Guatemalan Shoeshine Boy

Jeffrey C. Jacob

The shoeshine boy is a permanent, though far from motionless, part of the landscape of Latin America's city centers. Barefoot, in tattered clothing, and with dirty faces and hands, Latin America's shoeshine boys crowd parks and squares, prowl up and down city streets, and pass in and out of office buildings and stores in search of customers for their services. They are everywhere; even the most casual tourist finds it difficult to avoid them. Tagging after the obvious North American, they ask, in heavy Spanish accents, "Shoeshine, mister? Shoeshine, mister?"

For many of us North Americans, accustomed as we are to the apparent gentleness of a protected and protracted childhood, the very presence of young, very poor, and unsupervised children working on city streets provokes a whole series of emotions and questions: Who are these children? Where do they live? What kind of homes do they come from? How much money do they make, and how do they spend it? And what do they do after they finish shining shoes?

From my very first visit to Latin America over ten years ago I have wanted to know the answers to these questions about the Latin American shoeshine boys, and other working children, of one of Guatemala City's poorest communities. I believe that the lives of the Latin American shoeshine boys hold intrinsic interest, but their lives also have a meaning that transcends mere interest. The precise nature of this meaning, however, is still something I have not yet clearly defined. But after eighteen months of following shoeshine boys on the Guatemala City streets, I can no longer accept the absolute superiority of a middle-class childhood, and I have become skeptical of the all too easy assumptions of the inevitably negative psychological consequences of poverty. Not that I wish to romanticize the lives of these children. They are still very poor, even if they define their poverty in much different terms than we would.

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In approaching my study of Guatemala City shoeshine boys I had a basic choice to make in the selection of my subjects. I could either observe the shoeshine boys as I found them on the streets or choose a community and its children to study. For the sake of a more representative sample, I chose the community approach, although I'm sure this choice ruled out my coming across much of the bizarre in street life—I found no preadolescent pimps, for example. Nevertheless, I did become a member of a community—if only a marginal member—and I am confident that the report of my experience in Guatemala does reflect fairly the lives of many poor urban children.

Santa Maria, where "my" shoeshine boys live, is a community of approximately 170 adobe and clapboard homes chiseled into and hugging the bottom of a ravine-side above a river bottom less than a mile from downtown Guatemala City. Each morning ten to twelve shoeshine boys in groups of two or three climb up the steep ravine-side from Santa Maria to begin, as they say, "getting down on the skins" (in Spanish, *bajar cueros*, literally "to get down on leather").

One of the Santa Maria shoeshine boys is Benito Paz. While Benito's family background and home life are different from most of the other Santa Maria children, his work experience is in a general way representative of the daily routine of the other Santa Maria shoeshine boys. Most mornings just before nine o'clock the ten-year-old Benito makes the long walk up the ravine-side from Santa Maria and passes on to the city center to begin his daily rounds of office buildings, stores, and homes in search of clients willing to pay the five cents he asks for a shoeshine. In the late afternoon, after a hot lunch of soup and tortillas at a local market, Benito returns home. Before eating a supper of beans and tortillas, he watches television and buys a few pennies worth of candy at one of Santa Maria's small grocery stores. Occasionally he plays marbles with his friends. At eight o'clock he goes to bed.

Benito lives in a two-room adobe and frame house with his grandfather, aunt and uncle, and seven cousins. He was raised by his grandfather. Just after his birth in a small village on Guatemala's south coast his father deserted his mother. When Benito was two years old his mother left him with her widowed father and went to Guatemala City to look for work. For the first nine years of his life Benito lived in the rural village of his birth. As soon as he was able he began to work in his grandfather's *milpa* (cornfield). But when the grandfather's health failed, the old man gave up his small farm to one of his sons, and he and Benito went to Santa Maria to live with a daughter (not Benito's mother), her husband, and their children.

