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DIEGO RIVERA AS A JEWISH ROOT-SEEKER:
ART, IDENTITY POLITICS, AND THE “DOWNTRODDEN MASSES”

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DIEGO RIVERA AS A JEWISH ROOT-SEEKER:
ART, IDENTITY POLITICS, AND THE “DOWNTRODDEN MASSES”

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Abstract

The Mexican muralist Diego Rivera (1886-1957) was Jewish in his imagination only. During the 1930s, the artist invented a noble Sephardi lineage dating back to the seventeenth-century philosopher, Uriel Acosta (1585-1640). He subverted the Sephardic “Golden Age” Myth by highlighting the formerly downplayed history of persecution and expulsion. The communist leveraged his imaginary *Converso* genealogy as a way of identifying with the “downtrodden masses.” His Jewish pride and activism formed a bond between him and the many other Jews in his life. By putting him in contact with Jewish realities, his numerous Jewish “comrades,” friends, and acquaintances provided him with the materials he needed to create a symbolic Jewish identity. During the 1930s, the artist went on a “Jewish press-tour,” boasting his Jewish roots in interviews with the Jewish press in Mexico and the United States. Rivera created a Jewish genealogy in response to factors outside of himself, such as the rise of fascism and the intellectual milieu of the Jewish-left during the interwar period. The social activist made a mental connection between the Jews and the Indigenous people of pre-conquest Mexico who were both persecuted by early-modern Spanish institutions. He expressed his symbolic Jewish ethnicity by including motifs of Jews in the Inquisition in his art. This thesis explores how and why Rivera self-fashioned a Jewish identity.

Introduction

The Mexican muralist Diego Rivera (1886-1957) was a Jew in his imagination only. This thesis analyzes how he created an enigmatic Jewish identity during the 1930s. Rivera and his wife, Frida Kahlo, were iconic artists of the Mexican Renaissance during the 1920s and 30s. Both had emblematic and imaginary Jewish identities.



Figure 1. Marcel Sternberger, *Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo*, 1952. Photograph. Mexico City.

Sometime during the 1930s, Diego Rivera invented a *Converso* lineage dating back to the rationalist philosopher Uriel Acosta (1585-1640). This marks the beginning of the modern root-seeking phenomenon I term the “Sephardic Myth 2.0.” This thesis situates Diego Rivera’s “Sephardic Myth” in the historiography of “noble ancestry” in Sephardic studies. I trace Rivera’s ancestral narrative through his memoir and articles and interviews with the artist by the Mexican-Jewish periodicals *Der Weg*, *el Diario Judio*, *Novedades*, and *eSefarad* and U.S. Jewish newspapers such as the *Jewish Daily Bulletin*, *Chicago Jewish Star*, *Philadelphia Jewish Exponent*, *B’nai B’rith Messenger*, and *Jewish Exponent*. I analyze his genealogical claims in the sociohistorical context of the artist as a cosmopolitan communist in Mexico during the interwar period.

Figure 2. Diego Rivera, *Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in Alameda Central*, 1947. Mural. 15.6m × 4.7m. Mexico City, Mexico. Rivera’s “Autobiographical Mural”



Diego Rivera played a major role in Mexico's national identity building project following the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920). After ten years of bloodshed and revolution in Mexico, the new regime needed to establish a united Mexican identity. Rivera contributed through his murals. His murals were able to establish an official historical narrative of Mexican history. Depicting Mexico's history from left to right, the artist told the history of Mexico through his eyes. His preferred medium of fresco painting made his art accessible to the masses; art on walls was art for all. Thus, the muralist helped win over the hearts and minds of ordinary Mexicans.

Rivera's role in constructing a national identity is important for two reasons in regards to how the artist made up his Jewish ancestry and identity. First, he was familiar with the idea of inventing identities. Second—born from the nationalist movement—the ethnic concept of *mestizo* gave the artist a propensity for adopting multiple ethnicities. The *mestizo* was an ethnic mixture of African, Indigenous, and Spanish ancestry. The notion of *mestizo* was a way of uniting all Mexicans by saying, “We are all *mestizo*. We are all Mexicans.” His familiarity with mixed ethnicities made Rivera open to the idea of adopting multiple ethnic identities.

