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The Jewish Migration to Mexico during Nazi Germany

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Abstract: In response to antisemitic persecution from Nazi Germany and allied states, Jews from Central and Eastern Europe sought asylum, emigrated, applied for visas, and faced deportation. Mexico, under the leadership of President Lázaro Cardenas, a vocal opponent of Fascism who allowed tens of thousands of Spanish-Republican exiles to emigrate to the country, was one potential destination for Central and Eastern European Jews. In fact, the Mexican Secretariat of Foreign Affairs, received thousands of applications from asylum seekers. This paper challenges the image of Mexico as a country offering hospitality to European refugees and evaluates the state's reluctance to accept Jews during the presidencies of Cárdenas and his successor, Manuel Ávila Camacho. By highlighting the very different receptions given to Spaniards, on the one hand, and Central and Eastern European Jews on the other, I argue that Mexico's immigration and refugee policy was influenced by racism rather than antifascism alone. Examining immigration policies of the 1930s and 1940s has possible implications for today's immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers and how contemporary governments accept or exclude them.

When Adolf Hitler was appointed chancellor of Germany and the National Socialist German Workers' Party (now shorthanded as Nazi Party) gained control in 1933, life substantially changed for Jews, Romani, gay, and those otherwise considered "unfit" under the ideology advocated by this supremacist political party. The methodical persecution of those deemed inferior (*untermenschen*) began in 1933, and was further aggravated in 1935 through the Nuremberg Laws that revoked their German citizenship and prohibited "non-Aryans" from marrying "Aryans." Though in practice, these prohibitions included other groups, Jews were the only group mentioned in the text of law. Segregation, isolated violence, and *Kristallnacht*, (the terrorizing and killings of Jews by Germans) among other atrocities, were harbingers of one of the greatest documented genocides of human history: the Holocaust.

Thousands of Jews persecuted were later deported and sent to concentration camps, while others sought asylum in Cuba, France, China, and the United States. Neighboring European countries took hundreds of thousands of Jewish refugees when the Final Solution, the plan for exterminating all Jews, began to be carried out in 1941. Latin America, the Middle East, and places in Asia also became safe havens for Jews fleeing Nazism. After World War II broke out

in 1939, Latin American countries such as Argentina, Brazil, and Bolivia welcomed over 100,000 Jewish refugees.

Mexico, a country under the administration of Lázaro Cárdenas, was viewed as a progressive state because of the nationalization of oil and redistribution of acres of land, but it was not as liberal as Mexicans believed. On one hand, the Mexican government received thousands of applications from Jews; yet it only authorized the entrance of around 2,000 individuals. During that time, political asylum and refuge were offered to over 25,000 Spanish-Republicans fleeing fascism and the violent civil war in Spain that raged from 1936-1939. In this paper, I argue that Mexico's immigration and refugee policy was influenced by coinciding anti-Semitism, xenophobia, and racism rather than simply antifascism. Additionally, I argue that Cárdenas was less sympathetic to Jews than his successor, Manuel Avila Camacho, who allowed the entrance of hundreds more, albeit possibly because of political pressure from the United States and Great Britain. To obtain asylum, individuals had to be wealthy, not pose an economic threat to other Mexicans, not be an economic burden to the government, assimilate to Mexican society, and most importantly, preserve *mestizaje*. The latter was solely placed on Jews and not Spanish-Republicans, who, it was assumed, would contribute to the preservation of *mestizaje* in Mexico.

While some historians have lightly discussed this topic, Daniela Gleizer from the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de México (UNAM) has published three extensive books on the subject. Her book, *Unwelcome Exiles: Mexico and the Jewish Refugees from Nazism, 1933-1945*, investigates Mexico's immigration laws, the presidential administrations of Presidents Lázaro Cárdenas and Manuel Ávila Camacho and their responses to Nazism, refugees, and World War II. I seek to build on Gleizer's argument that the racism, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism present in Mexico resulted in the denial of thousands of Jews into the country. I begin by examining the exile and refuge offered to Spanish-Republicans in Mexico. While Gleizer argues that the preservation of *mestizaje* in Mexico was one of the main causes for the withholding of thousands of Jews, I pinpoint that there may be other reasons for such rebuttal: the lack of cultural and racial familiarity as well as intellectualism. There was a large acceptance and encouragement of Spanish migration to Mexico, but in primary and secondary sources, I find that many of the Spanish who came into Mexico were considered intellectuals who would contribute to the cultural advancement of the country led by Cárdenas. The story of why Spanish-Republicans were warmly welcomed and their migration from Spain was encouraged by the Mexican government but Jewish migration was discouraged and denied through harsh immigration laws will be unraveled.

