

When you make a study of an Indian community, you have to find the Indians who speak the best Spanish. Juan had given me some information on the fiestas in Chamula. Along the way, we ran into bad weather, hurricane winds with fine rain that went on for four days. We had to take shelter in a house where the authorities from the village of Magdalena live.

During those hours spent waiting for good weather, with nothing to do, it occurred to me to ask Juan to tell us the story of his life. He told me the most important events but I always asked him for more details and began to expand and organize his biography. Then I thought it would be interesting to weave everything that I knew about the Chamula people's customs and traditions into the story of Juan's life.

That is how I came to write *Pérez Jolote*. Before I had it published, I obviously read it to him with all the additions I had made, so he could correct any mistakes. When the book was published I sent him a copy.

● *So if it hadn't rained for four days, Juan Pérez Jolote might not have told you the story of his life because he would have been busy translating what the other informants said?*

■ It's a good thing it rained, then, isn't it? (Another broad smile.)

● *And what was Juan Pérez Jolote's reaction when the book was published in 1946? Was he pleased?*

■ He put the book in his haversack and went everywhere with it, showing it to people and telling them that this was the book that talked about the whole village. Once he lent the book to a nurse from the Indian Coordination Center,

who never returned it. I gave Juan a replacement copy published by the Fondo de Cultura Económica, which he did not like as much as the *Acta Antropológica* edition. (The School of Anthropology publishes all the studies it considers of interest to the general public in this collection.)

A couple of months later, Alberto Beltrán, who produced all the illustrations for the book, went to Chamula and Juan Pérez Jolote asked him to get a copy of the *Acta* edition, "Because that one's bigger, it's a quarter of a yard long, this little one's no good to me at all."

What would Juan Pérez Jolote have to say today about the communiqués of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN)? What would Ricardo Pozas, who loved, or rather worshipped the Chamulas, have to say about them?

II

In his own humble, impeccably modest way, Ricardo Pozas did a thousand times more for the Indians (whom he regarded as the poorest, most neglected Mexicans) than a bunch of new, gleaming offices with their hordes of secretaries, errand boys, writers, paperwork and bureaucratic formalities.

He knew about corn, beans, unscrupulous middlemen, liquor and ceremonies, because he lived in San Juan Chamula and San Cristóbal with the Indians, observing and sharing their hunger and suffering.

The middlemen could not stand Pozas.

Pozas not only worked in Chiapas, but also in Atlixco, Puebla, among the peasants who become workers; in the Indian areas of Oaxaca, in the Puebla mountain range,

—My son thinks that the law [for providing education to Indians] is reasonable and necessary, and that [Lázaro] Cárdenas is a just president.

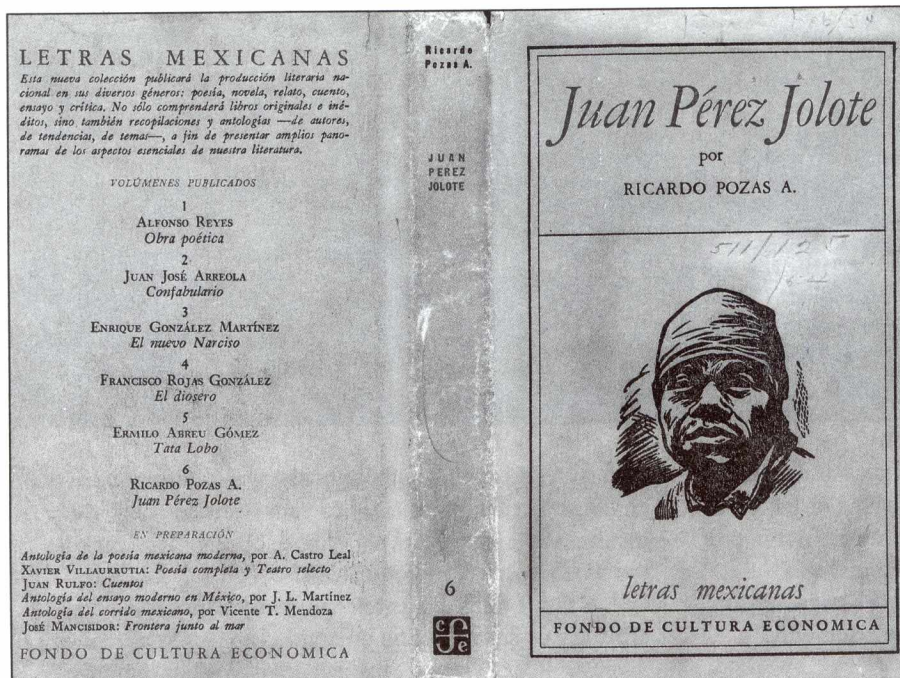
My mother started and said heatedly,

—Just? When he tramples on our rights and seizes our property? And who's he going to give it to? The Indians. The thing is, he doesn't know what they're like. He's never gotten close to them or smelt how they reek of filth and liquor. And he's never done them a favor and had them pay him back with ingratitude. He's never asked them to do a task to see how lazy they are. They're so hypocritical, so underhanded and so insincere!