Sometime during the early 1930s, Rivera began claiming Jewish ancestry. Specifically, he flaunted a noble Sephardi genealogy dating back to seventh-century philosopher, Uriel d'Acosta (1585-1640). Acosta was the son of Sephardi forced converts (*Conversos*), who was exiled by the Sephardic community of Amsterdam for his independent thinking. Rivera embraced this noble lineage until the end of his life, boasting on the first page of his memoir: “My father's mother, Grandmother Ynez Acosta, was descended from a Portuguese-Jewish family which traced its ancestry back to the rationalist philosopher Uriel Acosta.”¹

¹ Diego Rivera and Gladys March, *Diego Rivera: My Art, My Life: An Autobiography* (New York: Citadel Press, 1960), 1.

The artist's claim to "noble" Sephardic ancestry has a historical precedence. This thesis fits Rivera's Jewish root-seeking into the historiography of "noble ancestry" and the "Sephardic Myth" in Sephardic studies. The concept of Sephardi noble lineage pre-dated the Jews' expulsion from Spain in 1492. In exile, noble ancestry evolved into the "Myth of Sephardic Supremacy" in Germany during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The "Golden Age" myth of Sephardic superiority was born in an era of Jewish enlightenment called the *Haskalah*. From the *Haskalah* in Germany emerged a version of the Sephardic Myth which I term, "The Sephardic Myth 1.0." At the end of the eighteenth century, circles of German Jewish intellectuals began writing in Jewish newspapers and journals about the mystical Sephardim of the Spanish "Golden Age," between 900-1000. These German Jewish writers idealized the Iberian "Golden Age" and its Sephardi heroes.

In the early twentieth century, Diego Rivera departed from the "Golden Age" myth. First, he invented a specific Sephardi ancestor. While a few German Jews also invented a distinct Sephardi genealogy, most identified with the Sephardim as fellow Jews by means of a broader Jewish kinship connection. It was through a Jewish kinship connection that these German Jewish writers identified with the "Golden Age" Jews. These noble, "Golden Age" Jews had enjoyed an atmosphere of coexistence and acceptance antithetical to the German Jew's precarious situation in Germany and Eastern Europe. They saw "Golden Age" Spain as a real possibility for Germany. However, their perception of the Sephardim during the "Golden Age" was idealistic. They romanticized and overemphasized the "court Jews" who were able to reach the highest realms of society. The Sephardic Myth 1.0 minimized the memory of forced conversion and expulsion from Spain in 1492.

My intervention into the historiography of “noble ancestry” and the “Sephardic Myth” is the twentieth century development of the “Sephardic Myth 2.0.” Diego Rivera introduced the Sephardic Myth 2.0 in two novel ways. First, he was a modern root-seeker with a colorful genealogical imagination. Second, in addition to claiming classic noble ancestry, he subverted the Golden Age Myth by highlighting instead the Sephardic story of persecution and expulsion. This is what I term the “Sephardic Myth 2.0.”

Rivera advertised his Jewish genealogy during a Jewish press-tour during the 1930s. Between 1932-1940, the artist was interviewed by numerous Jewish periodicals in Mexico and the U.S. In June of 1935, the artist explained to the *Jewish Daily Bulletin* what his Jewishness meant to him: “My Jewishness is the dominant element in my life [...] Wherever I have gone, I have acknowledged myself a Jew. Whatever disabilities our people have suffered, I have experienced with them. From this has come my sympathy with the downtrodden masses which motivates all of my work.”²

Diego Rivera was a proud communist. He was an idealist who was passionate about social revolution. Therefore, he needed a way to identify the “downtrodden masses.” Inventing a Jewish identity by imagining a Jewish genealogy provided him with a connection to the downtrodden.

Consider the socio-historical context of the early 1930s. Fascist movements were emerging in Italy, Germany, Spain, and Japan. These fascist movements were accompanied by

* * *

WHILE discussing the Jewish question in Mexico, he told me some interesting and little known facts about himself. His grandfather was a Spanish nobleman who participated in an unsuccessful Revolution, and fled to Mexico. There he met and married a Portuguese Jewess. Their son was a mining engineer and an educator of the Indians. He married a Mexican woman, half Spanish and half Indian. Diego was the product of this union.

“Does your Jewish descent mean anything to you?” I asked.