A Note on Sources

From the Mexican Jewish Documentation and Investigation Center located in Mexico City, I gathered some of my primary sources such as newspapers, passports, and official government documents virtually. I looked through telegrams, letters, newspapers, and other official documents from the Fanny Zlabovsky-National Council of Jewish Women case files, courtesy of the Special Collections department at The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP). Photographs and telegrams were also found online from published articles on official websites. Interviews by Dr. Yael Siman filmed in 2017, of around 15 Holocaust survivors and Jewish migrants in Mexico, published on the United States Memorial Holocaust Museum's website, were indispensable for this paper.

This paper starts by investigating where Mexican anti-Semitism began: its roots can be traced back to the 15th century. Next, I analyze the immigration laws beginning in 1926, followed by Cárdenas's and Avila Camacho's regimes, their responses to Nazism and World War II, and the initiatives taken. I also discuss and critically evaluate individuals, such as Gilberto Bosques, who have held onto a portrayal of heroism for a long time.

Mexico possesses a deep, rich history of Jewish migration that trails back to their expulsion from Spain in 1492. Jews arrived as Crypto, having a secret loyalty to Judaism while professing to be of another faith, mostly Christianity to avoid the Inquisition or persecution. During the Iberian Union, many Portuguese Jews arrived in Mexico as Cryptos. In 1571, Jews and indigenous people were subject to the Spanish Inquisition in Mexico. According to Yvette Alt Miller, by the time the Inquisition was abolished in 1821, "approximately 100 Jews had been killed and many more imprisoned".¹

In 1862, Emperor Maximilian was declared ruler and "issued an edict of religious tolerance and invited German Jews to settle in Mexico".² His legacy was carried on by President Benito Juárez who "[enforced] a separation of Church and State, ensuring that Mexico remained a haven for Jewish immigrants".³ Subsequently, Jews from Russia, Eastern Europe, and the Ottoman Empire migrated to Mexico in the late nineteenth century.

In 1910, The Mexican Revolution encouraged the arrival of even more immigrants who could contribute to the national reconstruction of Mexico, including wealthy Jewish merchants. President Plutarco Elias Calles stated that the Mexican government was inclined to receive Jews from Eastern Europe in the "warmest way" with aspirations to involve them in agriculture and industrial proposals. In fact, Presidents Alvaro Obregón and Elias Calles considered immigration a necessary factor for the continuous development of the national economy. As expected, more Jews, mostly from Eastern Europe, migrated to Mexico and settled as merchants or shopkeepers. For many years, Mexico "constituted the promised land" as Friedrich Katz argues, since "persecuted people for their political or religious beliefs could find refuge in Mexico when repressive regimes took over their country of origin".⁴

The prohibition of Jewish migration was not enacted until 1934, but before then, selective immigration laws that allowed and banned the entrance of many ethnic groups of people were administered. The 1926 *Ley de Migración* (Immigration Law) was ratified on medical criteria rather than racial criteria.⁵ The following year, in 1927, *Diario Oficial* published the first restrictive immigration policy which banned Syrians, Lebanese, Armenians, Palestine, Arabs, and Turks. The secretary of foreign relations later informed that while it was not stated on the document,

¹ Miller, Yvette Alt, Surprising Facts about the Jews of Mexico, Aish HaTorah Israel Programs. <https://www.aish.com/jw/s/Surprising-Facts-about-the-Jews-of-Mexico.html> (Accessed July 28, 2019).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Katz, Friedrich, *Mexico, Gilberto Bosques and the Refugees*, (The Americas, Vol. 57, No. 1, 2000), pg. 1.

⁵ Gleizer, Daniela, *México frente a la inmigración de refugiados judíos 1934-1940*, (Conaculta: Inah, 2000), pg. 69.

Chinese, Blacks, and Indochinese were also banned. In 1928, the Mexican government justified the law by attempting to preserve mestizaje and to avoid racial mixture. However, immigrants with more than Mex\$10,000 were allowed to enter the country.

In 1929, the Great Depression devastated many Mexican workers and initiatives by the government were taken to restrict immigration, especially of people classified as “undesirable.” The revised Immigration Law of 1930 was even more confining and reflected the political interests of the government; it stated that immigration would be evaluated on how well the immigrant could assimilate into Mexican culture and on their contribution to the nation’s unification. Although these laws were sanctioned before Cárdenas, additions and revisions to the policies were actively implemented during his administration.