—Zoraida, said my father reproachfully.

—It's true, she shouted. —I would a thousand times sooner never have lived than been born among this race of vipers.

Rosario Castellanos, *Balún Canán*.



Cover of the first Fondo de Cultura Económica edition, with drawings by Alberto Beltrán.

in the southeast among the Mazatecs, and in Papaloapan when the river flooded the Indian communities and people had to be literally saved from drowning.

Pozas never sat behind a desk, and even wrote *Juan Pérez Jolote* on a notebook on his lap.

"I studied anthropology from the time the Polytechnic College opened, because I wanted to try help the Indian population and the best way of doing this was to study their lives, their origins and their social organization.

"I thought that by getting to know the Indian peoples one would be able to understand their problems better and then be able to achieve the national integration we all aspire to. The Indians should be like us...they should adopt all our positive aspects. We have to get them to take part in our highest values, our economy and our institutions.

"We have to take them the finest fruits of modern civilization, Spanish, for example, so that they can communicate with the rest of the world. This does not mean that they should abandon their folkloric aspects, but we should modify their technical methods and cultural formation.

"Each of the Indian peoples in the Chiapas highlands constitutes a religious unit, grouped around a patron saint and the church that protects them. And the groups fight among themselves because one saint does not get on with another.

"Zinacantán, Chamula and Teopisca each had two churches, one for worshipping St. Sebastian and the other for the patron saint. St. Sebastian always had a rough time. They never accepted him as a patron saint in any

village because he used to get distracted and protect more than one village (the Indians wanted exclusive rights). Also, he was always naked and that would never do, because the faithful had to dress like saints and vice versa, and in that cold weather, how could the Chamulas go about in the nude? It was quite enough that they should go around bare-legged, wearing their rough leather sandals with thick soles."

III

If Rosario² always had a sense of guilt, it was due to the fact that she realized she was a white woman among Indians, a landowner amidst the poor and a mistress with servants. She soon became indignant over the treatment given to the Indians, opposed her own

family and supported the agrarian reform implemented by Lázaro Cárdenas [president of Mexico from 1934 to 1940].

For this reason, Rosario Castellanos regarded teaching as an apostolate and as soon as she finished her degree she began working at the National Institute for Indian Affairs. She also wrote plays for a character named Petul, a smiling puppet dressed in coarse cotton cloth, sandals and a straw hat with flowing ribbons like the ones worn by the Chamulas. Petul went from village to village speaking of the benefits of vaccinations, the advantages of hygiene, the importance of DDT (now no longer used because of its hazards), the usefulness of toothpaste and toothbrushes, and the good of penicillin.

Rosario travelled on horseback through the communities, suffering the discomfort of the journey, the cold and the heat. However, she had a sense of humor, and once told of getting onto a headless horse, because she had got on the wrong way.

Many years later, in one of her articles, she wrote something I shall never forget. As well as Rufina, Rosario had another playmate called María Escandón, a Chamula girl who was given to Doña Adriana Castellanos to keep Rosario company and carry her. All the little rich girls had their nannies, their carriers.

² Rosario Castellanos (1925-1974): Mexican writer and poet laureate who spent her childhood in Comitán, Chiapas. Much of her literary work — such as *Balún Canán*, *Oficio de tinieblas* (Shadowy Trade), *Ciudad real* (Royal City)— tells of the misery and "caciquismo" (domination by petty chiefs or political bosses) in Chiapas. (Editor's note.)

Ahead of us walked an Indian. When he reached the ticket box [for the fortune wheel at a fair in Comitán, Chiapas] he asked for a ticket.

—Hey, just listen to this upstart Indian. He's speaking Spanish. I wonder who gave him permission?

Because there are rules. Spanish is a privilege that belongs to us [the whites]....

—An Indian up on the fortune wheel! It's the anti-Christ!