One of Benito's cousins, Felipe, is a shoeshine boy. It was Felipe who taught Benito how to shine shoes. The reasons for Benito's becoming a shoeshine boy were immediate and uncomplicated. His grandfather was unable to work and his uncle was neither disposed nor about to support the two new additions to his family. So, with the help of Felipe, Benito bought a used shoeshine box, brushes, and polish for fifty cents, on credit, and served a brief ten-day apprenticeship under his cousin.

To be a successful shoeshine boy one needs a measure of aggressiveness. Benito is a shy boy. The first several weeks of shining shoes on his own were a financial disaster. Having no regular customers and being too timid to approach potential clients, he aimlessly walked the streets, rarely bringing his grandfather more than five or ten cents a day. In addition to his shyness, Benito had another problem that stood in his way of becoming a successful shoeshine boy. He preferred playing marbles with his friends in Santa Maria to forcing himself on reluctant customers in the center of the city. His behavior angered his grandfather and exasperated his aunt. As a reaction to his incompetence and apparent indolence they made frequent and pointed reference—to Benito as well as to his family and friends—to the comparative virtues of his cousin Felipe: Felipe did not play marbles, nor did he watch television; he worked a full day and gave all his money to his mother.

But slowly Benito began to change. His cherubic countenance and his natural self-effacement gradually won over several regular clients. The modest initial successes gave him the confidence to overcome partially his self-consciousness, and within six months Benito was earning almost seventy-five cents a day. Consequently, he began to abandon some of the carefree inclinations of childhood. He spent more time shining shoes and less time playing marbles.

Money had a great deal to do with Benito's transformation. For the first time in his life he was handling and spending money. He buys his own lunch and regularly replenishes his shoeshine supplies. Money also means that Benito can buy inexpensive street candy almost at will and go to an occasional Sunday movie. These are certainly small pleasures, but they are important to a ten-year-old boy from a remote rural village who before coming to Guatemala City had neither money nor interesting places to spend it.

There is, however, a technical limitation to Benito's spending habits. He agreed to give all his earnings except lunch and polish money to his grandfather. But he has not kept the agreement. He gives his grandfather from thirty to fifty cents a day and keeps ten to twenty cents for his own use. Benito knows that if he were to give everything to his grandfather, there would be no money for the candy he likes. The grandfather is unaware of Benito's small-scale perfidy. With resignation as well as some gratitude, he accepts the money his grandchild does bring him.

Poor and dependent upon his daughter and grandson, Benito's grandfather is not happy in Guatemala City. Every few months he and Benito return to their home village to help plant, weed, and harvest the corn in his old *milpa*. Benito goes to help in the *milpa* with little complaint, although his absence does hurt his shoeshine business. While he is gone other shoeshine boys capture some of his regular clients.

A serious loss of customers took place during Benito's last stay in the countryside. After a great deal of effort Benito had finally cajoled a doctor's receptionist into granting him permission to shine shoes in the doctor's waiting room. While he spent no more than an hour each day in the waiting room, Benito made more than half of his money there. But while he was gone, Diego, an older and considerably larger boy, started to work in the doctor's office. When Benito returned, he found he had lost a substantial source of his daily income. There was nothing he could do. Diego was bigger than he, and, in any event, the circumstances of this change in clients was not considered a serious injustice by the Santa Maria shoeshine boys. Still, Benito enjoys going back to the small village where he was born and spent most of his life. "But," he says, "I like the city better. You can earn money in the city."

One of the ways in which Benito's experience is most representative of how his fellow shoeshine boys do their work is the solitary nature of his task. Benito and the other shoeshine boys work alone, not in groups. Shining shoes in Guatemala City is a one-boy job. It is a series of relationships between one customer or client and one shoeshine boy. The Santa Maria boys do not share clients; they rarely look on while a friend shines a customer's shoes. The boys are involved in a constant, individual struggle to find, cultivate, and keep clients.

The patron-client relationship (with the shoeshine boy as client from the perspective of this relationship) is the fundamental fact of shoeshine boy life. There are thousands of shoeshine boys on the Guatemala City streets, and there are only so many shoes in the city—in a very real sense there are more boys than shoes. In the face of ever increasing competition and a slowly expanding market the Guatemala shoeshine boys seek a sense of security in the faithful patron, the person who can regularly be counted on to have a pair or two of shoes to shine and who will always reject the proffered services of other boys.