As a result, many ethnic groups were banned from immigrating as investors, travelers, directors, representatives, students, or managers. The Immigration Law of 1936 stated that the increase in population should be sought by “natural growth, repatriation, and by immigration.”⁶ According to Gleizer, differential tables were drafted in 1939 which limited the migration to only 5,000 individuals from each country annually. However, the immigrants had to be wealthy, promise they would assimilate and contribute to Mexico, and not pose an economic burden or a threat to Mexican citizens. The following year, in 1940, the tables were reduced to 1,000 individuals per year. Spain and Latin American countries were not included in these tables, meaning migration from these countries remained unlimited. That same year, tourist and visitor visas were suspended because of World War II. Below is an excerpt by the secretary of the Interior found in Friedrich Katz’s article:

This *secretaría* believes that we have to deal with the problem created by the Jewish immigration but more than any other by its psychological and moral characteristics and by the kind of activities to which the Jews dedicate themselves... they are undesirable and they will not be allowed to immigrate in the country either as investors... as salesmen, directors, representatives of businesses in Mexico, employees, retirees or students.⁷

Dealing with the *Mexicanidad* project, the attempt by the Mexican government to unify the nation, ethnic races and/or religious groups were widely seen as “undesirable”. Mexicans took pride in mestizaje and as a result, Spanish exiles from the Spanish Civil War were warmly welcomed, accepted, and integrated into Mexico during the administration of Cárdenas. By 1928, the main goal of the Mexican government was to improve and preserve mestizaje,⁸ which led to the project of the unification of Indians, creoles, and mestizos and encouraged them to develop a Mexican identity. The government also took the initiative of labeling “undesirable” and “desirable” groups of people, which would later be defined in the immigration laws.

Simultaneously, Mexico was managing external factors that came with the Great Depression: the repatriation of more than 350,000 Mexican-Americans and their children. While the

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Katz, Friedrich, *Mexico, Gilberto Bosques and the Refugees*, (The Americas, Vol. 57, No. 1, 2000), pg. 1.

⁸ Gleizer, Daniela, *Unwelcome Exiles: Mexico and the Jewish Refugees from Nazism 1933-1945*, (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2014), pg. 37.

government's refusal of Jews was attributed to the repatriation, Spanish exiles were never denied political asylum during those years. In addition, Latin American countries suffered from the economic crisis and still welcomed hundreds of Jews in the 1930s. A coherent factor for a closed-door policy against Jews was the heavy anti-Semitism in Mexico. For centuries, the country had adopted and implemented Catholicism, while Judaism was widely thought of as the "devil's religion." This not only caused the Mexican government to reject Jews, but also opposition from the Mexican people. Communism and espionage were yet another concern, especially for Cárdenas since Jewish communists, Bundists, and Zionists (socialist organizations) were also emigrating from Europe.⁹ The demobilization of World War I troops also led to the development of complex systems by several countries to limit foreign entrance since governments assumed that temporary asylum would turn into permanent asylum. Ten years later, the annexation of Austria by Germany in March 1938 and the invasion of Poland in September 1939, forced countries to take extreme measures and shut down their borders. The first half of the twentieth century in Europe was tumultuous; overwhelmed with revolutions, global wars, a rise of fascism, and a political agenda to ethnically cleanse the East, so a refugee "problem" and crisis already existed. Hence, when the Jews sought refuge, many countries were quick to turn their backs, especially when the devastating Second World War broke out.

While Mexicans celebrated the nationalization of oil and redistribution of millions of acres of land across the country, fascism was at its peak in Italy, Germany, and Spain. As Jews searched and applied for visas, the Nuremberg Laws facilitated the refusal of many countries on the basis that once WWII was over, Jews would not be able to return to their home countries because their German citizenship had been revoked. The annexation of Austria by Germany had forced the French and British to carry out extremely restrictive immigration policies and for Palestine (mandated by the British) to close down their borders. The annexation of the Sudetenland and the deportation of German Jews to Poland also added to the intensifying situation in Eastern Europe and, in fact, most ships with Jewish refugees aboard arrived at the ports of Mexico that year. During the Evian Conference, organized by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Great Powers along with other countries gathered to discuss the Jewish problem in Europe. The purpose was "to coordinate international efforts in order to facilitate the immigration of political refugees from Germany and Austria."¹⁰ Mexican officials openly stated that they would willingly take as many refugees as they could. Yet, immigration into the country was still subject to the differential tables which explicitly banned Jews. Overall, the Evian Conference did not change the status of inferiority or "undesirable" designated to Jewish immigrants in Mexico.¹¹

