

# The Experience of Crossing the Border

- By Ramón Bannister

This is another interview of an immigrant, but the difference with this person is that she eventually acquired citizenship. She prefers to be unnamed, so I'll call her María. She describes what it's like to cross the border and the hardships she still experiences. I translated the interview from the original Spanish. All interviews were recorded and can be provided online as evidence that the interview took place.

## Reaching the Border and Getting Citizenship

RB – Please explain to us what it's like to cross the border illegally.

María – The road was much longer than simply arriving at the border. There was the first part of the trip, and then there was the border crossing. That was the goal, in order to arrive here. Well, I felt very emotional, which is what I think everyone who crosses the border undocumented feels. They come to a completely unrecognizable place. One comes full of dreams, and over time one becomes disillusioned a little. But one feels a lot of emotion, much stress, because you don't know what's going to happen on the other side. Consequently, I was very lucky because I received help from many family members and other people. So, nothing happened. But it's very emotional. It's like arriving in a paradise. That's the first emotion that someone has.

RB – What was the difference between your original country – which was Chile – and this country? And what did you do to survive in a different country?

María – The first difference is that you can get things immediately; for example, you can get a job quickly and have money more quickly. In Chile, it was much more difficult for me to find a job and earn money. That is, it's a very slow world. It's a light year away as compared to what you can acquire here.

RB – And eventually you got naturalized. Can you describe the process of how to do that? And how difficult is it as an undocumented person?

María – It's very difficult. It takes a long time. But when I did it, it wasn't even as long and complex as it is now. It was complicated though. One feels frustrated because you want to obtain things quickly but the process is very slow. You can't get the papers quickly. It took two and-a-half years to get a visa; meanwhile, I was working.

RB – Was it a problem for immigration officials that you were undocumented?

María – No. Because when I presented the papers I had to say the truth. So, I said that I was living in this country and solicited permission to stay. And I didn't have any problems. But that was thirteen years ago. I don't know how it is now. I think it's different now.

## How She Crossed

RB – I imagine that it was fairly easy to cross the border undocumented.

María – At that time it was extremely easy, but not now. To begin with, to physically cross, there was a fence or wall that was very small. It was a fence made out of wire [barbed wire] that was full of holes. At one part I only had to go through a hole and the other part I had to jump over a wall, but it wasn't high at all so it wasn't hard at all on the border.

RB – And a coyote helped you?

María – Yes. My sister paid a coyote to help me cross through the hole and escort me to the McDonald's in Nogales, Arizona, where my sister picked me up.

RB – The Border Patrol didn't say anything?

María – No. They were all on the Mexican side. Immigration officers from the Mexican side [Mexican police] asked us what we were doing. So, I gave them about 20 pesos and they left. So, the Mexican Border Patrol can be bought. And the Border Patrol agents on the American side were watching everyone, with their binoculars, passing through the hole, but they didn't do anything. Because people were going through non-stop [like an endless line]. [Laughing] There were so many people that the Border Patrol couldn't be capturing everybody. There wasn't enough time...[Still laughing].

RB – What is the experience like now to have papers and to be living in this country as a Chilean?

María – [Interjects]...Like an American...No, I will never feel like an American. I have my papers and citizenship now, but one always has her roots, her patriotism in her soul, although I'll never return. And now I'm in my country, where my descendents are living. This is my country. Despite all of that, one still feels like she is a Latina. I will always feel Chilean, always, until the day that I die. Always. And I always try to maintain those customs in my house, the words, the proverbs, the food, and the things we got accustomed to doing over there.

## María Helps Undocumented Immigrants

RB – Tell me the story of when you went to Nogales and were shopping, and wound up helping undocumented immigrants.

María – It was purely coincidence. We went to take the dogs to very beautiful hills. We were standing there when a kid came up to us, half-dead. I immediately noticed he was undocumented, so I asked him how long it had been since he drank water. He told me he hadn't eaten for about four or five days, but that he had drunk rain water. He looked very unhealthy. He shook; I'm not sure if he was scared or

what, but he was incoherent because he was crying but no tears came out of his eyes. I grew concerned. I told my husband that we had to do something for this kid because I didn't want to feel guilty if he died or something. We took him to our house, he bathed, we fed him and he gained strength again. I asked him where his family was from. He told me that his mother lived in Miami. But I realized that Miami is very far from here. So, I took him to a bus station in Tucson and put him on a bus. I bought him a bus ticket. I don't know what happened to him, but I told him there was a high probability that he gets detained – there would be immigration officials on the way. But at least I tried to help him. I feel like I helped him. I would have felt very badly if I hadn't. Though I don't do that for animals on the road. On top of that he was a kid, about eighteen years old. He could have been my son.

That was one occasion, but there was another time with a seventeen year old kid. I put him in my truck and asked him where he was going. He said about fifty miles away. Those are experiences that one has all the time here near the border. We often see people, in groups. Or, another time I saw people walking. Since I went shopping earlier, I grabbed a plastic bag and put oranges, tortillas, bread and other things in it. I held the bag outside of my [vehicle] window and they ran over to get it. They didn't speak Spanish. They were indigenous people; they talked to each other in another language.

RB – What do you think about the people who patrol the border even though they're not part of the Border Patrol?...The people who say that the border crossers are illegal, and that they shouldn't do that...?

María – If they are trying to prevent terrorists from coming into the country, terrorists didn't come through there. The terrorists entered legally. If it's for that, then they are mistaken. Second, the undocumented people are going to come, whether or not there are groups patrolling the border, because *hunger* brings them. What brings people here is the lack of opportunities and the lack of jobs. And that's what the [undocumented] people do here. They do the heavy work of this country.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

As I interviewed María, I noticed the internal contradiction between her Chilean and American identities. On the one hand, she'll always remember her homeland. On the other hand, she has become American. It is as if her national identity changed without her wanting it to change.