CHAPTER 1

The Reestablishing of an Acquaintanceship

> A society is, therefore, a structure which consists of beings who stand inside and outside of it at the same time. . . . This is that the individual can never stay within a unit which he does not at the same time stay outside of, that he is not incorporated into any order without also confronting it.
>
> —Simmel
> *On Individuality and Social Forms*

The encounter between Mexicans and Jews involved many things, including a confrontation with long-standing myths and the clashes of a new reality. The views they had about each other and the context in which they renewed their acquaintance played an important role. Though most of the accounts of immigrant Jews to Mexico highlight the perplexity they felt over the country, the geography, its flora, its folklore, the food, and the strange sound of the language, the confusion deepened because of the newcomers' ignorance of the recent Mexican past and their vague knowledge of an older history of uneasy relations with Jews. Mexicans, having been distanced from Jews for centuries, brought a mixed background to the new acquaintanceship. In addition to strong religious prejudices, Mexicans experienced great difficulty with the idea of and possible intrusion of foreigners—*all* foreigners. Both these intellectual currents always played a part when judging Jews.

The immediate and often unexpectedly friendly encounter between Jew and Mexican in this century required the juggling of contradictory information; when reality did not coincide with prejudice, the Mexican often concluded that the particular Jew had to be an "exception" to the norm, a being very different from the picture the Mexican had intellectually internalized.[1] At times, however, this attitude toward the Jews came perilously close to prejudice, and when the wave of anti-Semitism enveloped the world, Mexicans did not entirely disassociate themselves from those feelings. They remained largely detached: Jews were not physically attacked in Mexico, but neither was there any rush to help refugees out. Even the Spanish language, a good mirror of the group that uses it,

reflected some of the feelings towards Jews. A "Judas" doll was burned in effigy during Easter Week (Semana Santa), and *Judas-like* was used as pejorative adjective. Similarly, a *judiada* was defined as an inhuman action, particularly one producing excessive and scandalous gain. The negative associations put on Jews were thus encoded in language and hence in thought.

When the Spanish came to the "New World," they brought and passed on their "Jewish experience" to America, not only by including some converts among their expeditionaries, but mostly by bringing a well-defined anti-Jewish ideology that was an intrinsic part of their thinking and acting. This ideology was reproduced in the New World, and its traces, still felt today, were part of the cultural structure that welcomed Jews in the modern immigration.

The conquest and control of this part of the world was carried out by the same institutions that had made possible the discovery of this "new" world, all created in the mother country. The desire to Christianize, for instance, used as an argument to suggest the possible "salvation of the world," was closely linked to the conquest of the new territories. The Inquisition, the institution created to search out heretics or anyone that could hamper the project, was activated in Spain in 1481, and was soon to open a branch in the new continent too. To the Spanish, then, Jews were not an unknown, and the Spanish who came to Mexico brought their ideological and institutional structures to the social world they attempted to remodel and control.

The desire to banish Jews was not new. England expelled all its Jews in 1290; France followed the pattern with massacres and expulsions in the fourteenth century; and Spain subjected its Jewish population beginning in the mid–fourteenth century to periodic massacres, mob attacks, and forced conversion. Spain ended its chapter of Jewish life with the expulsion of Jews in 1492. However, the case of Spain is different, unique, and paradigmatic, because for a period Jews, Arabs, and Spaniards cooperated in a most fruitful cultural experiment of sustained association. It is only when the Spanish attempted to reverse the balance of power and control in the search for a new social structure, when the Spanish sought to reestablish an absolute control of their territory, that these old alliances were broken. New definitions of the "other" were activated. Religion, both as a system of thought and as an institution, stepped in to offer ultimate sanction to the forced conversions and to the new political construct. This pattern of thought and action helped propel not only the desire for new territory, but also the imposition of a dominant style of control of the new territory. Because no professing Jew was allowed to pollute Spanish society, no Jew was allowed to contaminate the colonies in the New World. The Spanish Inquisition, which started as an attempt

to impose a religious orthodoxy, developed as an ethnic cleansing tool, thus destroying the previous mutually enriching experience between Spaniards, Arabs, and Jews.

Little was done to allow even converted Jews into the New World in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Letters and decrees, both local and European, made clear that no Jews or converted Jews could settle in the cities of New Spain. The King and Queen of Spain and Pope Paul III issued decrees to that effect. King Pedro of Portugal, for instance, enacted a Law of Extermination (1683) for the expulsion of convicted Jews and their offspring.[2] The prejudices against Jews were thus exported to the new continent, and Jews were often used as symbols of evil in the lengthy process of conversion that the colonizers imposed on the local population. Jews therefore did not go to New Spain in large numbers, and those who did did not manage to leave direct traces.[3] By the time the autos-da-fé were famous and popular in New Spain, these antiheretical executions were perpetrated against Jews by the Inquisition with such ease that ideology and prejudice were well rooted.

An Overview of Mexican History: The Context

But Mexico and its society had an even more complicated history than this account alone would suggest. After three hundred years of being exposed to and forced to adopt Western culture, there was a sufficient cultural and demographic distance from the controlling center, Spain, so that the area was ripe for change. There was no redress possible. Some of what Spain gave to New Spain was so ingrained that no separating of cultures and people was possible. By now, Mexico sought to define itself as a new entity. Mexico was made up of a multiplicity of cultural, ethnic, and religious groups, but economic and political control were centralized by a very limited group. In addition, the French and American Revolutions provided a backdrop against which the colonized and conquered people could begin to dream. Mexico's population included a variety of Spanish subgroups: Creoles, Africans, racially mixed populations, local indigenous peoples, and other foreign groups such as the English, French, and American. Not only was it an extraordinary task for the people in Mexico to articulate and justify their desire for independence from Spain, it also required an exercise in realpolitik and imagination to coalesce the diverse multicentered forces in that vast territory. Each had its own agenda, and therefore had to be convinced and attracted to a single center to form a new political entity.