In their search for clients and in competition with

shoeshine boys from other poor communities the Santa Maria boys have divided their side of the city into an intricate patchwork of known territory. Rather than divide the city on the basis of a neighborhood or even a street, the shoeshine boys separate their territory by client. The house, the business, and the office are the units of competition. And where there is more than one potential customer, the same office or home may entertain more than one shoeshine boy.

as much money going from house to house as they earn in the office buildings. It is surprising, though, how many pairs of shoes some households have. Including the shoes of servants along with those of the other members of a household, a number of the Santa Maria boys' customers get together fifteen to twenty pairs of shoes once a week for their particular boys.

But however profitable individual homes and offices may be, the most lucrative sources of income are

Benito and his grandfather

Another "Santa Maria boy"
(photos: Jeffrey Jacob)

Large office buildings are the Santa Maria boys' favorite targets. Some of the boys have several clients in the same office or building and are able to shine several pairs of shoes in a short period of time and with a minimum of effort. The offices and businesses the boys frequent include doctors, lawyers, and engineers' offices as well as beauty salons, travel agencies, and magazine shops. Among the Santa Maria boys' clients are Guatemala's wealthy and famous, including one of the country's presidential candidates. For these clients, both the important and the obscure, the boys not only shine shoes but also run a variety of errands. The most common errand is money-changing. Almost every day the Santa Maria boys run to nearby stationery stores and restaurants to change five-, ten-, and twenty-dollar bills, always faithfully returning the change to their clients. They are never paid for these errands but count their efforts as an investment of good will toward their regular customers.

There are not enough offices to keep the boys busy all day, so they end up spending a good share of their time going from home to home in the middle- to upper-income residential neighborhoods close to Santa Maria. They have to work longer and harder to make large-scale complexes like hospitals, airports, and university faculties. Access, however, to these captive clienteles is no easy matter. Rather than face an invasion of hordes of shoeshine boys, the managers of these large-scale complexes restrict entrance to a few regular and easily controlled boys. The boys fortunate enough to work in an airport or university faculty can often make considerably more money in a day than can their parents. Two of the Santa Maria boys have been granted shoeshining privileges at the downtown Faculty of Medicine of the University of San Carlos (the Guatemalan national university), and each of them makes as much or more than his parents' $25 per month.

The Guatemala City shoeshine boys, then, have divided the city into a network of clients and customers. But the question naturally arises as to how well this system works. Do the boys respect each other's clients? And just how do they regulate competition?

The boys subscribe to the simple principle that one should never try to solicit business from another's active clientele. Most of the boys adhere closely to the rule of nonintervention—they know its observance pro-

tects their own interests. When the rule is broken, the punishment and how it is administered depend on the size of the antagonists. If the rule-breaker is smaller than the complainant, the larger boy punches tthe smaller one in the nose, and that is the end of the affair. Benito, for example, told one of Eduardo's regular customers that Eduardo was sick and could not leave home, and had asked him to shine the client's shoes. Eduardo's client agreed. The next day an enraged Eduardo, at least two sizes larger than Benito, marched over to Benito's house, wrestled him to the ground, and left him with a bloody nose. The arrangements, not the results, differ slightly if the interloper is larger than his wronged competitor. If the larger boy insists on tampering with the smaller boy's clients, one of the larger shoeshine boys, two or more smaller ones, or a combination of sizes threaten the wrongdoer and, if necessary, administer the same kind of treatment Eduardo gave Benito. Such punishment, along with the clients' cooperation and a sense of fair play and self-interest, is sufficient to insure that the Santa Maria boys need not worry about working under any long-term inequity.

