

Enslaved Deaf Mexicans Tell of Life in City Shadows

By [Mirta Ojito](#)

July 17, 1998

The first time he was handed a backpack full of pencils and ordered to sell them for \$1 each in the subways of New York, Jesus Barraza understood he had been lied to.

Mr. Barraza, deaf and illiterate, had come to the United States in 1994, enticed by tales of riches from a woman he had known since childhood in Mazatlan, a city in western Mexico. The woman, Rosa Maria Beltran-Sanchez, handed him a fake passport and told him that in New York he would find work as an electrician.

Instead, he became a virtual slave of bosses who smuggled dozens of deaf Mexicans into the United States, putting them to work selling trinkets in the subways and airports of New York, Chicago, Boston and other cities.

Their story became public a year ago this Sunday when three men and a woman walked into a police station in Jackson Heights, Queens and, using signs and written messages, revealed a tale of abuse and enslavement that shocked the city and attracted national attention.

Since then, they have been kept by the Immigration and Naturalization Service in a motel in Astoria, Queens, the details of their ordeal revealed only in the formalities of criminal prosecutions. Now, after 18 of their bosses have pleaded guilty and have been sentenced or deported to Mexico, the Mexican workers have begun to tell their stories.

In interviews conducted yesterday with the help of sign-language interpreters, several of the immigrants described living in crowded houses, watched by abusive, greedy bosses, who punished them if they did not make enough money.

Mr. Barraza said he turned over as much as \$200 to his bosses when he returned from a 12-hour day in the subways but was never given money to buy milk or pampers for his 2-year-old son. Ms. Beltran-Sanchez, who was the boss in the house where he lived, gave him one diaper a day for his child and allowed him to borrow milk from her own children, but only if he pleaded.

Otherwise, Mr. Barraza would go to the corner bodega to buy diapers and baby food on credit, he said. He paid off his tab with the tips he accumulated from subway riders who gave him more than the \$1 price of the trinkets. He said he felt the payment for the pencils belonged to his bosses, who were supposedly saving it for him and the others to help their relatives in Mexico.

"I would never steal from anyone," he said. "It was very obvious that the money was not mine to keep."

Barraza, tall and muscular, said that when he dared to ask for food, he was punched and slapped on the head by Ms. Beltran-Sanchez and once even threatened with a knife.

He said he put up with the long, miserable hours in the subway cars, the lies and beatings because he had nowhere to run to and he feared deportation.

"I thought about leaving a couple of times," he said yesterday through an interpreter. "But where was I going to go? I didn't know anyone."

And so, he stayed for 41 months.

A year later, the images haunt him. He said he saw one of the bosses beat another immigrant repeatedly, until his boyish face had become a maze of a scars. He slept with his wife and son on the top of a bunk bed and many nights all three went to bed hungry. Often, too depressed and tired to work, he walked the streets of Queens waiting for nightfall. On those nights, when he returned and his bosses realized he had not made any money, he was denied food.

Ricardo Gonzalez, 26, lived in another house run by a different set of bosses, who had their own ideas about punishment. When Mr. Gonzalez did not sell enough trinkets, he was sent into a room by himself and forced to assemble thousands of keychains to be sold the next day.

But, he said, there were more horrific moments.

"The worst," he said, "is when I saw them beat the children."

Mr. Gonzalez said the bosses, who were deaf themselves, often slapped crying infants and forced spoonfuls of food into the mouths of finicky toddlers who did not want to eat.

He said he often thought of going to the police but feared that his bosses and their friends, here and in Mexico, would eventually find out and have him killed.

"I'm very happy that the police came when they did," he said yesterday. "I never thought they would come. To this day, I don't know who did it. It may have been one of us, or it may have been a neighbor. I have no idea who did it, but I'm thankful they did it."

In fact, the people who went to the police were two workers, accompanied by an elderly couple who were not connected to the group in Queens.

One of the workers who alerted the police said in an interview yesterday that he decided to seek help because his bosses had started to abuse him mentally as well as physically. He agreed to tell his story for the first time on the condition that his name not be used.

He said that last year, after more than three years of hard work, he thought he deserved a vacation and his bosses had promised him one. He was told he would be going to Florida in July with eight co-workers.

But when the time came to pack, his bosses told him that they had changed their minds and he would not be going. That made him angry enough to walk into a police station house that same night and alert the police to what was going on.

"They broke their promise to me," he said, anger still reflected in his desperate and quick signing. "They made me work hard for months, promising that we would all enjoy a vacation and then they shut me out of it."

When he decided to go to the police, he told a fellow worker. Together, they went to Newark International Airport where they sought out an elderly, deaf woman from New Jersey, whom they had met while working at the airport. The woman, a peddler born in the United States, was sympathetic to their plight and told the men they should not have to turn over the profits to their bosses.

She and her husband accompanied them to the houses in Queens where they lived, and, seeing the crowded conditions, agreed to go with them to the police. The worker said yesterday that he never knew the name of the couple, referring to the woman only by what he called "her deaf name" -- a sign across the left cheek with his left pinky.

The worker said he came to the United States thinking that he would lead a better life. He had lost his job as a fisherman in Mexico and, following the advice of friends, took the fake passport they offered and crossed into the United States. He said the border patrol officer never asked to see his documents, though.

A few days later, accompanied by three of the bosses who had recruited him, he arrived in New York. Within days, he was taken to the subway, handed a bag of trinkets and told to begin selling. "I was deeply humiliated," he said. "I thought peddling trinkets was like begging. That's not what I came here for."

The man and 34 other workers, who still remain in the motel, have asked for permission to stay in the country; 14 of their fellow workers voluntarily returned to Mexico earlier this week. Immigration officials have agreed to sponsor the workers still here for a special visa granted to witnesses who contribute to the prosecution of criminal cases. Today, they will receive work permits and will soon move to housing provided by the city.

Mr. Barraza has already decided what kind of work he would like to do. He wants to work at a factory putting together television sets or in a hospital, waxing the floors.

"Operating that big machine, you know," he said with a grin. "I think I'd like that."