“My Jewishness is the dominant element in my life,” he replied. “Wherever I have gone, I have acknowledged myself a Jew. Whatever disabilities our people have suffered, I have experienced with them. From this has come my sympathy with the downtrodden masses which motivates all of my work.”

Amazing people—these Jews.

Figure 3. Excerpt of widely-quoted but rarely-cited interview with Rivera. Phillip Bernstein, “Hodge-Podge,” *Jewish Daily Bulletin*, June 16, 1935.

² Phillip Bernstein, “Hodge-Podge,” *Jewish Daily Bulletin*, June 16, 1935.

antisemitic sentiments. It is remarkable that Rivera claimed Jewish ancestry at a time when it was not yet fashionable to do so. In fact, boasting one's Jewish heritage was quite dangerous during the 1930s. For Rivera, the revolutionary, claiming Jewish ancestry was a form of civil resistance.

The activist's Jewish identity made him stand up. He thought of himself as a communist speaking out against injustice. It is ironic, however, for a communist to point to the fact that he was allegedly Jewish. Usually communists do not talk about their identity.³ A communist believes in communism—period. One's identity as a communist subsumes all other identities. For Rivera, however, his ancestry gave him a strong sense of identity. It provided the activist with a personal connection to what he was fighting against.

As a well-connected, transnational political figure, Rivera knew about the rise of National Socialism in Germany from early on. In his memoir, the communist-artist described how he was particularly impacted by his first encounter with Adolf Hitler (1889-1945). During a trip to the Soviet Union in 1928—five years before the dictator came to power in 1933—Rivera witnessed Hitler give a speech in Berlin. Rivera reflected in his memoir on the premonition he had of what was to come. He explained how he felt the crowd's energy and knew something bad was coming. Five years later in 1933, the new National Socialist regime ordered a burning of all books by Jewish authors. This thesis discusses how Rivera responded by publicly denouncing the book-burning through his art and speeches at symposiums hosted by Jewish organizations. His public

³ Discussed briefly in this paper, Leon Trotsky (1879-1940) is a perfect example of a veritable communist rejecting Jewish identity. Trotsky exemplifies Jewish ambivalence. He distanced himself from his Jewish roots and always stressed his identity as an internationalist. For this reason—though Leon Trotsky was certainly an important leftist figure in Rivera's life, this thesis does not address his potential impact on the formation of the artist's Jewish identity. Trotsky rarely discussed his Jewish heritage, and the two did not become acquainted until 1938.

protests of the book-burning make it clear that Rivera was an active anti-fascist from the very beginning.

During the late 1930s, fascist political organizations in Mexico attacked the artist for being Jewish. As a result, receiving antisemitic attacks and being called Jewish by others solidified his Jewish identity. By calling Rivera Jewish, antisemitic groups and the Jewish press made the artist-activist a Jew in the eyes of his contemporaries.

Rivera was known to the Mexican Jewish community as an anti-fascist and a proud fellow Jew. The artist's Jewish pride and activism formed a bond between him and the many other Jews in his life. Moreover, his numerous Jewish "comrades," friends, and acquaintances provided him with materials for creating a symbolic Jewish identity by putting him in contact with Jewish realities. He had many Jewish friends from his years with Eastern European revolutionary refugees in Paris during the 1910s and throughout the rest of his life. It is important to note how Rivera also leveraged a 'pan-Jewish' identity to connect with the Ashkenazi Jews in his life who shared his worldview. His pan-Jewish identity was based on a broader Jewish kinship-connection between his alleged Sephardi ancestors and his Ashkenazi Jewish friends. In particular, Rivera was close friends with Isaac Berliner (1899-1957). The two met as early as 1934, and by 1936 they had published together a Yiddish book of poetry titled, *City of Palaces*. Isaac Berliner wrote the poems and Rivera drew the illustrations. The book was a product of their exploration of Mexican Jewish identity.

Rivera's friendship with Berliner did two things for Rivera's identity and perception of what it meant to be Jewish. One, he started to see a Jew as a victim of poverty and persecution, as a *pariah*. He sympathized with Berliner's plight as a poor immigrant. Rivera perceived

Berliner as a *pariah* and as a person who shared his sympathy for the “downtrodden masses” of Mexico.