Cárdenas supported the Spanish-Republicans during the Civil War against Francisco Franco's dictatorship and since Franco was supported by Hitler and Italy's Benito Mussolini—it was apparent that Cárdenas was not in favor of the fascist nations and leaders of Europe. Thus, Jews believed that they had a possibility of finding refuge in Mexico. On one hand, Katz argues that Cárdenas's acceptance of thousands of Spanish was a "result of profound ideological commitment and perhaps also of a hope to break the isolation in which Mexico in many respects found itself in the world."¹² Gleizer, on the other hand, states that when discussing the refugee

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Gleizer, Daniela, *México frente a la inmigración de refugiados judíos 1934-1940*, (Conaculta: Inah, 2000), pg, 113.

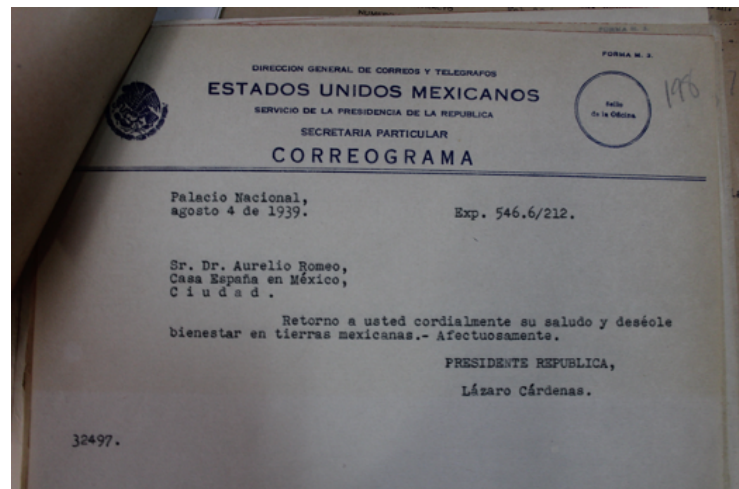
¹¹ Ibid, pg. 121.

¹² Katz, Friedrich, *Mexico, Gilberto Bosques and the Refugees*, (The Americas, Vol. 57, No. 1, 2000).

crisis, “[Jewish] persecution was almost never mentioned, and the subject was approached from the ideological viewpoint of mestizaje.”¹³ Consequently, the embrace of tens of thousands of Spanish exiles was based on racial merit as opposed to breaking the isolation of Mexico in the world, as Katz states. In fact, Mexico benefited from the Spanish exile as many were intellectuals, historians, writers, and scientists.¹⁴

When the Spanish-Republicans fell to General Franco, more than 500,000 people began to escape from Spain.¹⁵ They often were threatened to be sent back to Spain by the French government, where the Spanish regime would severely punish them for having escaped. Later, France fell to Nazi Germany and many Spaniards who had not been able to escape out of France were punished “in the most draconian ways”¹⁶ while others were directly sent to German concentration camps. Cárdenas, despite many Mexican citizens protesting against the Spanish refugees’ arrival, granted visa passports to hundreds or thousands of Spanish refugees at a time. He then worked with the committees of Spanish exiles so they “could not just live but thrive” in Mexican agriculture, fishing, and electrical engineering. According to Maria Sibley, these programs were paid from gold that had been shipped out of Spain during the Civil War that Cárdenas refused to return to Franco’s fascist regime. On a telegram found in Sibley’s article, Cárdenas writes a letter to a Spanish exile arriving at Mexico a letter of acceptance and warmth. Sibley calls him a “humanitarian, a leader with a backbone, a moral compass, and an intelligence that would be revered for decades to come.”¹⁷ Yet, a leader with a humanitarian impulse and sympathy for refugees sustained the reluctance of allowing ships to arrive at Mexican ports filled with hundreds of Jews ready to disembark.

Figure 1. Mexican General National Archive Printed in *National Geographic* by Destry Maria Sibley. A letter President Cárdenas wrote to Dr. Aurelio Romo upon his arrival to Mexico.



¹³ Gleizer, Daniela, *Unwelcome Exiles: Mexico and the Jewish Refugees from Nazism 1933-1945*, (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2014), pg. 84.

