

STORY OF A SALAD

Ana Cervantes

My aunt Zita Montenegro said to me once with her gentle laugh, “Yes, it is true. We are all a big salad.” She was speaking of Mexicans, but I think it is true of all of us. My Aunt Zita was born in the central Mexican hill town of Dolores Hidalgo, the cradle of Mexican independence. At eighteen, she came to California to scout out the territory for the rest of the family. The daughter of one of my grandmother’s brothers, Zita was one of my pathways into the history of my Mexican family.

The other pathway, albeit only briefly, was my paternal grandfather, Miguel Cervantes Martínez (I use the matronymic as the second last name, as is the custom in Spanish-speaking countries, because this was his real name). He was born in 1895 in Silao, which lies about fifteen miles west-northwest of Guanajuato, Mexico, capital of the state with the same name. Some call Guanajuato the heart of Mexico. It is in the Bajío (lowland), which in spite of its name is a high (between 6 and 7 thousand feet) plateau suspended in the center of Mexico between the Sierra Madre Occidental and the Sierra Madre Oriental, the two great mountain ranges which run like twin spines down the sides of the country.

My grandfather was born into a family of humble origins: his father was a shoemaker from the Spanish province of Murcia who arrived in Mexico in the early 1890s. Aunt Zita says that my grandmother, María Eugenia Bravo y Galván, became enamored of Miguel Cervantes on the rebound from having been jilted by a local doctor. For Miguel to have contemplated matrimony with María Eugenia, also born in 1895 but into the family of a respected accountant in the state capital of Guanajuato, was to dream above his station, something rare even during Mexico’s early twentieth century revolutionary turbulence. Nevertheless, marry they did in Guanajuato in 1914, when they were both 19 years old. In the sepia wedding photo I have of them, they look solemn, innocent and heartbreakingly young. Their first child, my uncle Michael (Miguel Ángel), was the only one of their four children still living in 2002, when I first wrote this little essay. Born in July of 1915 in the city of Guanajuato, Michael passed on early in 2004.

How was it that his younger brother, my father, brown child of unmistakably Latino parents, was born in Olean, NY, a town of only white people, six years later? The short answer is that the family, like many families then, left Mexico and came to the United States. The longer -- and true -- story is that they had to leave because there was a price on my grandfather’s head. It was a time of almost incessant conflict in Mexico. This was the era of Francisco (*Pancho*) Villa, of gifted idealists and greedy power seekers, of the tremendous and often bloody ferment of a republic being born. The state of Guanajuato was the scene of a number of pivotal events in these conflicts, one of the most fought-over territories of the still young republic.

My grandfather, Miguel Cervantes Martínez, working hard to support his new family, accepted contracts to transport goods with a mule train which he ran with a few men who worked for him. At some point during this period, he was hauling grain for the *federales*, when he and his mule train had the bad luck to run into Pancho Villa. Villa’s men took the grain and the mules, and were getting ready to send my grandfather into the next world. The

men who worked for him interceded on his behalf, saying to Villa that my grandfather was not a bad man, that he had no politics and was just doing what any man would who had a young family to feed. They must have pled eloquently, or Villa was in a magnanimous mood that day. He let Miguel Cervantes go, but he made it plain that if he were to bump into Miguel again, it would most likely be the last encounter Miguel would have with any living soul. During 1919, the family crossed the river into the United States at Nuevo Laredo. My uncle Michael was barely five, and the second child, Estela, was eighteen months of age. My grandfather Miguel Cervantes had papers only for himself. He had to trust María Eugenia and the two children to the *coyotes*, the operators who get people across the border illegally. After various adventures, they wound up in that small town of Olean, New York, where the third child, Guillermo (William), and the last, my father, Roberto Martínez, were born.

In Nebraska in the spring of 1876, my maternal great-grandfather James Ezekiel Davey married Rosalie Hornung, a twenty-five year old woman from the Duchy of Saxe-Meiningen, Germany who had come to the United States at the age of twelve. James' own father had immigrated from Sligo County, Ireland around 1836.

According to the family history which my Nebraska cousin Harold Davey, tireless genealogist of this side of the family, has compiled, Rosalie's mother, Louisa Burckhardt Hornung, single-handedly kept her family alive after the death of her husband in 1877 and after the collapse of their homesteaders' sod house on the plains of Nebraska. She lived to the ripe old age of 80, leaving numerous great-grandchildren, a prosperous farm in Little Salt Precinct, Nebraska, and a reputation as a businesswoman of considerable acumen. Her daughter Rosalie and the Irishman's son James had two sons and five daughters, of whom the youngest was Anna Davey.