The political and economic difficulties were exacerbated by the territories' geographic and cultural situation. It was difficult to maintain control over the vast and distant north (California, Louisiana, Texas,

Florida) while also maintaining linkages to the south (Yucatán and Guatemala). The major challenge was to create a centering nucleus capable of holding all these forces in a centripetal fashion and subsume the population under a new power structure.

The nineteenth century was for Mexico a period of physical violence and intellectual upheaval. Divergent visions of how to integrate the new unit competed for attention. It was a century of war and dissension: liberals fought conservatives in their many variations. From the war of independence (1810) with its later national heroes like Hidalgo and Morelos, to the Constitution of 1824, to the Santa Anna period and the Ayutla revolution against Santa Anna, to the Constitution of 1857, to the Reform War separating church and state (Juárez, 1859), to the French invasion and the Empire of Maximilian, constant clashes were the norm.[4] The nineteenth century in Mexico was one of turmoil from which a new political entity was born and the parameters of its polity were defined.

All of these conflicts, together with the visions, the ideas, and the experiments undergirding them, were inherited by the twentieth century. As the geographical international pressures against Mexico eased, the conflicts were incorporated into an internal agenda. The issues then were transposed into the political agenda that forged the Revolution of 1910.

Two Issues That Defined the New Nation

There were two major issues around which the confrontations of these two centuries were fought: territory and population. In fact, each of these issues embodied a series of problems. For example, the problem of territory comprised at least three aspects: jurisdiction, control, and governance.

Territorial problems in these last two centuries have firstly been problems of jurisdiction, of which areas of land would remain under the jurisdiction of what was then Mexico. Mexico's international relations were extremely complicated. Following the war of independence which began in 1810 and the difficulties of gaining support from Spain, France, and England, Mexico faced Spain's attempts to reconquer lost territory in 1822. Then followed a war fought against France in 1838.[5] The tension over territory did not abate.

The second aspect of the territorial problem concerned how to remain in control of the bordering territories. In the north of Mexico, for instance, the American government sought to expand its economic resources by mobilizing the population of the area against the Mexican government. Thus, the colonists of Texas attempted to become independent in 1835; the final annexation of Texas to the American state occurred in 1845. Later, New Mexico and California were also annexed.

Words were exchanged over the fate of the regions of Sonora, Baja California, and Chihuahua. All of these were not just defeats and humiliations but shocks to the Mexican system; eventually the Río Grande became the demarcation line. Mexico had given up more than half its territory in exchange for an indemnization of 15 million pesos in 1848.

The third aspect of the territorial problem was more internal, and involved the type of governance an independent Mexico should adopt. Some felt it could be an empire; others thought Mexico could and should be ruled by a monarch with European support; yet others favored a republic as the best solution. At the same time, the mechanics of creating a federation had to be worked out. The political rules of the new polity had to be not only articulated but agreed upon. Decisions concerning who could "own" territory, and how much of it, were constantly debated.

The problem of population was (and probably still is) not only extremely complex, but also undergirded many essential issues of contemporary Mexico. In its original and older format the question asked was: who, among the different types of groups, was to be in charge of the new Mexico? There were many groups competing for power and control, and their confrontations demanded simultaneous intellectual elaborations. Thus Peninsulares (Spaniards from the continent), Creoles (of Spanish descent but born in New Spain), mestizos (mixed population resulting from either Spanish and indigenous marriages, and Spanish and other racial mixtures as Africans), and the indigenous population all had to find a way to coexist. Eventually, the notion that the country needed a nationalist definition took over. That would help justify and legitimate the new polity and its dominant groups. The main idea—since the war of independence—was to forge and legitimize a new civilization based on the mestizo. This was to be the new man, unsituated historically. The mestizo was the result of mixture, yet all new, carefully designed to limit the new group in power. The right to a particular culture, the right of any of the groups that lived or came to live in Mexico to their own culture in Mexico, was lost.[6]

The interaction between and among these groups slowly shaped the content of the new nationalism. For instance, the Peninsulares had been powerful people in New Spain. At the time of independence, some sided with the Mexicans during the war. They had developed a taste for independence, too, and had important positions in the army, in the government, and in the church. Some, however, remained loyal to Spain and even attempted to oppose the independence movement,[7] hoping to maintain their power with the support of Spain. Spain's opposition to the legitimacy of Mexican independence gave rise to further anti-Spanish feeling. In 1827 the first Peninsulares were expelled. Soon, expulsion became the norm. Hundreds of Peninsulares with Mexican families

who lacked the resources to pay for their families' relocation had to leave the country alone. Aligned against the mestizos in power positions, the remaining Peninsulares became the new foreigners of the new state.