Rosario Castellanos, *Balún Canán*.

“This idea of having an Indian girl was at its peak. It meant that the masters' child had a child his or her own age to play with, besides his toys, which were not very many in any case and rather simple. The girl was sometimes a playmate with initiative and a capacity for invention who took an active part in the other child's

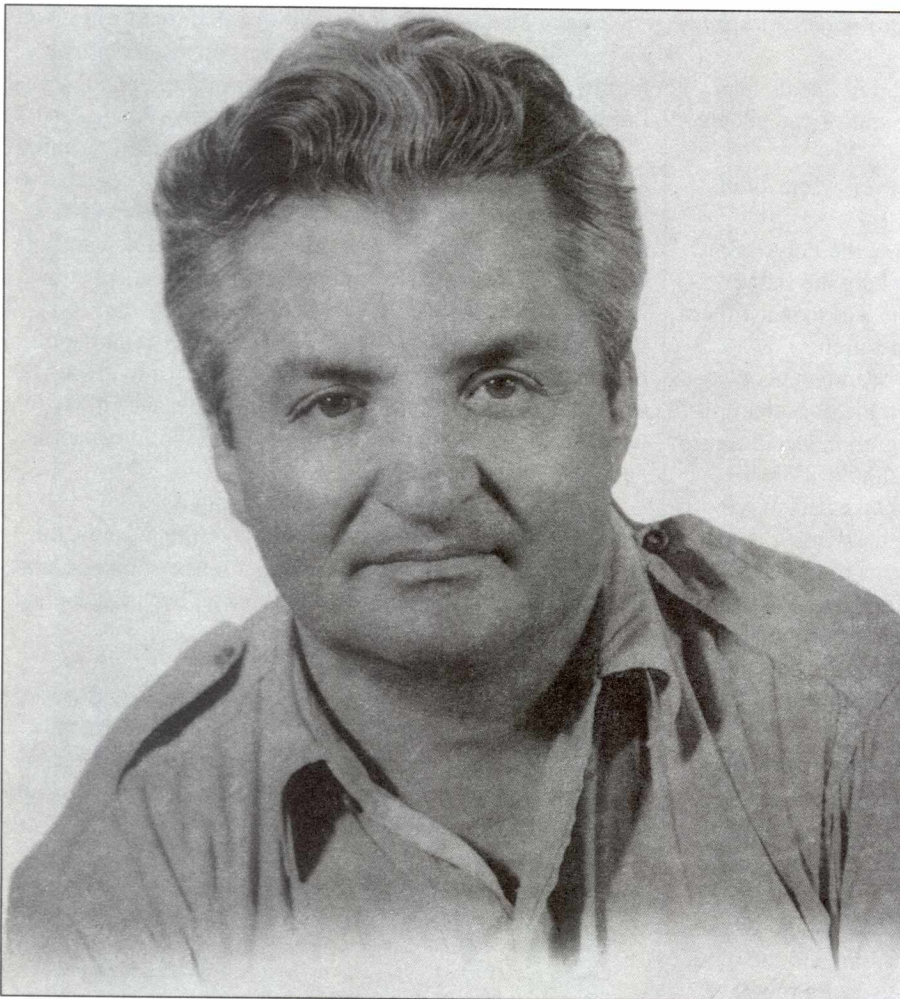
games. At other times, though, she was nothing more than an object for the other child to vent his moods on: the inexhaustible energy of childhood, boredom, anger and the bitter jealousy of possession.

“I don't think I was exceptionally capricious, arbitrary or cruel. But no one had ever taught me to

respect anyone other than my equals, and of course respect my elders far more. So I just drifted along. The day I suddenly realized that this thing I used was actually a person, I made an instant decision: to apologize to anyone I had offended. Another decision, which was to last the rest of my life, was not to take advantage of my privileged position to humiliate others.”

María Escandón, her nanny, remained in Rosario's service until she married. She did not even leave her when Rosario had to spend almost a year in a TB clinic. She only felt relieved of her obligations when Rosario married. Only then did María Escandón take her leave, with the following words: “Now you'll be ruled by a man.”

Strangely enough, *Juan Pérez Jolote* was translated into several languages, and only recently into Tzotzil and Tzeltal. This gave Ricardo Pozas great pleasure. He wanted to introduce us to the poorest people in Chiapas so that we would love and respect them, and appreciate their bravery and charm ❧



Ricardo Pozas appreciated the bravery and charm of Chiapas' poorest people.