

# The Jew in Mexico

By ANITA BRENNER

MEXICO faces, in her work of reconstruction, the untangling of an amazing number of racial problems. She must reconcile the East and the West, the primitive and the ultra-modern. All castes, all creeds, all stages of "progress" must be merged into a coherent whole. And yet, curiously enough, Mexico lacks the universal "Jewish question." Here, as in several other Latin-American countries, there is no Jewish problem because ostensibly there is no Jew. To the average Mexican, the *Judío* (Jew) is purely a Biblical demon. He is the traitor who betrayed Christ. And as such he burns him in effigy during Holy Week, and as such he curses him and shudders at his name. Serapia, my old nurse, had always solemnly assured me that all *Judíos* were horned and tailed and drank children's blood; and I did not know until we had left Mexico that by all rights we ourselves should possess the wicked little horns and carefully concealed tail.

Even today, with the exception of some members of the upper middle classes and the intellectuals, Mexico still believes the old church myths about the Jew, and, what is still more wonderful, Mexico believes that all the Jews are either damned or in Jerusalem. This in the face of the fact that the Jewish population of Mexico City alone numbers several thousands. Jewish immigrants are flooding Mexico, from Poland, Russia, Germany, Austria, Turkey, Arabia, even Palestine. Yet all of them are called simply *extranjeros*—foreigners—or more specifically *Rusos*, *Alemanes*, *Turcos*, *Árabes*.

Precisely because he is excluded by certain immigration restrictions from entering the United States the Jew in Mexico is rapidly becoming omnipresent. As a peddler he travels through the entire country with his pack of socks, ties, dry-goods, hardware, saint-images, and crucifixes—"literally fulfilling," said one with a smile, "the old accusation of selling the Christ." The Eastern Jews, who have a long-established semi-colony in Mexico City, practically monopolize the silk and rug markets. The old-timer, usually a French, German, English, or Spanish Jew, is to be found in the big businesses, the banks, the importing and exporting houses, the mines and haciendas. The educated newcomer from Germany, Russia, England is a doctor, a lawyer, a teacher. In the foremost ranks of labor leaders are found Jews; doing scientific research work are Jews; Jews hold important and highly trustworthy government positions. It is even said that the prophet of Mexico's renaissance, the dreamer and revolutionist Madero, was the son of a man who prayed every morning in Hebrew with phylacteries upon his forehead.

The Jew is everywhere, but astoundingly unperceived. He is never known as a *Judío* to Mexicans, and often he is incognito to his own people. Because he likes Mexico and its people he very rapidly identifies himself with it. Nearly all the immigrants succeed eventually in reaching their Mecca—America. And yet each one returns. He comes back to Mexico from *gefüllte fisch* and synagogues, bringing perhaps a Jewish wife, perhaps a new stock of merchandise, a sprinkling of English, and an agglomeration of American ideas. But he makes his home Mexican, and he speaks Spanish, dropping his comfortable Yiddish even

within the family. And in a startlingly short time he has become part of the country he has adopted.

Not very long ago I was dancing at the house of a friend with a young man who seemed quite Mexican in his speech, his manner, his appearance. And within a few moments he had placed himself, Daniel Levy, with smiling Mexican courtesy, "at my service." Upon another occasion I had dropped into one of the large curio and book stores of Mexico City for a chat with a most agreeable, supposedly Spanish gentleman who hunted books from the top shelves for me. I inquired for Zangwill's "King of Schnorrers." He regretted very much that at present the book was not in stock, but if I desired he could constitute himself a genuine *King of Schmoozers* (*schmooz* is to talk) for me.

It is practically an historical axiom that the Jew thrives on prejudice, on persecution; tolerated, he loses the intensity of his race consciousness, tends to disseminate and assimilate. But in Mexico the assimilation of the Jew is more than a tendency, it is the key of his future in the new land. Not only does the Jewish tradition of race preservation struggle—if one may put it so—against a wholly unexpected tolerance; it is completely disconcerted, undermined, by the Mexican attitude of indifference. And, somehow, there hardly seems any point in being a Jew and declaring so passionately when no one prohibits it. The whole procedure becomes a little ridiculous.

The Mexican attitude of casual tolerance does not, however, limit itself to religious fields. Personally, socially, he does not hate the Jew, and consequently the Jew cannot despise him, as he always has despised the Gentile in other lands. If there is no hate and no contempt, there is no reason for aloofness. That is why Mexico City, with its very large Jewish population, has no Jewish community. In fact, the *extranjeros* are divided among themselves, first in two large groups, the Eastern and Western, and each of these in itself, through differences of nationality. While the Easterners have made an attempt to preserve their race individuality—they have a synagogue, rabbis, a Hebrew school—the attempt takes on a character of pathos. Their zeal has a broken backbone, and their struggles are fruitless. The immigrants, in Europe the most orthodox of all Jews, become in Mexico actually indifferent to the lack of both rabbi and synagogue. They accept Mexicans on a friendly, even an intimate footing. Gradually, unconsciously, because by the outsiders they are not considered primarily as Jews, they themselves forget the all-embracing character of their religion. They drift, hardly realizing where, and not particularly concerned.

There is even a strong element which does understand the nature of the disintegration that is going on and which is glad of it, deliberately advocating it. These "liberals" say that the race, in spite of its prophecies, has no divine mission to fulfil in the modern world. They say there is absolutely no reason why the Jews must continue to preserve themselves a race apart. They say that they have suffered far too much already for the sake of an outworn religion and because of a great deal of blind stubbornness. And while the majority of the Jews do not echo their