¹⁴ Sibley, Destry Maria, *A Parable of Refugees, or a History That Is True*, (National Geographic, 2017), access date December 13, 2018,

<https://blog.nationalgeographic.org/2017/11/15/a-parable-of-refugees-or-a-history-that-is-true/>.

¹⁵ Unknown Author. Civil War of Spain: What role did Mexico have in the conflict. The Mazatlán Post. <https://themazatlanpost.com/2019/04/02/civil-war-of-spain-what-role-did-mexico-have-in-the-conflict/> (Accessed August 5, 2019).

¹⁶ Sibley, Destry Maria, *A Parable of Refugees, or a History That Is True*, (National Geographic, 2017), access date December 13, 2018,

<https://blog.nationalgeographic.org/2017/11/15/a-parable-of-refugees-or-a-history-that-is-true/>.

¹⁷ Ibid

It is important to note that some Jewish immigrants were able to enter the country because they had more than Mex\$10,000 or Mex\$20,000 with them. This is troublesome because most of the time, when Jews fled Europe, the Nazis took all their possessions and left them with nothing. Some exceptions were made for Jews who had relatives in the country who were able to arrange their admission or because they were able to take advantage of gaps in the immigration policy.¹⁸ The first asylum seekers arrived at the port of Veracruz in August 1938 from the Rhineland in Austria. While the refugees carried tourist visas signed by the Mexican consul in Cologne, they did not have sufficient economic resources. Only a few refugees were allowed to disembark, Mr. Munz and Mr. Kaufman, who had been in a concentration camp in Germany, therefore, proving he was a real case of political asylum. According to Emanuel Barta, who wrote in a letter to Mrs. Fanny Zlabovsky, who worked for the El Paso, Texas section of the National Council of Jewish women and helped European Jewish immigrants enter the United States via Mexico: "a person which is persecuted because of his Judaism is not a political refugee. He must have a document of a socialistic or communistic organization in which is written, that he is punished for his political ideas or the reason because he was persecuted."¹⁹ He adds that an immigrant who wanted to work in the industry or agriculture could legally enter Mexico, but must own "a capital of 10.000 to 20.000 U.S. Dlls. In this case, it will cost nearly 600. To 1,000. U.S. Dlls. to get permission to enter the country."²⁰

The very few Jews who were allowed to set foot in Mexico often faced deportation threats for entering the country as tourists and not holding a valid passport. However, most Jews had their citizenship abolished and could not obtain passports except for those provided by Nazi Germany, which were marked with a large, red "J" to distinguish their Jewish race. By having these passports, it was strenuous to be admitted into many countries as refugees since they could not obscure the fact that they were Jewish. As a result, many Jews fled to Mexico with tourist visas or sometimes without any official documents with aspirations to change their status or extend their stay.

According to the headlines of *El Informado* published in Guadalajara, Jalisco in 1939, many refugees boarding *Orinoco*, one of the first boats to arrive at the port of Veracruz, were shunned. Onboard were Pablo Garbinsky from Poland and Hans Heinrich Von-Hollofeur from Germany who were expelled from their countries of origin. Both were accused of being secret spies for Nazi Germany by the Ministry of the Interior and had their documents destroyed.²¹ It was, however, almost impossible for them to be spies as both men were Jewish. Unfortunately, Garbinsky and Von-Hollofeur were forced to return to Europe accompanied by other Jews who were also not allowed to land. *Iberia*, another ship that reached the port of Veracruz, was only allowed to disembark 11 refugees, while 14 were detained by the Ministry of the Interior for having expired visas. Shortly, they were freed with the condition of leaving Mexico within the next 30 days or would face deportation to their country of origin. On October 22, 1938, *Orinoco*

¹⁸ Gleizer, Daniela, *Unwelcome Exiles: Mexico and the Jewish Refugees from Nazism 1933-1945*, (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2014), pg. 105.