With Mexico engaged in wars both locally and internationally, the notion of *foreigner* became increasingly problematic; a nationalist ideology was elaborated in a parallel fashion to secure and legitimize the new political entity and its new power elite. The Juárez government of the 1850s was particularly significant in this process. Following the defeat and execution of the imposed European emperor Maximiliano and the establishment of the reconstructed Republic, liberal intellectuals took over the rebuilding of the country. The main agenda was to homogenize the country. It was understood that the country needed pacification, demilitarization, roads, railroads, foreign capital, and immigration. If, as it was then argued, the weakness of the country and its poverty were in direct relation to its being sparsely populated, the solution lay in repopulating. Some of Mexico's leaders wanted to follow the American and Argentinian models of attracting potential homesteaders, though the salaries that Mexico could offer were much less attractive than the ones in these countries. Mexico had about eight million inhabitants then, of which only two million were in the labor force.[8] That worked out to about one worker for each one hundred hectares of land. Though Spanish was the lingua franca, more than one hundred languages were actively used. One million people spoke Nahua; half a million spoke Otomi; a quarter spoke Maya; and more than 100,000 people spoke Zapoteca, Mixteco, and Tarasco. While new population was sought, the government had decided that the country's internal diversity had to be diminished regardless of its cultural-ethical price. The country's prehispanic past was felt to offer nothing but the recounting of fabulous glories of only antiquarian interest.[9] There was a need to form a new unity so that the new incoming population could be part of the new mixture.[10] That this policy would have a tremendous social, political, and philosophical effect went unnoticed.

From 1867 to 1876, raging epidemics did not allow the anticipated population growth, and neither did the desired foreign colonization take place. In 1875 a new colonization law not only authorized the government to become an active colonizing agent but also allowed the private sector to participate in such a task. Added incentives included cheap land, deferred payment on loans, Mexican citizenship, and other economic aid. But actual numbers fell short of projections: the 6,000 to 7,000 Europeans and Americans were much fewer than expected. Most of the immigrants dedicated themselves to commerce and settled in cities. They therefore did not populate the hinterland, a fact that was later used

against the Jewish immigrants. The lesson was clear: a population that migrates seeks mostly urban areas, where jobs may be available and where a lesser investment is necessary to survive.

Ingrained Ambivalence: The Strongest Characteristic

The Mexican government's ambivalence to foreigners following the revolution was also evident in its treatment of a specific minority, the Chinese. Although there was interest in attracting immigrants, Mexico eventually adopted the types of restrictions that the United States implemented after the 1830s, when labor unions started to protest against immigration, suggesting that immigrants were the cause of the country's economic problems.[11]

In Mexico it was becoming clearer that investments were more acceptable than actual immigrants. But by 1880 there were about 150,000 Chinese who had come to the United States as part of the famous gold rush. The U.S. recession of 1871 eliminated the jobs of thousands of Chinese, and the U.S. government closed its doors, suggesting that the Chinese were "inferior and dangerous" for the country. It was also argued that cultural homogeneity was necessary; the Chinese were therefore seen as less desirable.[12]

Chinese then started to come into Mexico in the 1880s. The first Chinese-Mexican treaty was signed in 1887 in search for a balanced exchange of population and commerce.[13] In 1889 the final version of a treaty for "friendship, commerce, and navigation" was signed. Although ten years earlier the Chinese government had protested against the bad treatment to which the Chinese had been exposed, the Chinese continued to arrive and Mexico found a rationale for their presence. Again, it was hoped that the Chinese would aid the agricultural progress of the country. Yet, the same year that the treaty was signed, anti-Chinese sentiments were aired in the newspapers of Mexico. The Chinese were called "degenerates"; people who never adjusted to the countries they immigrated to since they remained loyal to their customs and language; a type of bird of prey that flies home as soon as its beak is full. The Chinese were criticized for their short height, suggesting that that characteristic in a population that would mix with Mexicans would eventually produce a "nation of midgets."

In 1896 protests against the Chinese started: it was argued that they took jobs away from the Mexicans, and that they often rejected work that other Mexicans offered them. In 1907, a Catholic newspaper saw them as reaching the limits of the acceptable: they were becoming *tortilla* workers and *tamal* experts. More and more, the attack took on racial undertones. Descriptions of how the Chinese ate, and their habits, were published.

Absurd rumors took hold of the imagination of the local population: it was said that *chorizo*—a sausage—was being made by the Chinese of children's meat, and that the Chinese were not hygienic, and were therefore a menace to the Mexican population. Pressure against mixed marriages heightened.[14]

In the 1800s other groups of people arrived: Italians, Japanese, and Mormons. None assimilated, not even the Italians, who were judged to be the most "assimilable" type.[15] But none faired so terribly as the Chinese, who in 1911 faced a terrible massacre in the northern part of the country, in Torreón, where about three hundred people were killed. Some sectors, in an attempt to justify it, claimed the massacre was brought on by the "wealth and greed" of the Chinese people. These events, so much like pogroms, were too well known to the foreigners to be ignored. The victims were always blamed; there was very little hope for justice, reason, and civility.

Nationalism and Political Control

Once a body politic had been formed and its rules stabilized, the different groups, through contention, sought to define how the country would develop, modernize, and achieve social justice. Mexico went through a major social revolution; 1910 marked the beginning of a period of convulsion and struggle during which a variety of commanding army chiefs—*caudillos*—attempted to gain control and redefine the goals of the country. Fights and alliances as well as enmities characterized the next seven years. The country pacified and controlled some of its violence during this civil war only under the presidency of Plutarco Elías Calles (1920–1924).

In the thirties, the rules and the system that President Calles had initiated started to take root. They established an electoral process that would offer a longer life expectancy and routinized transitions that increasingly legitimized rules and rulers.[16] More and more, it became an attempt to move away from the Hobbesian state of war of all against all. The issues that had been hitherto fought in military struggles became too costly for the country to benefit anyone any further.[17] As groups were being disarmed and depoliticized, they also reconfigured the political life of the country.