In 1915, a year after my Mexican grandparents were married in Guanajuato, Anna Davey married a man named James Leslie Teal, and early in 1916 she gave birth to my mother, Grace Lenore Teal, in Lincoln, Nebraska. I am sure that the indomitable blood of her great-grandmother Louisa ran strong in my mother's veins. Not only was she a gifted pianist but she also earned the Master's degree in English Literature and was Phi Beta Kappa from the University of Nebraska, a rare achievement for a young woman in the early 1940s. Like many young people with curiosity and a yen for adventure, she headed for Washington DC at the end of the Second World War. There she found a terrible housing shortage, but also a lot of interesting government jobs.

My father's childhood cannot have been idyllic, and indeed the few tales he told me were mostly not happy ones. There was a great deal of racism in that little upstate New York town, and it often expressed itself toward the unfamiliar family with a different skin color and very little English. (As of the 2000 census, cited in Wikipedia, "Latino or any race" was only still 1.24% of the population.) My grandfather held down three jobs: in the railroad repair depot, as janitor in the bank, and at any other odd job he could get. More than once, in the depths of those terrible cold winters, he did what many other poor people must have done: he went to the railroad tracks to pick up coal that had fallen from the passing trains, in order to feed the stove in the house. Once he was found there and taken to the local lockup.

Someone from the railroad had to come and vouch for him before he could be released. The story does not tell if they let him keep the coal.

As always, there were people who acted on their nobler instincts. These were the only ones my grandfather, a man of extraordinarily sweet temperament, talked about when he told me this story. The president of the bank where Miguel Cervantes worked was a good man. He helped my grandparents become citizens, and his wife was kind to my grandmother.

Somehow, through all of this, the family Cervantes seems almost always to have managed to keep a piano in the house. That Mexican accountant and maternal great-grandfather of mine, although a periodic binge drinker according to Aunt Zita and others, was a kindly and good father who saw to it that his daughters were educated. Thus my grandmother María Eugenia had some musical training and more than a little talent. She played the piano and even composed songs. My father grew up sometimes hungry for food, but with a great love of music. He enlisted in the military around 1943, the last of the four children to leave that precarious nest. During those war years, Miguel Cervantes Martínez and María Eugenia Bravo de Cervantes moved to New York City because there was more work there. It was during this time that my grandfather worked for a period of time in the Steinway piano factory in Astoria, Queens. Steinway made gliders for the United States military during the war, as they had special expertise in forming wood into these lightweight, maneuverable aircraft.

My father's unit was preparing to ship out to the Pacific when the war ended. Instead of going to war he headed to Washington, DC to go to college on the GI Bill. That was where Robert Martínez Cervantes and Grace Lenore Teal met and married and my younger sister Madolin and I were born and raised. When I was about twelve, my mother bought herself a Steinway grand piano, no doubt built in that same factory in Queens. That piano now graces me with its presence in my life.

I grew up disconnected from both my mother's Nebraska background and my father's Mexican one. My father shared with many other first-generation immigrants a ferocious desire to assimilate, to put definitively behind him the past which his parents represented. In his case, this included separating almost completely from his family as well as from his mother tongue. My mother, who it seems had the stable and comfortable childhood my father lacked, nevertheless felt an overwhelming desire to leave behind the places from whence she came, and thus to a great extent she too cut herself off from her family.

My father, Roberto Martínez Cervantes, died in 1983 without ever having set foot in Mexico, but not before he started speaking Spanish again, and not before he reconnected with his brother and with his father.

It was not until some time later that my own salad started to mix itself and the different flavors to emerge. In 1997, my sister died suddenly. Later that terrible year, I came to the city of Guanajuato for the first time and found my cousins in San Luis de la Paz, some three hours' bus ride away. In late September of 1998, my mother Grace Lenore Teal passed on. Six months later, in March of 1999, I was awarded a Fulbright-García Robles Senior Scholar grant to come to Mexico and develop a repertoire of contemporary Mexican concert music for

subsequent performance in the United States. A scant two weeks before I left for that Fulbright year, I received an e-mail message from my Cousin Harold, whom I'd never known. Harold had found me through the Internet in the course of his genealogical research. With him, I am part of yet another family, the Nebraskan and Mexican parts of me finding a connection.

The salad continues to work itself together, and I continue to savor it, profoundly grateful for its unexpected sweetness and bitterness, its many flavors and connections.

This memoir -what do I call it?!- was first published in the *Borough Bulletin* of Roosevelt, New Jersey (USA), still one of my heart-places. It appeared in March of 2011 in the on-line publication *Somos Primos*.