¹⁹ Barta, Emanuel. Emanuel Barta to Mrs. Frank Zlabovsky, September 25, 1940. In Fanny Zlabovsky-National Council of Jewish Women case files, MS 508, C.L. Sonnichsen Special Collections Department. The University of Texas at El Paso Library.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Unknown author, *Es Ignorado su Paradero en Veracruz*, (El Informador: Diario Independiente, 1939), Retrieved from: <http://www.hndm.unam.mx/consulta>

carried 21 Jewish refugees with tourist visas but was denied entrance by the Mexican government. Six of them had been released from concentration camps in Europe and four had permission to enter the United States.²²

Organizations and groups, including Jewish People's Committee for United Action against Fascism, the Refugee Committee, and the Israelite Chamber of Industry and Commerce, begged Cárdenas to allow the refugees to at least remain in Mexico until they obtained permission to enter another country. While "the decision to forbid disembarkation was made by the Ministry of the Interior, [Cárdenas ratified it]."²³ That December of 1938, *Orinoco* returned to the ports of Mexico, but the government did not allow for the refugees to disembark because they presented passports marked with a large, red "J" and argued that bearers of these documents could not return to their country of origin when the war was finalized. Below is an image of the Jewish passports provided by the Nazis to distinguish them; women were assigned "Sara" as their middle names and men, "Israel".

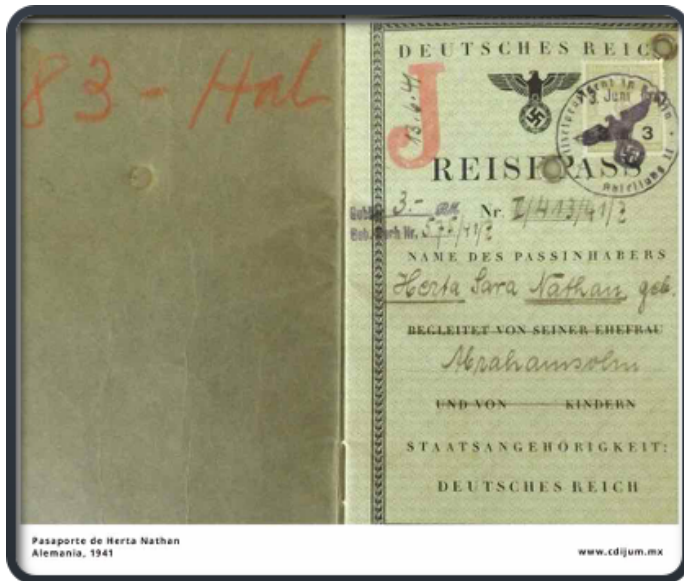


Figure 2. *Centro de Documentacion de Investigacion Judia* courtesy of Karla Vasquez.

Ignacio Garcia Téllez was the Minister of the Interior and in charge of all the immigration into Mexico. All of his decisions were endorsed by Cárdenas. Téllez advocated to only allow refugees who were politicians, scientists, or artists; the final decision regarding Jewish immigration rested in his hands. In the Special Collections Department at UTEP, a letter from Albert Einstein to the Ministry of Education in Mexico. Einstein urges the Ministry to accept a prominent

scientist from Austria which confirms the selective immigration process and that only very few, and the elite, were granted refuge. Ramón Beteta was a politician during Cárdenas's administration who advocated for the acceptance of Jewish refugees. After meeting with the Advisory Committee on Political Refugees, the Joint Distribution Committee, and the leader of the Quaker's American Friends Service Committee to discuss the Jewish migration to Mexico, a plan to offer 1,500 working visas to Jewish workers was developed. According to Gleizer, their families would settle in Tabasco; Poles, Germans, Austrians, Hungarians, Czechs, among others would find refuge. The governor of Tabasco, Francisco Trujillo Gurría was one of the most enthusiastic supporters of this project. However, despite there being enough financial means to pay for the project, Cárdenas canceled it in 1940 in fear of negative public opinion. Towards the end of his regime, Cárdenas faced a lot of criticism for his socialist reforms which

²² Gleizer, Daniela, *Unwelcome Exiles: Mexico and the Jewish Refugees from Nazism 1933-1945*, (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2014), pg. 113.

²³ *Ibid*, pg. 114.

was possibly the main cause for the cancellation of the project in Tabasco. That same year, tourist, student, and visitor visas from Europe were canceled. Before Cárdenas's regime ended, the *Rakuyo Maru* arrived at the port of Manzanillo, Colima in 1940 with six Jewish refugees who had been sailing for more than 112 days but not one Latin American country provided asylum. Mexican authorities gave the people on board permission to disembark and eat, but "an order from the capital immediately arrived, stating that the refugees could not enter the country, and thus the customs agents found them and led them back to the ship."²⁴

