

DIANA ANHALT

GROWING ROOTS

Mexico City is magical, and I was eight years old. I had lived in New York from the day I was born, and I doubt anyone could have prepared me for a place so foreign with its palm trees and street corner musicians, its florid colors, and markets redolent of mangos and tortilla dough, its *burros* carting wood down the *Paseo de la Reforma*, the *charros* on horseback, lottery tickets, second-class buses, and car watchmen, the handshakes and cheek kisses, Spanish.

In any case, no one ever tried. My family fled the Bronx on November 15, 1950, the day I was supposed to be the apple blossom in our school pageant. I cried all the way to the airport and so did my four-year-old sister, though she didn't know why. "Why didn't you tell me? I had a singing part." My mother ignored me. My father plied me with chocolates. But once on the plane—I had never flown before—I stopped crying. The flight attendant pinned a Junior Stewardess pin to my chest and allowed me to follow her down the aisle handing out chewing gum. (Air travel was far more gracious in those days.) When a woman looked up from her knitting to ask, "Where are you going little girl?" I gave her the same answer my parents had given me. "I am going to California." "Well, dear, if you are going to California, you are on the wrong plane. This one is going to Mexico." I ran back to tell my parents, in case they didn't know.

Only years later would I question, and only years later would I realize that we had left the Bronx so precipitously because we had to. It was the height of the McCarthy era, and my father had run for public office on the American Labor Party (ALP) ticket. (By 1950, the ALP, a political pressure group, was accused of being a communist front and was under investigation by the FBI.) Mexico, I discovered, was one of only two countries that permitted the entry of U.S. citizens without passports—Canada was the other one—and the State Department routinely denied travel documents to the politically suspect.

When we first arrived, I was inconsolable. I missed my extended family, my friends, P.S. 106. "She'll be alright," I heard my mother tell my father. "Once you live long enough in any place, you grow roots." (Today I realize she was probably addressing her own apprehensions as well as mine.) But she was right. In the way of children, I adapted to the enormous changes taking place in my life within months.

No doubt adaptation had to have been far easier for me than it was for my parents. They were running scared. My mother instructed me: "If anyone asks what we're doing in Mexico, don't tell them." But even if I had wanted to, I couldn't, because no one had informed me. I was, they told me, to write "Zyke" in my notebooks rather than Zykofsky, our real surname. (They subsequently told me to change it back.) No doubt they feared the Mexican authorities, hand in hand with the American Embassy and the FBI, were keeping an eye on us along with the more than seventy families who had immigrated to Mexico in the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s for political reasons. My parents were right to be cautious. We were under surveillance. However, they probably felt more secure knowing that in Mexico, unlike Canada, the rules could be bent and often were.

In spite of their fears, they sent me to the American School, closely allied with the U.S. government, where many of my classmates were the sons and daughters of embassy personnel or employees of large American companies. Half my school day was in English, the other half in Spanish. At the beginning, I understood little in this new language, but I remember learning a song about *la gloria de America*. Upon returning home, I told my parents how nice it was for Mexico to write a song praising the country of my birth. They explained to me that "America" included an entire continent, and the word was not synonymous with United States. (To this day, I grow impatient with using the two terms interchangeably and believe it says a great deal about the United States and its sense of self-importance.)

By the time I left Mexico for Michigan State University (MSU) in 1959, I had learned to kiss my friends hello and goodbye, to roll my tortillas around just about anything, and my Rs around words like *ferrocarril*. I knew the Spanish lyrics to the *corridos* and love songs, addressed my elders as *Señor* and *Señora*, had grown accustomed to three-course lunches, to *salsa* with every meal, to reading, writing and speaking Spanish, to having servants. I had become thoroughly adapted to Mexico.

True, much of what I had learned about Mexico disturbed me. I