Second, Berliner and Rivera made a mental connection between Jews and the Indigenous Americans persecuted by the Inquisition of New Spain; the same early-modern Spanish institutions which killed the native people of Mexico had expelled and persecuted the Jews. The two social activists made a connection between sixteenth and twentieth century suffering, implying that such suffering should not persist in the civilized twentieth century. Rivera sketched a powerful image of a Jew walking to his death at the stake by the Holy Office of the Inquisition in colonial Mexico in *City of Palaces*.

Jews in the Inquisition became a key theme in Rivera’s art. As early as 1929, Rivera depicted Jews being persecuted by the Holy Office in his murals of Mexican history. He remarkably incorporated a scene of an *auto-da-fé* in his grand “autobiographical mural” of Mexican history, *Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in the Alameda Central* (1946). To the very far left, Rivera painted a sixteenth-century *auto-da-fé* of Spanish *Conversos*. During the Inquisition, the *auto-da-fé* was a theatrical ritual of public penance in which accused heretics were publicly humiliated. The morbid ceremonies often featured the Holy Office’s most heinous punishment: being burned alive at the stake. He painted his “autobiographical mural” in 1946—after WWII. The mural tells the story of the painter’s life through the history of Mexico in the artist’s eyes. It is significant that he included the scene of persecuted Spanish *Conversos*—Rivera’s alleged ancestors—at the beginning of the history of Mexico and his own life story. Rivera’s inclusion of the martyred *Conversos* indicated that the artist saw the *Converso* story as an important part of Mexican history and his own life. Rivera included Jews being persecuted by the Inquisition—an early modern Spanish institution—as a way of expressing his Jewish identity.

The artist's diverse, imaginary genealogy offered him the option to select multiple ethnicities. Using his artist's imagination, Rivera created identities for himself with a genealogy to match. In this way, adopting a fluid ancestral narrative provided Rivera with materials for self-fashioning multiple identities—at his convenience. Diego Rivera wanted so badly to be a part of everything that he was passionate about that he invented identities for himself. Despite the fact that his ancestral claims were unfounded, Rivera was so sure of his Jewish identity that he convinced everyone around him that he was Jewish. His contemporaries saw him as a proud Jew. He became a Jew in historical records because others called him Jewish. This thesis examines Rivera's presence in the U.S. and Mexican Jewish Press and also in antisemitic political propaganda in Mexico during the 1930s. These entities projected a Jewish identity onto Rivera just as much as he proclaimed it himself.

Chapter 1: Approaches to Modern Jewish Identity

Symbolic Ethnicity

By giving Jews a voice in his autobiographical masterpiece, Rivera expressed his symbolic ethnic identity. In 1979, the sociologist Herbert Gans defined "symbolic ethnicity" as "a nostalgic allegiance ... a love for and pride in a tradition that can be felt without having to be incorporated in everyday behavior."⁴ Gans was a German refugee who arrived to the U.S. in 1940. His work as a sociologist concerned the American immigrant experience. He suggested that while some cultural or ethnic practices are maintained throughout generations, these ethnic practices "will be taken out of their original cultural context and become 'stand-ins' or 'symbols' of it."⁵ In Gans's view, "most people look for easy and intermittent ways of expressing their [ethnic] identity."⁶ Symbolic ethnicity involves one's self-perception and feeling of belonging to an ethnic group. Symbolic ethnicity is a part of root-seekers' identity. They *feel* an attachment to the ethnic group based on filial ties, but they may not be actively be involved with the culture.

Symbolic ethnicity allows root-seekers to "find their identity by 'affiliating' with an abstract collectivity which does not exist as an interacting group." He explained, "that collectively, moreover, can be mythic or real, contemporary or historical." He offered Jews specifically as an example collectivity,

"On the one hand, Jews can express their identity as synagogue members, or as partition participants in a consciousness raising group consisting mostly of Jewish women. On the other hand they can also identify with the Jewish people as a long suffering collectivity which has been credited with inventing monotheism. If they are non-religious, they can

⁴ Herbert J. Gans, "Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 2, no. 1 (January 1979): 1–20. Gans's reflections on American Jewish immigrants are compelling and deserve attention by sociologists.

