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celerate when the island can handle it least—during economic downturns in the United States, which unfailingly ripple through the Puerto Rican economy.

In effect, the tranquility of the Commonwealth is premised on massive *out*-migration; that premise has been overtaken by events. There is a growing belief among politicians and intellectuals in Puerto Rico today that yesterday's "safety valve" may be tomorrow's time bomb.



## ANGEL AND AUREA

*by Pedro A. Rivera*

Once, after World War II, policymakers and economists saw the massive Puerto Rican migration to the United States as a partial and temporary solution to the island's poverty and unemployment (as well as a cheap source of labor in the fields and factories of the U.S. mainland). The migrants, too, often saw their sojourn as temporary, hoping to return someday to Puerto Rico and buy a house and a small plot of land, a *parcela*.

For many of the migrants, this hope foundered on reality. Instead, they found themselves in a recurring cycle of migration and return. Yet people like Angel and Aurea Ortíz, despite the odds, and despite their own disappointments, are confident they can succeed where tens of thousands have failed.

Angel, 37, and Aurea, 31, live in Hoboken, New Jersey, across the Hudson River from Manhattan. Hoboken is a city of 45,000, an old, ailing garment center whose Puerto Rican population (now more than 10,000) has doubled in the last decade, even as its total population has declined. Angel and Aurea pay \$100 (plus utilities) per month for a four-room apartment in a community comprising Italians, Irish, blacks, and Puerto Ricans like themselves. It is a solid, working-class neighborhood. The Ortíz children—Sandra, 15; Elsie, 13; Angel, 11; and David, 8—all attend local public schools.

Angel and Aurea are both garment workers, he a skilled coat

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presser with Rosemary Fashions in Hoboken, she a sewer for Bella Rosa in the same town. Neither has a high-school diploma, though they believe in the importance of a high-school education (at least) for their children. Together, they make about \$450 a week before taxes. They have a 1972 Chevrolet Impala, a black-and-white television set, and a savings account.

Migration has shaped the lives of their parents and relatives. Angel's father, José Irene, who now lives on Social Security in his hometown of Guayama, came to the United States a dozen times beginning in the late 1940s. Always leaving his wife, Alejandrina, behind, he would take seasonal work on New Jersey truck farms, save his pay, then fly home. His three sons, Miguel, Pablo, and Angel (the youngest), eventually followed him to the United States.

### Washing Dishes

Angel's first job after he arrived in 1959 was as a \$1.15-an-hour dishwasher in Chicopee, Massachusetts. He moved to New Jersey in 1963 to aid his sister-in-law after his brother Miguel suddenly died of appendicitis. He entered the garment trade as an apprentice that year. (Brother Pablo, 39, also a Hoboken garment worker, is married and has three children.)

Aurea's parents, Tomás and Vincenta Rivera, came to the United States from Mayaguez in 1949 when Aurea was 10 months old, settling in the Bronx. Both found work at the All-right Belt Company in Manhattan and, on the side, ran a small *bodega*, or grocery store. The Riveras still live in New York, stymied in their attempts to return permanently to Puerto Rico, a dream they have cherished ever since they arrived.\* Aurea dropped out of school to work in a coat factory when she was 15, moving in with her sister, Gladys, who lived in Hoboken. She met Angel on the job, and they were married in 1965.

Like their parents, Angel and Aurea have tried often to return to Puerto Rico. By Puerto Rican standards, they have done well here, but, at the same time, there remains a strong emotional tie to the island and its culture. The Ortízes have friends and family there. Says Angel: "I want my children to be brought up in Puerto Rico so that they can know who they are and where

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\*The Riveras visit Puerto Rico frequently, but the longest they have managed to stay is nine months. They bought a *parcela* in Mayaguez in 1964, built a house there in 1967, and in 1976 opened a grocery store with a view to settling in Puerto Rico for good. The business failed. Says Aurea: "My father thought that he could run his *bodega* like he did in New York, where he used to sell on credit, and people paid him back. In Puerto Rico, he also sold on credit, but, when people picked up their food stamps, they ran to the supermarket to do their shopping and forgot about their debts."

*Puerto Rican migrants get their first glimpse of New York. During the 1940s, islanders already established in the city called the newcomers "Marine Tigers" after one of the ships that made the run between San Juan and New York.*



Drawing by Manuel Otero. Reprinted by permission of the Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, City University of New York.

they come from." Angel and Aurea have made sure that their children learned Spanish—not as typical a parental practice as is commonly believed—and Spanish is spoken at home. (My interviews, for example, were conducted in Spanish.)