Whether they work in large-scale complexes, office buildings, or homes, the Santa Maria boys prefer to work inside, off the streets. These boys' work habits would seem to be in marked contrast to the aggressive shoeshine boys the tourist meets in city squares and parks, as well as on the street. And it is true that in Guatemala City, and other Latin American cities, there are two basic approaches to shining shoes: the well-developed clientele and the chance customer. Nevertheless, the boys in the parks and squares who rely primarily on the chance shine do have regular customers, and the Santa Maria boys do make money from the occasional street customer. The point here, though, is that the stereotype of the gregarious shoeshine boy accosting pedestrians left and right in the city streets fails to cover all Latin American shoeshine boys. The majority of Latin American shoeshine boys, I would think, work much as do the Santa Maria boys.

In contrasting the Santa Maria boys with their counterparts in the parks and squares, one more important detail ought to be mentioned. The boys who work in the public squares and parks shine shoes in competition with men. There are as many or more adult males shining shoes in the central parks and squares as there are adolescent and preadolescent boys. In fact, not only shoeshine boys but all children who work on the Latin American city streets compete with adults for the few dollars their customers and clients pay them. There are, however, relatively few men who shine shoes from house to house or in office buildings in the Santa Maria boys' section of the city.

The reason the Santa Maria boys shine shoes is, of course, to earn money. But shining shoes is more search than shine. The boys average about three shines an hour, and since it takes them no more than five minutes to finish a pair of shoes, they spend forty-five minutes out of each hour looking for customers and passing from client to client. The same clients are visited almost daily, but most of them have their boys shine shoes once or twice a week. In their search for shoeshines the Santa Maria boys work seven to eight hours a day, an average of five days a week. There are naturally variations in these work habits. Some of the boys spend only a few hours every other day or so shining shoes, and there are a few Santa Maria boys who work ten hours a day, seven days a week.

Five cents is the going rate for a shoeshine in Guatemala City. Since the Santa Maria boys average three shines an hour, they, as a group, earn approximately fifteen cents an hour and a dollar a day. Again there is variation; some of the boys earn only fifty cents a day and others over a dollar and a half. Tips count for only a very small percentage of the boys' earnings. Guatemalans evidently think five cents is a fair remuneration for a shoeshine, and/or they feel that being a regular customer in itself is all the extra incentive the boys need.

Regardless, though, of how much the shoeshine boys earn, they are expected to give all the money they make to their parents—that is the very reason for their parents allowing them to shine shoes. The expectation that children give their earnings to their parents is a community norm, but, as in the case of Benito's keeping back part of his shoeshine money from his grandfather, there is often a considerable distance between the ideal and the real.

None of the boys actually gives all his money to his parents. There is a simple, nonconspiratorial reason: All the boys must use part of the money they earn to replenish their supplies (mostly polish and dye, accounting for about 10 per cent of their gross incomes). And while they work, they eat. Besides eating a lunch of hot soup and tortillas or beans and tortillas, the boys find it most difficult to resist the city's numerous fruit stands and small bakeries. As they move along the streets between shoeshines, the boys consume a remarkable amount of papaya and pineapple slices, oranges, apples, and shortening bread (all costing a penny or two).

Not all the money left over after expenses finds its way to the boys' parents. The boys have two basic agreements with their parents. They are to give all their net income or an agreed part of it. Those who give part of their earnings to their parents sometimes give half of what they make, or everything over fifty or seventy-five cents. Some of the boys faithfully live up to the understanding they have with their parents, but most of the boys who have agreed to give all their money to their parents keep back part of what they earn. If these boys did not keep some of their money, usually no more than ten or fifteen cents a day, they would never have a consistent source of spending money. Those boys who do give all their money to their parents do so with the understanding that their parents will from time to time give them spending money. But given the poverty that their parents labor under, it seldom works out that they can give their

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working children more money than just enough to buy more dye and shoe polish.

It is interesting that those boys who make the most money are the boys whose parents allow them to keep the highest percentage of their earnings. At the same time, the parents of these same boys have higher family incomes than the parents of the other shoeshine boys. The money the boys keep after their expenses, whether openly or secretively, goes in two main directions: clothes and entertainment. It often takes a boy several months to save enough for a pair of pants or shoes, each costing in the neighborhood of three to five dollars. The boys who have large clienteles and keep back a good part of their money buy new clothes every month or two, but the boys who give most of their money to their parents wear secondhand clothing. Some boys are very clothes conscious and dress quite well considering their situation, but most of the boys' savings and buying are prompted by strict necessity rather than fashion.