Physically, whatever had been achieved during the pre-Revolutionary calm was soon destroyed. Roads and railroads—crucial for war and for peace—had been extensively damaged. The mining, metallurgy, and oil industries needed foreign currency to restart production. In the early part of the century, economic tensions grew. Salaries did not follow past growth; strikes broke out all over the country. About 88 percent of the country was rural, and the agricultural sector had to support half of Mexico's 14 or 15 million inhabitants. This majority did not have the power to participate in the economy. The market was possibly used by 3 million people only.

About a million people died during the Revolution over issues of leadership and presidential succession. The expansion plans of the United States also remained a source of tension. In 1914, in the midst of the power struggles following the murder and coup d'état staged against President Francisco I. Madero by Victoriano Huerta, the northern states of Mexico requested help and military supplies from the United States. President Woodrow Wilson sent troops to Veracruz. The reaction in Mexico was fierce: many interpreted it as an attempt on the part of the United States to secure the oil fields of Tampico (near Veracruz) and to get a permanent foothold in the national territory. Mexican nationalistic sensibilities were and remained raw. Only in 1932 did the United States recognize the then-president of the country, thereby officially acknowledging the sovereignty of Mexico.

As soon as there was some peace, the issue of repopulating the country resurfaced as the most efficient and immediate solution to the country's internal problems. But the inherited dislike and distrust of foreigners and of Jews specifically had not disappeared. The nationalism that had taken root in Mexico during the years after the war of independence now also incorporated elements of nineteenth-century positivism, which was an ideology very much in fashion in European circles. In its social version, it suggested that the betterment of a society required the "whitening" of the races by establishing a racially hierarchical structure to direct society. In its Mexican version, the social hierarchy implied that those at the top were also in control of the economy and polity. This was to come about as the Europeans mixed with the local indigenous population, producing a culture and a group, the mestizo, that incorporated the "whiteness" of Western European culture biologically, culturally, and religiously. Though it appeared that this brand of positivism invoked universal principles (i.e., the mixture of "all" the races), in practice its xenophobic and anti-Semitic content was never fully hidden. It linked the betterment of society to a predefined homogenization of the population, usually in support of "white, western, Catholic" culture.

Yet the idea of an immigrant population, when discussed in abstract terms, seems to have been attractive. Despite the specific nationalistic feelings, everyone agreed that the immigrants were an economic asset. Immigration as an idea was never totally rejected; but the ambivalence over it always lurked.

On Immigration: Policy and Politics

Taking as its source an immigration law that had been enacted in 1823, after the independence movement started, immigration and colonization were often topics on the political agendas of the groups fighting for con-

trol of the country. However, Mexico never achieved what the United States achieved in the area of immigration.[18] When the government once again stressed the issue of immigration in 1856, Mexico was still immersed in a civil war that never allowed the country to offer the economic attractions required for populations to come.

The immigration laws changed often, refining the language about immigration categories following what other countries were doing at the time. During the first years of the century and until 1923, the country based its policy of immigration on the 1908 law that examined only the health condition of those foreigners coming into the country. This followed the selection criteria that were used in the United States. Limitations were set against people with epilepsy, communicable diseases, mental diseases, and physical defects, as well as beggars, prostitutes, and, in a category of their own, anarchists. But slowly, new restrictions were added. By 1917, not only physical and mental undesirables were excluded but "economic and political undesirables" too. As more laws were enacted, reports that the laws were not regularly enforced increased and the bribes paid to circumvent the laws became more frequent.

While the United States was closing its doors to immigration in 1924, Mexico sought to attract the immigrants that were being rerouted from the north. Though the United States had developed a mystique of success,[19] the country of "streets paved with gold," the reality of political life was at odds with the prevailing image. During World War I, many attempted to avoid the draft, Jews among them. Some managed to enter Mexico even when documentation was missing. The Mexican inspectors were lax on the requirements and may have felt some sympathy for what they may have perceived as the immigrants' "anti-Yankee" stand.[20]

In 1923, President Obregón refined the immigration law, establishing male and female age requirements, as well as favoring only young adults; restrictions were also placed on illiterates, users of toxic substances, and anybody who did not have sufficient economic resources to subsist for at least two months. The law was amended again in an attempt to attract the postwar influx from the United States. The Jews who settled "temporarily" in Mexico were offered a special "privilege" to wait for visas to enter the United States; but, because the number of years required to wait changed between 1921 and 1928 from one to five, many were forced to settle in Mexico after all. Once they had developed basic skills, established themselves in some line of work, and learned the language, the move again to the United States was less attractive; it would involve a difficult and exhausting effort, for an undetermined benefit. As if against all odds, Jews were arriving in the country. Little by little, and totally unplanned, Mexico was hosting immigrants, among them Jews.

In the aftermath of World War I, immigration to Mexico occurred in larger numbers, and the laws on immigration became more complicated. Reforms adopted in 1926 defined categories such as *colonizer, tourist, emigrant, immigrant,* and so on. By July of 1927, the economic crisis led to the imposition of additional restrictions by specific area or country: Armenians, Arabs, Lebanese, Palestinians, and Turks, among others, were all deemed unacceptable. In 1929 the increase of the undesired categories of people included the Polish, Russians, and Chinese. For a few months, albeit temporarily, immigration was prohibited completely. Though later it was phrased as only limiting the entry of "Syrians, Lebanese, Armenians, Palestinians, Arabs, Turks, and Chinese," the law amounted to a closed-door policy.