⁵ J. Alan Winter, "Symbolic Ethnicity or Religion among Jews in the United States: A Test of Gansian Hypotheses," *Review of Religious Research* 37, no. 3 (1996): 233–47; Gans, Herbert J. "Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America*," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 2, no. 1 (January 1979): 1–20. 8.

⁶ Gans, 8.

identify with Jewish liberal or socialist political cultures, or with a population which has produced many prominent intellectuals and artists in the last 100 years.”⁷

Rivera participated in “consciousness raising groups” for Jewish causes. He identified with the “Jewish people as a long suffering collectivity.” Rivera, a proclaimed atheist, identified with the “Jewish liberal or socialist political cultures” and the “many prominent [Jewish] intellectuals and artists” of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Rivera’s Jewish identity was symbolic. He was not an active participant in Jewish religious tradition or culture. Rather, he identified with the Jews as an “abstract collectivity” on which he projected his own ideas of what it meant to be Jewish.

Rivera’s symbolic ethnicity provided him an experience of identity. His experience of identity aligns with the Gansian hypothesis of symbolic ethnicity. For Gans, symbolic ethnicity entails a “feeling of identity” without necessarily requiring active ties with the collectivity.⁸ In other words, “feeling Jewish” does not necessarily entail “doing Jewish.” One need not engage in or prefer Jewish religious or communal activities and affiliations to feel Jewish.⁹

Another sociologist, Alan Winter, tested Gans’s hypotheses about symbolic ethnicity through a national survey of American Jews in the 1990s. His research methodology provides helpful measures for analyzing Jewish identity and “Jewish behavior.”¹⁰ When discussing the symbolic ethnicity of Diego Rivera and future root-seekers of the Sephardic Myth 2.0, it is helpful to keep these ideas in mind about how one expresses their Jewish identity. First, “acting Jewish” might involve specific religious observances. Perhaps someone that “feels Jewish” might light Hanukkah candles, attend a Seder, fast on Yom Kippur, be member of a synagogue

⁷ Gans, 8.

⁸ Gans, 12

⁹ Winter, “Symbolic Ethnicity,” 8.

¹⁰ Winter, 8.

or temple, observe the Sabbath, maintain separate dishes for meat and dairy, buy kosher meat, light Sabbath candles, or refrain from spending money on the Sabbath. Diego Rivera certainly observed none of these religious activities.

On the other hand, the artist participated in various “organized Jewish communal activities.” Rivera was involved in numerous “Jewish organizations other than a synagogue or temple” and did “volunteer work for [numerous] Jewish organizations.” In Mexico and abroad during the 1930s, he volunteered his celebrity status by speaking at various conferences hosted by Jewish organizations. Further, he embraced his symbolic ethnicity by following the Jewish media and interacting with the Jewish press. Above all, the social rights advocate stressed his symbolic Jewish identity when he advocated for Jewish issues.

The last measure of Jewish identity that Winter utilized was “Jewish primary groups.” This category concerned “the Jewish character of one’s neighborhood” and “how many of one’s closest friends are Jewish.”¹¹ By this measure of “Jewish primary groups,” Rivera had a strong, symbolic ethnic identity. During his European years in the 1910s, Rivera’s friend group was dominated by Eastern European Jewish refugees. During the 1930s, he was a dear friend of Isaac Berliner. The two collaborated in politics and in art, and Berliner was present for three interviews with the artist by the Mexican Jewish press in 1935. Rivera also had many Jewish friends and protégés in Mexico and abroad. Rivera expressed his symbolic ethnic identity by capturing the plight of Jews in his art.

¹¹ Winters, 237.

Genealogical Imagination, Root-Seeking, and Self-Making

The Sephardic Myth 2.0 is characterized by personal root-seeking and self-identification. Through the example of the Mexican muralist, my research shows how the early twentieth century brought on the transition from the Sephardic Myth 1.0 to 2.0 in two ways. First, Diego Rivera introduced the Sephardic Myth 2.0's concepts of personal 'root-seeking' and self-identification. A reflection of modernity, Rivera broke the mold by rejecting fixed identities imposed by others. Instead, he created them. Recalling Foucault, the literary critic, Stephen Greenblatt, suggested that "the power to impose a shape upon oneself is an aspect of the more general power to control identity—that of others at least as often as one's own." He explained that the power to self-identify is a "Consequence of human expression—for the 'I'—of a specific form of power, power at once localized in particular institutions—the court, the church, colonial administration, the patriarchal family—and diffused in ideological structures of meaning, characteristic modes of expression, recurrent narrative patterns." In his landmark book, Greenblatt defined self-fashioning as the "process of constructing one's identity and public persona according to a set of socially acceptable standards and the conscious effort to strive to imitate a praised model in society." In modern times, "the fashioning of human identity" is a "manipulable, artful process."¹² In this way, the artist created his own identities.

