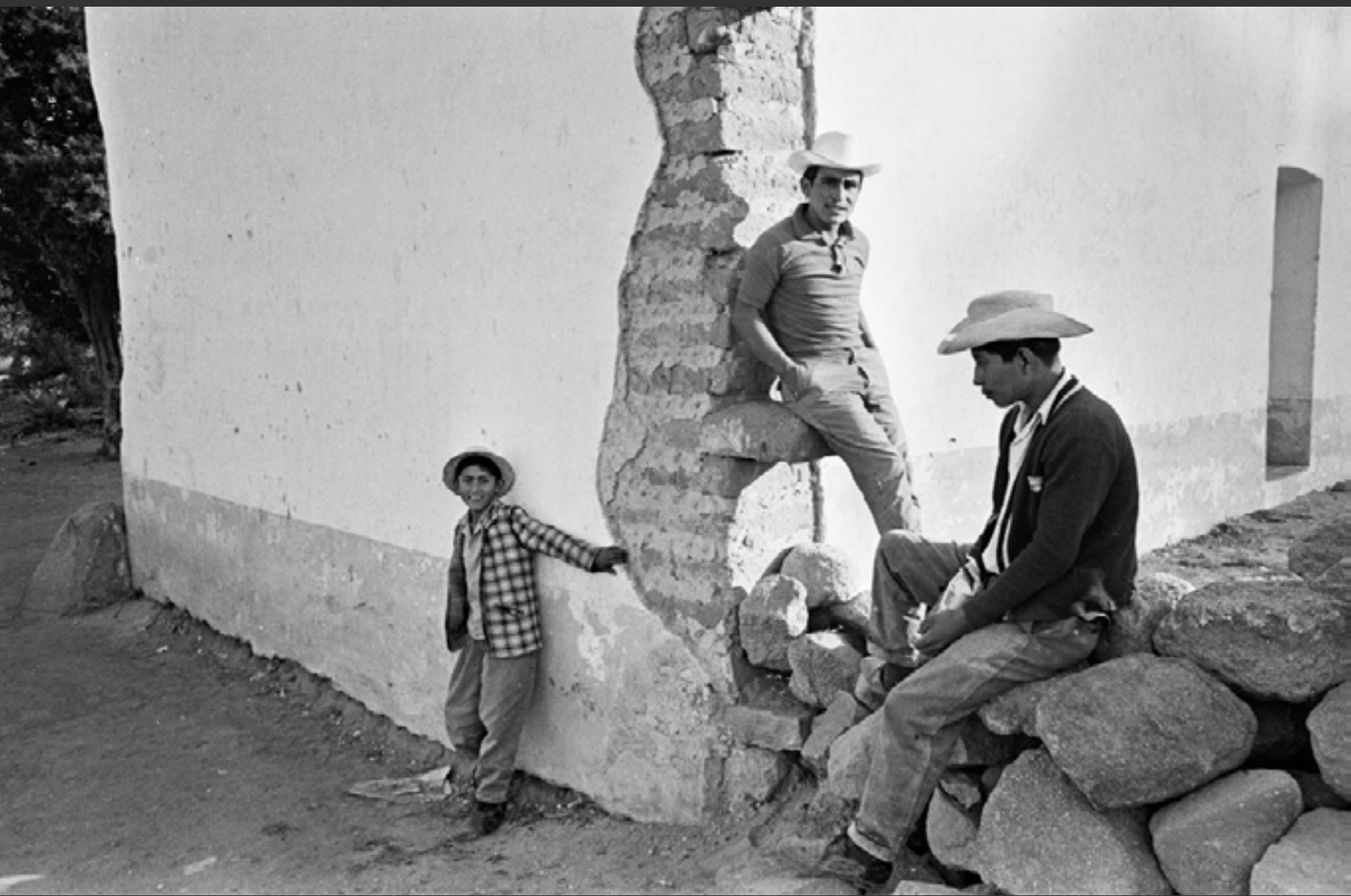














































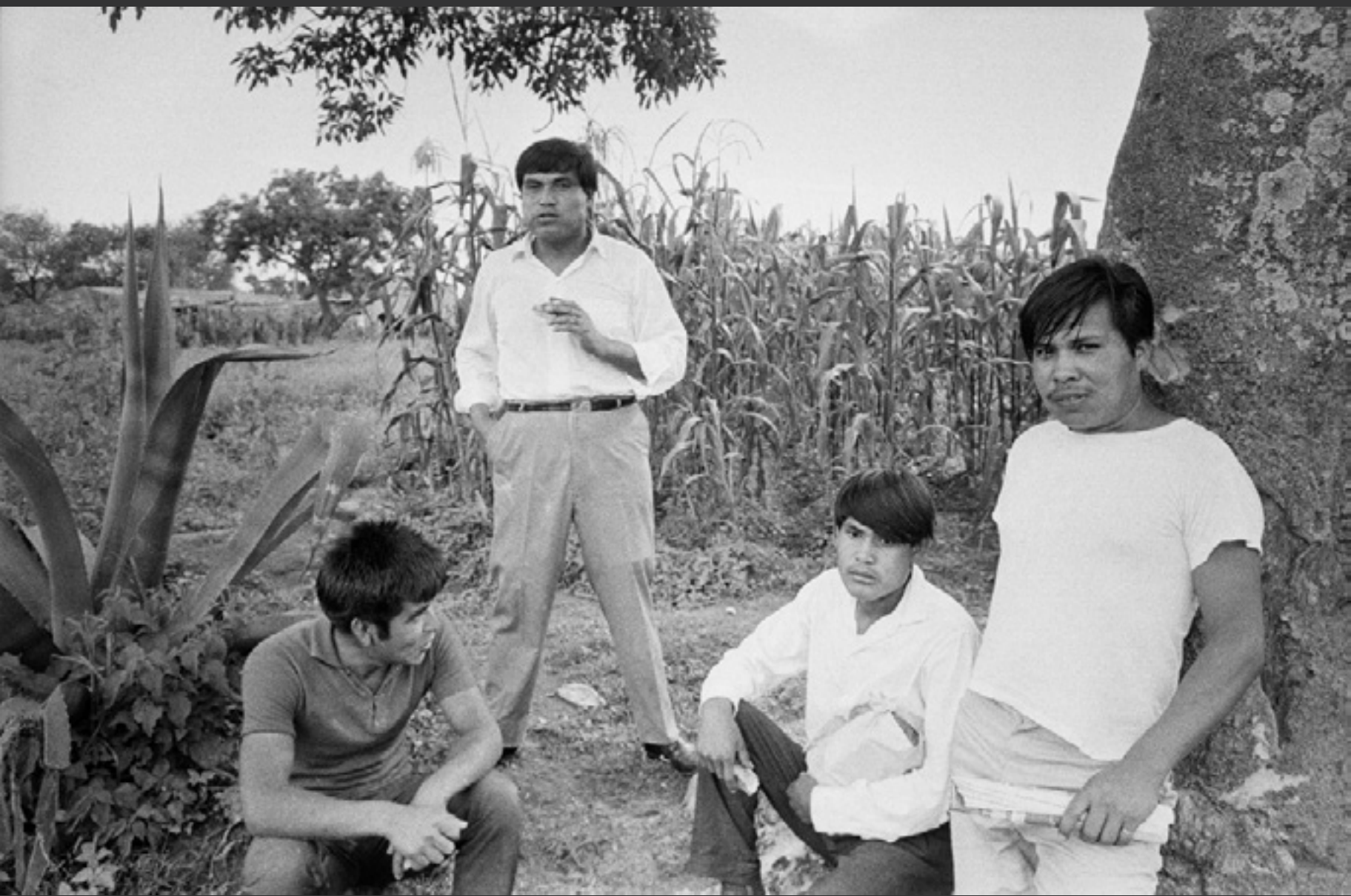


















Laurence Salzmänn, 1971



Ayşe Gürsan-Salzmänn, 1971

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