Nationalist labels often masked the fact that the restrictions were aimed at Jews from certain countries; only in 1933–34 did the regulations openly limit Jewish immigration. This, of course, was at the height of the need for Jews to immigrate, as Nazi persecution rose. The law thus decreed:

> This Ministry deems it convenient to attack the problem created by Jewish immigration, which more than any other, because of its psychological and moral characteristics, and because of the type of activities to which it dedicates and the procedures it follows in pressing business of commercial nature that invariably is its choice, comes to be undesirable; and consequently will not be allowed to immigrate to the country, neither as investors in terms of the Agreement of the last 16th of February, nor as traveling agents, directors, managers, representatives of businesses established in the Republic, workers of responsibility, rentists, students, the individuals of Semitic race; adding . . . if it will be discovered that he is of Jewish origin, regardless of the nationality he belongs to, his entry will have to be prohibited and the Ministry shall be advised immediately by telegraph.[21]

In 1938, the international effort to place Nazi-persecuted Jews as refugees did not make Mexico into an immigrant haven. However, the rules were bent for other groups: in 1937, five hundred Spanish orphans of the Spanish Civil War were taken in; in 1939, Spanish republicans were also allowed in as refugees. With respect to the Jews, like some other countries, Mexico intended to be helpful, but the terms of its help were so vague that the numbers of immigrants considered acceptable were absolutely minimal. Nevertheless, the application of the many new and changing Mexican rules on immigration were never enforced so rigorously as to inhibit all immigration.

But the Mexican government still sought to solve its chronic internal economic problems by using immigrant population. Agriculture and industrialization were both areas of the economy which required attention

in Mexico. Mostly they required large amounts of capital. Agriculture required infrastructure: irrigation, dams, and the transport of water. To industrialize, there was need for money to generate the technology necessary or even to import it.[22] This also required the development of infrastructure—roads and railroads. To attract immigrants, the government offered facilities: limited free land, low prices for land, time to pay off land, and exemption from military service and taxes. But the government's propaganda was neither accurate nor widespread. Any propaganda on immigration that reached the Jews became a bureaucratic problem because they had no particular international body to represent them. Most attempts were made by either American Jewish organizations that helped Jews internationally, such as the B'nai B'rith, HIAS (the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society), the Joint Distribution Committee (commonly known as "Joint"), or colonization associations that were often organized and supported by a wealthy Jew who financed most of the enterprise.

Mexico had not clearly defined its immigration policy; when it came to Jews, the ambivalences were further exacerbated. In addition, there were diverse opinions within the country as to the specific desirability of Jews. The latent and intangible prejudices of the Catholic Church against Jews, at least in the abstract, exerted an influence. The image of Jews crucifying Jesus and the connection between contemporary Jews and the crucifixion were actively maintained. In addition, Jews were hardly physically known in Mexico for a few centuries, as the Inquisition had eliminated the few who had managed to settle centuries back. Because of their small number, Jews were not encountered as a group. Yet the negative images of Jews held by the population at large were not counteracted. The Church fostered anti-Semitic thinking for practical reasons: the Catholic Church owned half of all the real estate of the country; it was thus not interested in sharing territory with immigrants who would get it "free" from the government.[23] However, all anti-Semitic actions were not attributable to the Catholic Church.[24] Church and state had been separate since the latter part of the nineteenth century. There was too much ambivalence and anti-Jewish feeling on the part of the government to blame those actions solely on the Church.

Attempts to Redress the Antiforeigner Mood

The ambivalence to foreigners that was imbedded in the actions and reactions of the Mexican government had many facets. In 1920, before the country had achieved peace, President Carranza faced the problem of most of the leadership positions in the country being held by self-made military men. The value and aim of a civilian government seemed utopian,

as a civilian within the existing power structure was totally alien. Carranza, however, decided to introduce his ambassador to the United States, Licenciado Bonilla, as a civil candidate to the presidency. Bonilla was relatively unfamiliar in the Mexican scene. Speculation arose concerning his national background, whether his family name was really Mexican, who his parents were, and whether he was Catholic. The fact that he was married to a Protestant Englishwoman was regarded as a liability, and raised questions about the education and religious beliefs of his daughters. The lack of sympathy for Bonilla was fanned by an entire campaign to discredit and eventually disqualify him as candidate.[25] In this story all the political elements of the period conflate: civilism versus militarism; nationalism versus openness to foreigners; Catholic versus other religions.

In 1922, President Obregón made the first public invitation to Jews, but by 31 October 1922 he was urging that the Mexican Constitution grant privileges to any race. The new invitation and its clarification seem to have eliminated the possibility for colonization, and weakened any immigration. The B'nai B'rith had potential projects for colonization in Mexico, and had contacted President Obregón without being in contact with local Jews. A group of sixty Jews in Mexico wrote an open letter to the Jewish press in America, suggesting a halt to the ideas of immigration.[26] The local economy was too precarious and unwelcoming, they argued. Similarly, Anita Brenner, an early settler and writer, recalled that when Yiddish was first heard in the streets of Mexico, a wave of alarm went through the Jews who had settled there. Their good fortune would be spoiled if competition increased and Jews started to be recognized. This reaction, encountered again and again in many communities, reveals, at the very least, the perpetual insecurity of Jews.

Whether the original invitation from President Obregón was aimed at countering these feelings of the local Jews, and the later modifications to the invitation were a response to internal pressure, is not known. We can conclude, though, that conflicting pressures and rationales existed in both sectors.