All of the boys spend money on one kind of diversion or another. Some have only enough money to pay a penny a night to watch television at one of Santa Maria's small stores; others have money enough to go to the weekly professional wrestling matches (fifty cents) and watch an occasional movie (fifteen cents). But even if the boys do not have the money to watch television or to go to professional wrestling matches, they find their own diversions. They are passionate football players; marbles have a consuming interest; and they greatly multiply the few comic books they buy through extensive trading networks. While the Santa Maria shoeshine boys do work and help support their families, they are children, and play is an important part of their lives.

To the first-time visitor to one of Latin America's large cities it seems that every child in the country must be a shoeshine boy. And while there is no denying that there are a great many shoeshine boys on the Latin American streets, only a small percentage of the Latin American city children shine shoes at any one time. In Santa Maria, for example, there are about 120 boys of "respectable" shoeshine-boy age (seven to sixteen), but there are never more than fifteen boys from Santa Maria regularly shining shoes. Even though there are admittedly a lot of shoeshine boys on the Guatemala City streets, it seems strange that more Santa Maria boys do not shine shoes, especially since only a fairly small number of them have work outside their homes. There are few better ways for a Santa Maria boy to earn a little spending money, and he can make quite a substantial contribution to his family's economic well-being. The monthly income of the average head of a household in Santa Maria is $40, and most of the shoeshine boys give their parents $12 to $15 a month.

But poor as they are, the great majority of Santa Maria boys do not even try to shine shoes. Victor, a fourteen-year-old regular member of one of Santa Maria's corner groups, thinks he knows why more boys do not work as shoeshine boys. When asked why he is not a shoeshine boy, Victor answered: "There are already too many." Victor is quite right. And not only are there too many, the shoeshine boys already on the street work within the closed system of the patron-client relationship. It is extremely difficult for the novice shoeshine boy to become established. Everyone he contacts is someone else's client.

It is doubtful, however, that even if the city were not so crowded with shoeshine boys and there were no closed system of competition a much greater number of Santa Maria boys would automatically go into the streets to shine shoes. There is another factor that contributes to the low percentage of shoeshine boys from Santa Maria, perhaps more influential than the city's economic system. The normative climate of the community discourages children from working in the street. There is a basic antipathy in Santa Maria toward the idea of children working in the streets, and it is particularly focused on shoeshine boys. (The low esteem the Santa Maria residents have for shoeshine boys holds for anyone, including adults, who has a job that involves doing menial tasks for others.)

Outside Santa Maria the term "shoeshine boy" is synonymous with delinquent. It is a middle-class truism that shoeshine boys walk through residential neighborhoods in order to case unoccupied houses, informing their accomplices, who in turn rob the unattended home. When a boy enters a home to shine shoes, he is watched carefully to insure that he does not take anything. In middle-class Guatemala the word *lustre* (meaning shine, shoeshine) suggests vulgarity and crudity. If one is impolite or utters an obscenity, a friend is likely to scold him gently and jokingly by saying, *lustre*.

The Santa Maria adults share the outsiders' negative view of shoeshine boys. They call the boys *los perdidos*, "the lost ones." The boys often receive lectures from well-meaning neighbors on the evils of earning a living in the street. At times they are told "mean old men will make soup out of you and eat you" stories and pointedly encouraged to stay home to work. Most parents absolutely forbid their boys to shine shoes. In a community survey I asked the Santa Maria heads of families with children eighteen years old and younger, who were not shining shoes, if they would allow their children to shine shoes, and 75 per cent said they would not. The Santa Maria parents want their children to learn a trade, and are afraid that shining shoes is the first step to a life of unemployment and indolence. Those who do allow their children to go are very sensitive to the community pressure against letting boys work on the streets. They try to protect their vulnerability by claiming that they give their boys strict instructions not to loiter, steal, or act discourteously.