Diego Rivera's story shows how root-seeking can be a way of strategic self-making. Root-seekers interpret their lineage and create ancestral narratives. Sociologist Alondra Nelson stressed that "identity and self-making are primary ambitions" for modern root-seekers. She calls these "genealogical aspirations;" root-seekers have "questions to be answered," "mysteries to solve," and "autobiographical narratives" they want to complete. Just as in the case of Diego

¹² Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 2.

Rivera, they aspire for a “corroboration of ethnically diverse lineage” and an association with an ethnic community.”¹³ Root-seekers explain their affiliation to a particular culture through lineage.

Personal root-seeking is often imaginative. Genealogical imagination provides root-seekers with materials for constructing a self-concept, an identity, an understanding of who they are by means of where and from whom they come. In *Conversos Return*, Dalia Kandiyoti analyzed how people come to identify as *Conversos* and *Converso* descendants through “genealogical imagination.” Roots—real or imagined—serve as the basis for selectively affiliating oneself with certain ethnicities and cultures. Recalling James Lehman’s term, “biographical imagination” of German Jews of the Sephardic Myth 1.0., imagination is a common theme in Sephardi historiography. This is because both genealogy and the elusive Sephardi past provide a springboard for the imagination to create identities.

Sephardic history is mystical, elusive and compelling: the perfect ingredients for a story. There is room for imagination in crafting a family narrative, which at its core is a self-narrative. Root-seekers write these stories, and they become part of their complex identities. Thus speculating about familial Sephardi pasts plays a role in identity formation. Dalia Kandiyoti explored how Latin American root-seekers can use genealogy to construct and legitimize a Sephardi or *Converso* identity. Descendants revisit the *Converso* past and identify as Sephardic Jews or *Conversos* through “genealogical and historical research and consciousness.”¹⁴ I present Diego Rivera as one of the early *Converso* root-seekers with genealogical aspirations.

¹³ Alondra Nelson, “Bio Science: Genetic Genealogy Testing and the Pursuit of African Ancestry,” *Social Studies of Science*, October 1, 2008. 763.

¹⁴ Dalia Kandiyoti, *The Converso’s Return: Conversion and Sephardi History in Contemporary Literature and Culture* (Redwood City, United States: Stanford University Press, 2020). 172

The Origins of “Noble Ancestry” in Sephardic History

The artist’s claim to “noble” Sephardic ancestry has a historical precedence. In Spain, even before the Sephardic Jews were expelled in 1492, there was already an understanding that Sephardim came from a royal, “noble” lineage. This concept of Sephardi noble lineage dates back to a verse in the Hebrew Bible. *Sepharad* is the name of Spain in Rabbinical and modern Hebrew, which originated in a biblical reference from the book of Obadiah. Obadiah 1:20 refers to *Sepharad*, a biblical “place-name” which connects Spanish Jewry with the exiles of ancient Jerusalem.¹⁵ In his translation of the Hebrew Bible with commentary, Robert Alter suggested, “Obadiah appears to have mapped out a plan in which Judahites exiled to different regions would be assigned different territories in the return to Zion.”¹⁶ *Encyclopedia Judaica* defined *Sepharad* as the site of a colony of exiles from Jerusalem and explained, “it is predicted that the exiles in *Sepharad* would possess the cities of the south.”¹⁷ Thus, these ancient exiles can be considered ‘noble,’ in the sense that they were to be destined to be inheritors of land in the return to Zion.