Projecting an Image and a Reality

The Mexican business representative in Berlin and later deputy Alberto García Granados told the Mexican government in 1879 that since Jews in Rumania seemed very unhappy, it would be wise to induce them to go to Mexico if they would bring their "considerable capital." The Alliance Israelite of Paris[27] began planning the migration of between 12 000 to 15 000 Russian Jews to Mexico. Because the Mexican government wanted farmers, the plan was to settle them in San Luis Potosí. But the plan quickly

fell apart as the potential immigrants were found not to be farmers.[28]

In 1881, the newspapers *El Monitor Republicano* and *El Siglo XXI* reprinted a French article concerning a proposal for the establishment of Russian Jewry in Mexico. Incentives to the would-be immigrants included free grants, transportation, tools, machines, animals, and exemption from military service. The same month, the English *Jewish Chronicle* also suggested possible emigration for Russian Jews to Mexico. A year later, a German Jew living in Mexico, Guillermo Müeller, offered to buy land in the state of Veracruz for the resettlement of one hundred Jewish families.[29] Similar proposals arose periodically, and as late as 1957 diverse groups were still attempting to settle Jews in Mexico.[30] The local Jews never made great efforts to attract, support, or expand the government's invitations after these were issued and published; little on this topic was publicized in Mexico.[31] As a result, there was never a formal organized plan, neither from the hosts nor from the Jewish immigrants.

In the period immediately preceding the more formal settlement of Sephardic Jews in Mexico in 1912, there were other major projects to relocate Jews; all ended unsuccessfully.[32] There was an attempt, for instance, initiated by Baron Maurice de Hirsch (1831–1896) in 1881. While focusing on Argentina as a possible solution for some of the masses of impoverished Jews, he also briefly considered Mexico. Prominent Jews in France and New York cooperated with him in his effort; most significant among these were Jacob Schiff (1847–1920), the New York banker, and Ernest Cassel (1852–1921), financier and railroad magnate involved in the construction of railroads in Mexico. The discussions continued until 1892, but again nothing materialized. Baron de Hirsch was never fully convinced of Mexico as the right place for Jews, and he eventually abandoned the plan.

The attempts that the Alliance Israelite had initiated in 1882 in response to a Mexican overture did not lead to anything either. In 1887 another project was sponsored by Lionel Samuel, a member of a London Jewish family living in Mexico; this also failed. This was the period when the President Díaz expressed interest in Jewish immigration, declaring that Jews could "teach [Mexicans] to think preventively." Their example could be, he said, beneficial to the country. The Catholic press declared itself against the project.[33]

A project launched by the Territorialists, a group formed by the British Zionist writer Israel Zangwill (1864–1926), also failed. They propagandized sporadic attempts for colonization in Mexico, which they printed in their journal *Freeland* in Mexico. Even as late as 1945, *Freeland, Periodical of the Freeland League for Jewish Territorial Colonization in Mexico*,[34] suggested a novel theory of immigration. This posited the view that immigration did not displace the local population econom-

ically, because the process did not decrease wage levels or employment. Instead, they saw immigration as a potential job-creating experience, as the case of the United States proved. The Territorialists produced a list of immigrant groups such as the Italians and the Irish, and attempted to show that cotton manufacturing, whaling industry, iron-clad steamship, and the building of bridges, railroads, and dams were all activities whose development was due to the immigrants' ingenuity and resources.

But in creating colonies with potential massive immigration of Jews, Mexico often wanted "capital and sufficient remuneration" that made the projects prohibitive and unfeasible. The problem of the daily sustenance of the newcomers was left unresolved. How would they earn a living? The country needed the building of an infrastructure and population, and resources to do it all. It also wanted to develop the country's agriculture. Jews could certainly not finance the first part of the project, not even part of it, and they tended to be more of an urban population. In Mexico, the only type of urban immigration that was welcomed was that of technically skilled people who moved temporarily to the cities to provide specific services. As a result, all the Jews who entered the country in the 1920s made it mostly on their own, with no official structural support.

In 1910, before the Revolution, Mexico had about sixty colonies: sixteen official ones and forty-four private ones. Eight of the official ones and ten of the private ones were formed with Mexicans; of these, five were comprised of repatriated Mexicans. Of the other official ones, six were settled by Italians, one by nationalized Guatemalans, and one by American Indians. Of the private efforts, twenty were North American, two German, and two Cuban. Each of the following groups also had a colony: French, Belgian, Spanish, Boer, Japanese, Russian, and Puerto Rican. It is very hard to come by the exact numbers of people that were housed in these colonies. We can assume, in general terms, that the total population fluctuated between 6,700 to 8,500 persons.

The Mexican official position was ambivalent to all foreigners but in particular to Jews, who were in constant search for a territory and a safe haven, especially during politically and economically discriminatory periods in Eastern and Western Europe. When invitations were issued, they were inevitably accompanied by statements that ample privileges could not be offered to the new population; financial support and capital were almost always requested from the world Jewish organizations. Thus, although the Mexican government toyed for a long time with the idea of attracting an immigrant population to help develop and colonize the vast country, and Jews, for the most part, were eager to participate, a formal match was never consummated. Jews never seemed to fit the exact type of immigrant the Mexican government envisioned.

A World That Dismisses Pluralism

The fact that Mexico was in search for ways to achieve new defined goals for itself was in and of itself not new. For a long time, diverse groups in Mexican society had put forward their own blueprints of what they thought Mexican society should become. The modern history of the country can be read as the confrontation among groups with varied ideas on this matter.