In spite of the advice and the threats some boys still shine shoes. Two of the boys, in fact, work against the express wishes of their fathers and without their knowledge. Most of the boys work directly through their mothers. Even if their fathers do not know, or are not supposed to know, that they shine, their mothers do. They give their money to their mothers for the

household budget.

The adults are not the only ones with a negative view of shoeshining. The Santa Maria children themselves hold a very low opinion of shoeshine boys. They mercilessly tease the shoeshine boys and those suspected of being shoeshine boys. Surprisingly, some of those who lead out in the teasing are former shoeshine boys, and even current ones tease their own. The phrase *bajar cueros* calls up the picture of Jesus washing his disciples' feet at the Last Supper to demonstrate humility. The teased and teasers, however, have no humility, only pride—the Santa Maria children are more like Homeric Greeks than humble disciples. Then *bajar cueros* has a double meaning. Not only does it mean to shine shoes; it is also the slang expression for masturbation. And in *macho* Latin America to *bajar cueros* is a very poor substitute for the "real thing."

The shoeshine boys react differently to the community disapproval of their work. The young boys like Benito who are just starting to shine pay little attention to the teasing and negative evaluations, but the older boys, especially those over fifteen, are extremely sensitive to the fact that they have very low prestige work. All the boys say they would leave shining shoes if they could find regular work—errand boy or house boy—even at less money. An older boy, Marco, seventeen, stopped shining shoes at the medical school at $2 a day to take a job as a mason's helper for $1.25 a day.

Few of the boys have yet found "respectable" jobs. In the meantime they spend considerable energy hiding their identities as shoeshine boys. The first step in hiding their identities is to make sure that no one from Santa Maria sees them with their shoeshine boxes. Most of the boys leave their boxes with the proprietors of small shops and businesses. They claim, to each other as well as to anyone who asks, that they leave their boxes outside of Santa Maria because they are afraid of being robbed if they carry them down the ravine-side. The boys know, though, that there is little danger; they just do not want anybody in the community to see tangible evidence of their profession and to remind them of it.

There are, however, clues to a shoeshine boy's identity besides a shoeshine box. When the boys work, they shine themselves almost as much as their clients' shoes. At the end of the day their hands are black, and there are black smudges and stains on their clothing, arms, and faces. Dirty hands and clothing, of course, completely invalidate the boys' claims not to be shoeshine boys. So most of the boys take the necessary precautions not to return to Santa Maria with dirty hands and clothing. Some of the boys keep a complete change of clothing with a friendly downtown merchant to change into before starting work, and others carry old pants and shirts with them to wear over their regular clothes. Then when they finish work, they scrub their hands and faces to remove the dirty accumulation of polish and dye.

The contrast between the boys' appearance in the community and at work is startling. When they leave Santa Maria in the morning on their way to shine shoes, some of the boys look like well-groomed schoolchildren. But after they change to their work clothes, they come close to fitting the popular stereotype of the street urchin. The boys, however, will suffer with the poor street image so long as they can keep their friends and neighbors in Santa Maria from knowing what they do. Knowing Santa Maria's negative evaluation of children working on the street and the shoeshine boys' reaction to that normative climate, it is easy to understand why the Santa Maria boys are reluctant to conduct their business on the street. Once inside office buildings and private residences they are safe; no one from Santa Maria can discover their secret.

If the work habits of the Santa Maria shoeshine boys are in any way representative, the lives of the Latin American shoeshine boys are certainly more complex than one could imagine after just a brief encounter with a shoeshine boy on a Latin American city street. While their lives are guided by simple economic necessity, they are also influenced by the complex interrelationship of their own patron-client relations and a community value system that holds no esteem for the work they do. At home they live incognito, but then drop their hidden identities at the edge of the city center as they begin their daily trek through the networks of clients and customers.

