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## In Death, Homeward Bound

By **TRIPTI LAHIRI**

In a world of specialization, the R. G. Ortiz chain has won clients by catering to a particular travel niche: transporting the dead from anywhere in the New York metropolitan area to final resting places anywhere in Mexico.

For \$2,200 or so, perhaps a third of the price of a funeral in New York, R. G. Ortiz Funeral Homes handles the paperwork required to ship a body to Mexico. And the Mexican Consulate and community groups often chip in with the cost of repatriation. So a Mexican funeral in New York City is still a rare occurrence.

"I don't know one Mexican family who has purchased a burial plot here," said the Rev. John Grange, of St. Jerome's Roman Catholic Church in the Mott Haven section of the Bronx. Father Grange's congregation is now about 80 percent Mexican, and most of those parishioners have arrived in the last 10 years. Though he has officiated at funerals for Puerto Ricans and Dominicans, he has not done a single funeral for a Mexican in the 28 years he has served at the church.

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"When the Irish came to stay, the first thing they did was to buy a grave," Father Grange said. "For the Mexicans, home is not here yet. In 10 years maybe New York will be home, and they'll start to bury their dead here."

Employees at Ortiz, which runs about 15 funeral homes in Brooklyn, Manhattan and the Bronx, said that while it was also common for other groups to send their dead back, Mexicans were the most adamant about it. Imelda Guarneros, who works at Ortiz's central office on Southern Boulevard in the Bronx, said that perhaps half of the funeral home's Puerto Rican clients and three-fourths of the Dominican and Ecuadorean clients wanted bodies sent back to their homelands. For Mexicans, she estimated that the figure was closer to 95 percent.

And though there are no official numbers, some funeral home employees say the figure is even higher. "I would say maybe 1 percent of Mexicans does not send the body to be buried in Mexico," said Teresa Puga, who works at a branch of Ortiz in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. "We've even sent babies. I remember once sending a tiny baby who weighed just about a pound."

Mrs. Guarneros also said that the Ecuadorean Consulate charged about \$20 for the paperwork to send a body back and that the Dominican Consulate charged about \$150. But the Mexican Consulate does not charge for repatriation permits, and even offers a stipend of \$200 to \$300 to those who need help with the cost of repatriation. In extreme cases, it may even pay the full amount.

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Angel Franco/The New York Times  
R. G. Ortiz Funeral Homes has made a niche in arrangements for Mexican immigrants who want to send a relative's body to Mexico. Coffins range from plain to elaborate, with one carrying an image of the Blessed Virgin of Guadalupe, below.

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Ortiz has seen such a demand for Mexican burials that it formed alliances with funeral homes in Mexico. Its base package hovers around \$2,200 to \$2,500 depending on the final destination in Mexico, and includes a gray cloth-covered pine coffin, embalming (which is mandatory in this case) and a wake in New York. If clients are willing to pay more, they can request a more elegant coffin or a longer wake. Once the body arrives in Mexico, a funeral home there arranges for it to go to any town in the country.

According to the Mexican Consulate, about 60 percent of the 250-odd repatriations it helps organize each year go to Puebla, the region southeast of Mexico City where the vast majority of New York's Mexican population is from.

Given the youthfulness of the city's Mexican population — the City Planning Department estimates the median age of the city's roughly 200,000 Mexicans is about 23 — the dead are often young, and have left parents or spouses behind. But even in cases in which the immediate family is here, older relatives, like grandparents or aunts and uncles, ask for the body to be sent back.

"Immigration status has a lot to do with it," said Esperanza Chacón, director of social services at the Tepeyac Association, one of the larger Mexican community groups. "For most Mexicans, the United States is a country of instability. But a dead person cannot move. People send the body back knowing the people there are settled and can tend to the dead. We cannot."

Sister Lucilla Perez, a missionary from Puebla who is working at St. Jerome's, said that many people felt a proper funeral was only possible in Mexico. "Here, there might be a wake for one night or two," she said. "There, the whole family will keep a wake for nine days. They'll sing. They'll pray. They'll eat tamales."

On the ninth day, the entire town accompanies the coffin on foot to the cemetery. Afterward, everyone gathers at the family's home to be fed and to remember the deceased. The dead person is also formally remembered with prayers and feasting on the first anniversary of the death, and on the Day of the Dead every November.

"Over here, Mexicans cannot celebrate their dead in the same way," Sister Lucilla said. "There's no room in an apartment where two or three families live. There's no time off work. It's too expensive."

Although the \$2,200 Ortiz asks is a lot for many Mexicans, it is a price people find a way to pay.

"When it comes to sending someone back, the Mexicans are very united," said Mrs. Puga of Ortiz. "They'll take up a collection, they'll go door-to-door, whatever it takes, until they have enough."

In the case of Francisca Cariño, whose father, Miguel, 68, was assaulted and killed last August, Casa Puebla paid \$1,500 toward repatriating the body.

Mrs. Cariño, a teacher's aide who lives in the Bronx, said of her father, "He always told us, 'I want to be buried in Puebla, not anywhere else.'"



Angel Franco/The New York Times  
An image of the Blessed Virgin of Guadalupe on a coffin.



Angel Franco/The New York Times  
After her father died, Francisca Cariño had his body sent to Mexico.

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