Angel also believes that the everyday environment for working-class Puerto Ricans in the United States is deteriorating. "To give you an example," he says, "when I came to Hoboken in 1963, there weren't as many abandoned buildings. Now it is a total disaster. It has left me stunned." And he harbors deep resentment against the small elite of Puerto Ricans who have "made it," taking white-collar jobs in the state and local bureaucracy and social welfare agencies. Such people, he charges, "are living off our problems."

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The Ortíz family moved to Puerto Rico for the first time in 1972 when, enticed by their friends' and relatives' description of a forthcoming economic boom on the island, they sold most of their possessions, paid out \$1,500 for six round-trip airplane tickets, and joined Angel's father in Guayama. The children were enrolled in local public schools. Yet, while the boom was real—for investors and manufacturers, anyway—the Ortízes' expectations proved too high. Though jobs were available, what the Ortízes regarded as *good* jobs were scarce; neither Angel nor Aurea could find any work comparable, in pay or status, to what they had in the States. They lived off their savings and unemployment compensation, and in 1974, when funds ran low, returned to the United States—and to their old jobs.\*

### Back and Forth

Determined to try again, they went back to Guayama in 1975. "We started to build a house with my cousin's help," recalls Angel. "Even Aurea and the kids were mixing cement. It was a united family effort. From Monday through Sunday, working like horses, but for a cause." Family support is one thing the Ortízes can count on in Puerto Rico.

But the job situation had not improved. Aurea went to work for a pantyhose factory in nearby Salinas, where many of her coworkers were migrants from the Dominican Republic. ("Puerto Rico is to them what the United States is to us," she observes.) She earned \$2.18 an hour, about two-thirds what she earned in the United States.

Angel commuted to a Starkist fish-canning plant in Ponce, 45 minutes away by car. A 10-year veteran of the International Ladies Garment Worker's Union in the United States, he was not prepared for sudden immersion in Puerto Rican factory life, where wages are lower and union organizing is still difficult. "They told me I couldn't talk about unionization there, and I said 'What do you mean . . .?' I worked there for about two weeks. There was a lack of trust among everybody. The Puerto Rican who came from the States was looked at with suspicion."

Angel then bought a concession and sold hot dogs and beef sandwiches outside factory gates in Guayama. With a combined pretax income of \$250 a week the Ortízes could barely make

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\*The Ortízes' jobs in Hoboken serve as a kind of safety net. Because the work is seasonal, Angel and Aurea are frequently laid off for long periods, during which both collect unemployment benefits. In the interval, the family can try its luck in Puerto Rico. If things do not work out, Angel and Aurea come back to their jobs when the garment business picks up again—with no loss in seniority or pay.

ends meet. There was no money for even the occasional luxury. In 1977, they boarded up their house and returned to the United States, resuming work at their respective factories.

The next time they go back, Angel wants to open an auto-parts shop, and he plans to attend night school in Puerto Rico to learn the business. The previous trips have taught him much, he believes: the importance of planning, certainly, and also that factory jobs in Puerto Rico are not worth seeking. "That would be the greatest of mistakes," says Angel, "to go to Puerto Rico and get a factory job."

Like many Puerto Rican working-class families in the United States, the Ortízes face a cruel dilemma. They recognize that urban conditions for many Puerto Ricans on the mainland are worsening, yet they are obliged to stay in the United States until they can somehow establish a beachhead in Puerto Rico. They yearn for the cultural familiarity of life on the island, even as that culture (they feel) is fast disappearing. "Those of us who go back and forth," says Angel, "are always in a trauma."

Will the Ortízes succeed? Both Angel and Aurea believe political independence for Puerto Rico would make their task easier and at the same time free thousands of Puerto Ricans from the need to come to the United States in the first place. Yet migration has become a way of life for millions of workers in Latin American countries that have already achieved formal political independence. Independence for Puerto Rico is conceivably *part* of a solution; but the Ortíz family, like its counterparts elsewhere, must look at a bigger picture.

The prime spurs to migration throughout the hemisphere have been the changes, for good or ill, wrought by capital: industrialization, urbanization, and the mutation of age-old agricultural patterns. These changes, and the rising expectations they tend to foster, are tearing apart the traditional economic and social structures of countries as diverse as Mexico, the Dominican Republic, and Ecuador. Displaced in one country, Latin American workers are absorbed by another—notably, the United States, where they fill jobs that U.S. workers aren't willing to take.

In this situation, it is as difficult for migrants to stay home as it is for government officials to keep them there—and as it is for U.S. factories and farms to do without them.