The last two centuries have been for Mexico a period of not only rebuilding the physical and political boundaries of its nation but also of building its internal psychohistorical identity. After being a colonial enclave of Spain, Mexico struggled to create a new cultural definition of itself sufficiently distinct from the Spanish one to further its claim to independence and sovereignty. Although independence meant primarily separation from the Spanish, the process itself suggested that many "others," individuals as well as cultures, could be perceived as potential or actual threats. The distaste for the "other," the stereotypical Jew, helped to create scapegoats to explain the country's internal economic problems. After all, blaming foreigners for most social evils has a long history.

The concepts of *mestizaje* (crossbreeding of racial groups) and *crisol de las razas* (crucible of races) were the two central concepts embodying the idea and the experience of Mexico's cultural melting. But more than anything, *mestizaje* and *crisol de las razas*, as used in the later part of the last century and the current one, became parts of an ideology that defined the cultural entity of the new Mexico. The concepts helped identify who was in charge and in control of the new body politic, who were the legitimate owners of modern Mexico. Mexico was for the mestizos and for no one else. At the same time, the ideology evoked the homogenizing forces that were at work for those who wanted to join the new Mexican experiment. The fear of the "other" led to the fear of diversity; diversity was seen as an inherent threat to central authority and to the authentic. This lack of pluralism had consequences that have spilled over the political style of the country into areas that are very far removed from cultural areas: as soon as any group was defined as "other" in Mexico, it was excluded from full participation in the political space of the country.

This ideology also overlooked a historical, ethical, political, and cultural fact: the indigenous population of Mexico. This population had not turned mestizo. Thus, the ideology expressed a desire for a homogeneity, but did not describe a reality. Moreover, the homogenizing ideology promoted and imposed a violence onto one of the most deserving sectors of the population: the indigenous groups. This population had

incorporated vast elements of Western culture and the Catholic religion, and, to some degree, the most structural characteristic of the Western society that controlled them: the language. But many indigenous groups, perhaps as many as a hundred, diverse in size and spread out over the country, had remained, despite this history, distinctive cultural and linguistic subgroups. Mexico reflected the liberalism of the Enlightenment, offering a similar response to its cultural wars of identity. As in the Enlightenment, most ideals of man and society were stated in abstract, universal terms. On the one hand, this meant a unification of the conceptualizations of the human condition. On the other, it meant an effacement of immediate historical specificities. Thus, the ideology and the nationalism it produced was a composite of cosmopolitan, rational design that negated its own pluralism and its diversity.

Mexico's political culture did not encourage respect for pluralism. It developed an abstract definition of Mexicanness, expecting the social groups to fit into it. If the internal diversity of cultures was not accepted, how could Mexico tolerate diversity from the outside? It is interesting to analyze the thinking of the influential Mexican philosopher, politician, and writer José Vasconcelos as an example of the problems intrinsic to such an ideology. Although by no means the only thinker on the issue,[35] as a politician in the early part of the 1920s Vasconcelos became an active proponent of the "Mestizo ideology." In his interpretation, mestizaje produced a new race. In this "new race," Hispanism would prevail. While he advocated the fusion of all races out of which a "cosmic race" would emerge, the fusion would not affect all races equally. He was especially proud of his Hispanic background and ancestry and thought that this Hispanism represented a higher cultural stage and should therefore predominate. During his years in public life, the ideological racial hierarchy that he promoted was either veiled to most or acceptable to some. It was only in the 1930s, when his political standing had weakened and he felt his personal power threatened, that his original distaste for other cultures took the form of a very clear anticommunism, anti-Americanism, and, finally, a vitriolic anti-Semitism.[36]

The condition and problems of the indigenous population of Mexico have been effaced from the political agenda of the country. The indigenous population was not sufficiently integrated linguistically, economically, geographically, or politically to be able to fill the economic gap that mestizo society wanted. Their general culture and existence were not fully accepted, their economic and political status were misunderstood, and the mestizo culture saw them as an undifferentiated group in terms of the dominant, conquering Western culture. *Indians*, in itself a historically inaccurate term that directed attention to the colonized status of these groups, were deemed a lazy, backward, useless group, all old stereo-

types taken from the conquering culture. There was no recognition of their painful past, no recognition of their culture, no respect for their identity, and no historical awareness of the sociopolitical and economic limitations that were imposed on them. Indeed it was only in 1994 that the Mexican Constitution recognized the fact of the indigenous population as a minority in its midst.

The number of languages the different groups maintained were—and mostly are—unknown to the Mestizo population at large. Maya, Tarahumara, Aymara, Guarani, Tzoltzil, and Tzeltzal are all one undifferentiated mass. If communication was difficult,[37] cohesion was then almost nonexistent. And, although language need not be a requisite for cohesion and nationalism (as the case of Switzerland shows), the diversity of languages in Mexico coincided with socioeconomic and political divisions. Seventy percent of the total population over ten years of age was illiterate at the beginning of the twentieth century.[38] Understood in a different way, this multicultural context could have served to develop views about multiple ethnic-cultural social arrangements. But Mexico was unable to address this issue.