It is generally accepted in the field of Jewish Studies that Targum Jonathan was the first to identify Sepharad with Spain. *Encyclopedia Judaica* entry argues that the site of *Sepharad* mentioned in Obadiah “was connected fancifully or erroneously with *Hispania*, the Latin name for Spain.”¹⁸ Thus, in the end of the eighth century, *Sepharad* became the usual Hebrew designation for the Iberian Peninsula.¹⁹ Still today, the encyclopedia entry for *Sephardim* defines the term in terms of “descent” and the Iberian peninsula: “descendants of Jews who lived in

¹⁵ Ob 1:20 NIV. “the exiles from Jerusalem who are in Sepharad will possess the towns of the Negev”

¹⁶ Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*, vol. 1: The Five Books of Moses (New York, New York : W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), 1284.

¹⁷ Alan D. Corre et al., “Sephardim,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, 2nd ed., vol. 18 (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 292–305.

¹⁸ Corre et al., 292.

¹⁹ Corre et al., 292. “Targum Jonathan renders Sepharad as Ispamia or Spamia, and the Peshitta, as Ispania, i.e., Spain.”

Spain or Portugal before the expulsion of 1492.” Sephardim and its connection to Spain and descent are inseparable.

Jane Gerber, historian of Sephardic Jewish studies, revisited the term *Sepharad* and its connection to the origins of “noble ancestry” in her book, *Cities of Splendor in the Shaping of Sephardi History* (2020). Gerber argued that Obadiah 1:20 served as the justification of claims to “noble” and “exalted ancestry.”²⁰ Sephardic Jews sought their own noble ancestry. Starting in the 9th century, Jews in Muslim Spain began to claim descent from ancient Judaeans priests and royalty—the exiles of Obadiah, “those from the house of King David.”²¹ Gerber described how Jews “revelled” in their “biblical roots.”²² Moreover, Gerber also argues that the exceptional accomplishments of Jews in Muslim Spain “confirm[ed] Jewish claims to noble lineage.”²³ The Sephardic Mystique is based in fact but is not representative of the lives of everyday Sephardim. It was a small minority who served as court Jews. Despite this, the Golden Age myth emerged.

²⁰ Jane S Gerber, *Cities of Splendour in the Shaping of Sephardi History* (Liverpool University Press, 2020), 7.

²¹ Gerber, 28.

²² Gerber, 27.

²³ Gerber, 28.

The Sephardic Myth 1.0

What historian Ismar Schorsch termed the “Myth of Sephardic Supremacy” allowed German Jews of the *Haskalah* (Jewish Enlightenment) to create a past a little less miserable and offered hope for the future.²⁴ Through the lens of the Golden Age Myth, they imagined a future of *Convivencia* in Germany—a future in which non-Jewish Germans would finally see their value, and they would be allowed to thrive in and benefit German society. Through identifying with the Sephardim based on broader Jewish kinship, the Sephardic success story allowed these enlightened German Jews to point to the Spanish “Golden Age” as a real possibility for German Jews.

Beginning in the late 18th century, Sephardi history sparked the interest of German Jewish intellectuals. Then, during the 19th century, they leveraged the Golden Age Myth in hopes of integration. The Sephardic story served as proof that Jews could not only be integrated but also valuable contributors to German society. As a result, the German Jews of the *Haskalah* affiliated themselves with the Sephardim.

Memory of Golden Age Spain was selective. Using James Lehmann’s term from 1975, the German Jews’ “biographical imagination” downplayed the expulsions and the Inquisition.²⁵ The Golden Age Myth instead celebrated the miracle of what would later be termed *convivencia*, or the era of coexistence between Jews, Christians, and Muslims. This is the key difference between the Sephardic Myth 1.0 and 2.0 discussed in Chapter 3. The mystical “Golden Age”

²⁴ Ismar Schorsch, “The Myth of Sephardic Supremacy,” *The Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 34, no. 1 (January 1, 1989): 47–66.

²⁵ James H. Lehmann, “Maimonides, Mendelssohn and the Me’asfim: Philosophy and the Biographical Imagination in the Early Haskala,” *The Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 20, (1975): 87–108.

Sephardim were not only integrated; they enriched Spanish social and intellectual life through their skills as “cultural mediators”.²⁶ The story of the expulsion of 1492 is ignored.