In addition to this surprising complexity, the lives of the Latin American shoeshine boys also possess a certain immediacy and coherency—an immediacy and coherency that is often missing from the lives of children who spend most of their time in school classrooms. While life is hard, it makes sense. One shines shoes to earn money, and one earns money to help one's family and to have a little spending money. This kind of unmediated confrontation with life's unvarnished realities can engender a precocious maturity and a strength and resiliency of character. As Jesus Sanchez said in Oscar Lewis's *The Children of Sanchez*: "I had no childhood....But these difficulties [being poor] help one to become a man, to appreciate the true value of things. One learns what it means to earn a living with the sweat of one's brow. To grow up away from your parents helps you to become mature."

Poverty, though, is a high price to pay for childhood maturity, immediacy, and coherency. And talk of the virtues of poverty borders on academic prattle. We would never wish such a childhood on our own children, and we would, if we could, rescue the Santa Maria children from theirs. We fear poverty not only for its obvious material deprivation, but also because of what we think it will do to the personality. Living in poverty with little hope for escape, it reasonably seems to us, would have to depress and discourage, eventually rendering one psychologically incapable of moving up and out of poverty.

It is true that poverty does sometimes have such a depressing effect, although we ought not to forget that the pressures of a middle-class life lead many to its own peculiar brands of depression. But there is no simple equation. Even Santa Maria children living

under what seem to be the most objectively oppressive conditions somehow survive it all with a remarkable degree of psychic stability. One of the most remarkable, though scarred, of the Santa Maria survivors is Diego, the shoeshine boy.

Diego is now thirteen. When he was ten, his mother left his father, an often unemployed day laborer, his older brother and two younger brothers. Diego's father, predictably, became discouraged and began to drink heavily. It was not long until he tried to commit suicide. He made several unsuccessful attempts at cutting his throat and wrists, and then one night in desperation he threw himself off a high ledge on Santa Maria's ravine-side into the river bottom below, finally to die.

Diego lived with his father during the last few weeks of his life, and the morning after his father's death he walked down the ravine-side to the river bottom and stared blankly at his father for over an hour as he floated face up in a small pool of water just off the river's mainstream. After his father's funeral Diego started what he thought would be a new life. He spent two weeks unsuccessfully trying to shine shoes, and then he went to live with his aunt, a *tortillera*, promising to work in her tortilla operation in exchange for room and board. In addition, he was enrolled in the Santa Maria school as a hardship case and consequently did not have to pay the $1.50 tuition fee. But Diego's new life quickly turned sour. Upset by Diego's lethargy and rebelliousness, not recognizing them as the natural aftereffects of the trauma of his father's death, and following the philosophy that "the idler shall not eat the bread of the laborer," the aunt ordered Diego to leave, after putting up with him for only a few weeks.

Diego first went to live with a married sister, and then later ended up living with and helping his sister's mother-in-law, a caretaker on a large estate in a wealthy section of the city. Diego could no more accept the authority of his sister's mother-in-law than that of his aunt, and so he went back to Santa Maria to live with his seventeen-year-old brother in their father's old clapboard house.

At this point it was easy to predict that Diego would become completely indolent and withdrawn in self-pity. Unpredictably, though, Diego did not collapse. He started to shine shoes regularly, and he earned enough money to feed himself and to replace occasionally a part of his tattered wardrobe. And to compensate partially for the absence of family relationships Diego has become a central figure in one of the Santa Maria friendship groups, going swimming and to movies and professional wrestling matches with his friends on the weekends. Still, Diego is not a healthy boy; he has a long way to go before becoming a model of thrift and industry. Whether Diego will grow up to become a "well-adjusted" adult is still problematic. On the basis of his past, however, he should not be written off. In addition to the pressures of deprived, affectionless surroundings, Diego overcame his mother's desertion and his father's suicide. With seemingly everything and everyone against him, one can only conclude that Diego has survived simply because he wants to live.

I am not sure what lessons, if any, can be drawn from the lives of Diego, Benito, and the other Santa Maria shoeshine boys. It ought to be said that these boys have an interesting life, one that has a certain wholeness and integrity, and be left at that. In thinking about the Santa Maria shoeshine boys and in writing about them I find it hard to muster cool objectivity. The thought of their lives and of my experience with them brings back a number of strong emotions, not excluding compassion. But most of all I feel respect.