Immigration was therefore a detour to avoid a direct confrontation of how to incorporate the indigenous population into the body politic. The Mexican government justified the need for immigration by stressing the country's unexploited national richness, the lack of population, the local limitations to exploit the natural resources, and the greater value of the foreign worker. If the policy of immigration of the nineteenth century was aimed at correcting the global deficit of population and the unequal distribution of the population of the country, the government acted at best ambivalently in its attempt to solve these problems. Since 1856, Article 27 of the Constitution had specified that only Mexican citizens could own land. The same was true for companies. Special care was given to place foreign colonies at specific distances from the border, to avoid the potential changing of boundaries within the territory. The government could officially offer special rights to foreigners as long as they renounced the protection of other governments. There was no desire to incorporate foreign entities into the country, only an intellectual desire that somehow seemed to make muddled numerical sense.

How then, is one to describe Mexico's position? At best, one can say that the political position on immigration remained always ambivalent. However, what seemed a problem of the past (immigration) and a policy of the past (the interrelationship with foreigners) became a basic characteristic of the state. The issue still colors the state's internal relationship with the minorities and calls into question the democratic character of Mexican society.

Jewish Testimony of the Early Mexico

Testimonial information from immigrant Jews who arrived in Mexico in the late teens, twenties, and thirties,[39] ranges from individual life histories to a view of the economy and politics as lived and felt in the streets, and from a view of lifestyles to the clash of cultures of the peoples of the world. What emerges is a picture of a world that no longer exists, but a picture that contains the seeds of much of what developed later into the more mature and elaborate political culture of this system.

The immigrants give us a Mexico which in its strangeness appeared to them as a land of extraordinary, magical beauty, a land in which nature, food, culture, and people present the landscape of a very different world. The colors, the light, the sun, the heat; the flora, the leaves, the trees; the smells, the shapes, the textures; the roads, the dust, the air, the sounds; the dress, the shawls, the hats, the sandals; the houses, the food, the songs, the drinking, the extreme feelings: everything is noticed because it is different. A picture of old Mexico can thus be reconstructed, coming alive through the voices of the immigrants.[40] In viewing this strangeness, and their aim to be part of it, they reveal much of themselves. Their fears and their anguish suffuse their recollections of the beginning. But, more than any other feeling, we find hope in their voices: hope that a future exists, hope that survival is possible, hope that coexistence is something within reach, hope that they will bond, and hope that the world's vast problems, when reduced to their life-span and immediate context, will permit life.

After their first assessment of their new environment, the immigrants began to make sense of themselves and their life in the new world in more reflexive terms. Then their self-definition became a priority. Their concerns—who are we, who can we be here, and how are we to become that—reflect the political make-up of the country. Many of the new writers identified very strongly with the indigenous population. For, if they felt themselves to be in exile, they sensed and identified all the more with the parts of the society that were also exiled.[41] When Salomon Kahan, a journalist, begins his 1945 book *Yidish-Meksikanish* (Jewish-Mexican) with a short essay on the drama of the "two Mexicos," he is chronicling not only Mexico's problems but also his general problem of belongingness in Mexican society. The issue of belongingness is his central motif, and he describes it as a raw nerve of this society. He studies the country: the indigenous groups and the mestizo. While he identifies with the tragic fate of the first, he also attempts to understand the difficulties of the second.

The main issue for Jews in Mexico was whether they would be able to belong. But to belong is not a one-way street. One must *want* to belong,

but one must also be *allowed* to belong. The complexity of this dynamic was not clear to the immigrants at the beginning, but neither was it totally hidden. The government had not adopted an explicit and definitive immigration policy; instead the flexibility of rules and rulers allowed Jews to arrive and settle, giving them some space in which to expand. In addition to the economic problems that Jews, like most immigrants, faced (lack of resources, lack of language skills, etc.), what they had to contend with was the creation of a political space.

Anita Brenner, an early observer of this community, concluded that, except to cultured Mexicans and foreigners, a Jew was either a "Judas toy" or an "evil spirit," but not a person.[42] Being limited in number, Jews could escape prejudice. They remained mostly unnoticed. However, they could also cope with discomfort by concealing their identity. Prejudice served them well, as Brenner suggests, and being a "monster" had its compensations. No one could identify them as Jews; horrid Jews were nowhere to be seen. For a time, they were considered to be of any other nationality and for as long as possible they remained hidden as such. Being called Arab, Russian, Turk, or Pole—it all served a purpose.

The Mexico that received these Jews is variously described through different lenses, from the disheartening feelings of dashed illusions to the romantic hopefulness of the dreamer. A foreign transient observer, Leon J. Pepperberg, a geologist and engineer, thus wrote to the *American Israelite* in 1922: "A colony in this desert territory is like exile. I ask myself if European Jewry could adapt easily to these agricultural conditions." He explained that railroads and roads were rudimentary; there was a lack of irrigation and water. "I am not a Zionist," he wrote, "but I would prefer to invest this money in Palestine rather than Mexico . . . the land of the forefathers . . . there is no future for the agricultural colonies of Jews in Mexico."[43] Though this thinking prevailed, attempts to help individual Jews continued. In 1923 Rabbi Martin Zielonka from El Paso, Texas, a special liaison of the B'nai B'rith, studied the possibility of Jewish colonization in Mexico. He found wages to be too low for immigrants to subsist, and the market too limited to be an incentive; Jews would therefore not be able to support themselves. As a result, neither the urban centers nor the agricultural projects received a seal of approval. Zielonka suggested that, even if attempted, massive colonization could be prohibitively expensive. Finally, the American Jewish Congress also vetoed the colonization projects. Opinions like these, harsh and disappointing, projected a disenchantment that had a strong impact on the American Jewish organizations and philanthropists who were considering Mexico a possible location for the colonizing experiments.[44]

Descriptions of Mexico differ according to their sources. For most adults, Mexico was foreign and difficult: exotic in its food, different in its