Conceivably, because of international pressure, mostly from the United States and Great Britain, President Manuel Avila Camacho's figures show that he may have been quite more sympathetic to Jewish refugees. As soon as his presidency started, he assured Mexicans that periods of revolution and great reforms would end, international relations would be reestablished and reorganized.²⁵ Avila's goals also included boosting economic development and most importantly, redefining the relationship with the United States. His administration quickly proved solidarity and sympathy with the U.S. after the Pearl Harbor attack in 1941, and cut ties with Japan, Italy, and Germany. Although the immigration differential tables were once again reduced in 1941 from 1,000 individuals to 100 in 1941, corrections were made and now included that foreigners would be admitted as political asylum-seekers who were persecuted for political or religious reasons and whose lives or freedom were in imminent danger. According to Gleizer, for the first time, the legislation extended the category of political asylum to those persecuted for other reasons, as it was the case of the Jews who tried to escape from Nazism.²⁶ Unfortunately, in 1941 the Third Reich prohibited the emigration of Jews from Europe. Thus, those who wanted to escape the extermination not only had to arrange visas with other countries but had to get exit permits authorized by the Nazi Germany government which was close to impossible.

In 1942, the "Final Solution" was implemented and it referred to the mass murder of Europe's Jews. Policies aimed at deporting or forcing Jews to leave the Third Reich were terminated and replaced by the plan of annihilating more than 11 million Jews. This same year, Mexico entered the world conflict because of the U.S.'s involvement, German aggression, and to show sympathy for the allies. This signified that Mexico's borders would close and immigration would become more restricted. However, it would not affect those who were on their way to Mexico or whose visas had been approved. In a letter found from the Israelite Central Committee to Dr. Kahn, the director of the Joint Distribution Committee, the organization paid for all the expenses for the refugees, such as transportation, food, water, legal and medical assistance.²⁷ All of them were legalized as political exiles and given the right to work. *San Thomé*, *Nyassa*, and *Guinée* are other ships with many passengers who were allowed to enter Mexico through the port of Veracruz. While it is true that Camacho held a more generous attitude towards refugees, dubious behavior occurred at the ports as Jews landed.

²⁴ Ibid, pg. 200.

²⁵ Ibid, pg. 201.

²⁶ Gleizer, Daniela, *El exilio incómodo México y los refugiados judíos*, (El Colegio de México, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 2011), pg. 192.

²⁷ Glikowski, M. M Glikowski to Dr. Kahn. January 10, 1942. In United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. <https://resources.ushmm.org/vlpnamelistimages/ReferenceCollection/AC0367/AC0367.PDF>

According to an FBI report, refugees who arrived on the *Serpa Pinto* ship without visas or official documentation were allowed to disembark at a cost of 2,000 pesos per group. This was done by the local head of the immigration office, Alfredo Reguero, who was protected by Miguel Alemán, the Minister of the Interior. An individual from the same office revised all documentation and offered to correct a problem or mistake for the sum of 10 to 50 pesos.²⁸ Not only was the corruption affecting Jews, but essentially, all refugees arriving at the ports of Mexico.

Gilberto Bosques played an important role during Avila's regime. Appointed as Mexico's Consul General in Marseilles, France, Bosques is credited for saving 20-40,000 Jewish and Spanish lives. Refugees who approached the Mexican consul in France were not received warmly, but rather faced a "bureaucratic wall".²⁹ For unknown reasons, many were now allowed to emigrate to Europe even though they had visas approved by the Mexican government. The price of visas also ranged from \$300 - \$500 and even \$1,000 which were impossible for refugees to pay. In a letter, Helmuth Wolfes writes to Mrs. Zlabovsky that his brother and himself could not afford \$500 for visas but express their hope in continuing to find some help or refuge. Around 5,000 visas were approved by the Mexican government for distribution to Jewish refugees but only 1,453 were used, possibly because they were too expensive. Bosques took advantage of the desperate situation Jews were facing in Europe and raised quotas and visa prices, knowing that Jews with money were willing to pay anything in exchange for safety. In fact, while Bosques is credited for saving 45,000 people in the documentary *Visa al Paraiso*, there is no evidence to support this argument and even if it was true, most were Spanish and not Jews. According to Gleizer, only 42 people were able to reach Mexico in 1942 thanks to help from the Mexican Consul. Unfortunately, many made a profit from the refugees from "the selling of visas, forging passports and other documents, taking bribes at the ports of entry, selling land at one thousand times its real value, devising fraudulent immigration projects, and using lawyers to 'fix' the immigrants' status."³⁰³¹ Gleizer describes one of Mexico's last options to make a significant contribution to save Jewish lives. As part of the Intergovernmental Committee for Refugees, the Mexican government was consulted to receive Hungarian Jews in July 1944. The agreement was to provide shelter for around 400 Jews until the war ended and then they would be sent back to Hungary. The government failed to accept the Jews, who were later deported, and some landed in concentration camps where they met their devastating fate.

Out of 500,000 Jews who tried to escape the brutality of Nazi Germany, Mexico only admitted around 2,000. Out of 500,000 Spanish Republican exiles, Mexico admitted more than 25,000. The difference is clear. The Spanish Civil War did not begin until 1936, three years after the Nazis gained control of Germany. The harsh immigration laws established by the Mexican government made the arrival of Jews extremely difficult, while for Spanish exiles, there were no limits nor requirements. President Cárdenas actually took it upon himself to warmly welcome Spanish families which is a great humanitarian gesture but unfortunately, turned his back on Jews when they needed refuge the most. While we cannot blame Mexico solely for the

²⁸ Gleizer, Daniela, *Unwelcome Exiles: Mexico and the Jewish Refugees from Nazism 1933-1945*, (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2014), pg. 221.

²⁹ *Ibid*, pg. 228.

³⁰ Wolfes, Helmuth. Helmuth Wolfes to Mrs. Frank Zlabovsky, September 29, 1940. In Fanny Zlabovsky-National Council of Jewish Women case files, MS 508, C.L. Sonnichsen Special Collections Department. The University of Texas at El Paso Library.

³¹ Gleizer, Daniela, *Unwelcome Exiles: Mexico and the Jewish Refugees from Nazism 1933-1945*, (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2014), pg. 307.

genocide of millions of Jews, it can be argued that the country could have saved thousands of lives but chose not to. Anti-Semitism in Mexico, and even Nazism, was very much alive at the time. Racial purification and eugenics also played a role in Mexico during this period and continue to today. Many ethnic groups were banned from entering the country and very selective laws that allowed people to enter were established. Immigrants had to be wealthy or prove that they could assimilate to Mexico and preserve *mestizaje*. It is important to note that during President Camacho's regime, more Jewish refugees were permitted to disembark from ships, but it was most likely through corruption and from advantage taken by government officials like Miguel Alemán and Gilberto Bosques. International pressure from great powers, especially the United States, was also a factor in Mexico admitting more Jewish refugees during Camacho's administration. Although 2,000 is not a huge number compared to Argentina or Bolivia who admitted a much larger number of Jews, Latin America became a safe haven for Jews (and eventually Nazi war criminals), but Mexico did not offer the same level of shelter and security, and it is very clear that Spanish Republicans were favored over Jews.

When millions of Jews and other groups of people labeled "unfit" were persecuted and eventually murdered by the popular far-right political party, the Nazis, some were quick to react, and others were not. Now widely known as the Holocaust, the genocide tried world leaders and citizens in unprecedented forms. From 1929-1940, Eastern and Central European Jews sought asylum, emigrated, applied for visas, and faced deportation. Their living situation deteriorated even more in 1939 when Poland was invaded by Germany, giving way to the devastating Second World War which forced many countries to shut down their borders. Two years later in 1941, when the Final Solution was solidified by the Nazis, Jews desperately searched for a way out of a Nazi-dominated Europe. Mexico, a country led by President Lázaro Cárdenas, received thousands of applications from Eastern and Central European Jews as asylum seekers. It was an obvious nation to apply and arrive to, as Mexico thrived economically and politically at the time; Cárdenas publicly opposed the rise of fascism in Europe and had willingly allowed tens of thousands of Spanish-Republican exiles into the country.

This paper has reexamined Mexico's image of hospitality and evaluated its reluctance to accept Jewish refugees from Nazism during the presidencies of Cárdenas and Avila Camacho. By highlighting the very different receptions given to Spaniards on one hand and Central European Jews on the other, Mexico's racialized contradictions on immigration and refugee policy are overly apparent. It is a surprising story that has been concealed for a long time and deserves to be universally known.

About the Author

Gisela Anaid Argote, a graduate in history and political science from the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP), is a first-year history doctoral student at the University of Iowa. She was awarded the Graduate College's Lulu Merle Johnson Fellowship and plans on expanding her research, which centers on Mexico's reluctance to accept Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany and their willingness to accept Spanish Republicans in the same era. Gisela has two dogs and one cat and loves to support her favorite football clubs, Barcelona and Arsenal.

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