The Sephardic Mystique made its way to Germany through the writings of Sephardim in the Netherlands. The Golden Age myth circulated in German Jewish intellectual circles during the *Haskalah*. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, the Golden Age myth and its mystical Sephardi heroes emerged as a topic of German Jewish journals and newspapers. Further, the history of Jews in the Middle Ages became a part of a new field of study—the Science of Judaism (*Wissenschaft des Judentum*). Starting in the end of the 18th century, German Jewish journals and newspapers began discussing and depicting individual Sephardic Jews, such as Maimonides and Yehuda Ha-Levy. The writers presented Sephardi heroes as ‘ideal’ Jews to their readership in Germany.

There were perhaps a couple of hundred German Jewish intellectuals participating in this elite discourse. In the beginning, these writers truly hoped that non-Jewish Germans would take heed of the Sephardi success story—then they would realize the German Jews’ value. The non-Jewish Germans would see how Jews could do great things for Germany, too—if allowed to so flourish. Unfortunately, Germans were not listening. The intellectuals’ elite discourse was a monologue. Among themselves, German Jews idealized figures of Sephardi history and praised them for their skillfulness, heroism, and Jewish integrity. They imagined Golden Age Sephardim as ‘full Jews’—whose Jewish identity was not compromised by persecution and the pressures of assimilation.

Most of these German Jews were not ‘root-seekers’ on a personal ancestral quest for roots or rootedness. The majority did not imagine a genealogy from specific Sephardi ancestors.

²⁶ Carsten Schapkow, *Role Model and Countermodel: The Golden Age of Iberian Jewry and German Jewish Culture During the Era of Emancipation* (Lexington Books, 2016), 15.

Instead, their writings suggest they formed a blanket Jewish identity by means of a broader Jewish kinship-connection. This idea of broader Jewish kinship connects all Jews throughout the diaspora. Striving for integration, German Jews identified with these ‘other’ Jews—who not only contributed to but thrived in Spanish society. Of course, there exists no global Jewish identity with a common set of values or characteristics. Rather, the German Jews were able to identify with Sephardim through one commonality: being of Jewish descent. I define this common Jewish identity based on broader Jewish kinship as a “pan-Jewish” identity.

The concept of pan-national identity offers means of identifying with a nation that is not restricted by geography. An example is the “pan-African” identity. Pan-African identity is a consequence of the African diaspora. Alondra Nelson described how one African root-seeker first encountered pan-Africanism. At a Kwanzaa fair, Pat was “faced with a purchasing decision that revealed her vacillating racio-ethnic identity.” Nelson explained that when Pat came upon an African immigrant flag-vendor, she was “confronted with two symbols of her ancestral roots and putative nationality.” The root-seeker asked about the flag with three fields of red, black, and green. The vendor explained that it was a “general flag,” which suggested that it was a “pan-African flag that symbolized the African diaspora rather than a specific nationality or ethnicity.”²⁷ Due to a lack of historical documentation, African root-seekers across the diaspora are unable to tie their ancestry back to a specific geographic region or African nation. Thus, pan-African identity offers descendants an ancestral identity that unites the African continent and all Africans and African descendants of the world.

Another example of pan-nationalism is Pan-Germanism. Pan-Germanism implies the union of all ethnic Germans and their descendants—including those living outside of Germany.

²⁷ Alondra Nelson, *The Social Life of DNA: Race, Reparations, and Reconciliation After the Genome* (Beacon Press, 2016), 88.

For example, German-speaking Austrians with a pan-German identity may not identify solely as German but as belonging to a broader German kinship.

This phenomenon of affiliating with the elite Golden Age Sephardim through broader Jewish kinship is the standard “Sephardic Mystique.” In 2015, however, Carsten Schapkow builds on the concept and also introduces some characters of the “Sephardic Myth 1.0.” In analyzing the writings of 18th and 19th Century German Jews striving for assimilation and acceptance, Schapkow describes certain individuals who romanticized the Sephardic success-story to the extent that they reinvented themselves as Sephardic Jews.²⁸ They are the first root-seekers who invent Sephardic identities. These unprecedented root-seekers, Naphtali (Hartwig) Wessley (1725-1805), Heinrich Heine (1797-1856), and Max Nordau (1849–1923), for example, invented a specific Sephardi genealogy. These exceptional root-seekers go beyond pan-Jewish identity. They are the first to engage in personal root seeking and genealogical imagination. This thesis draws on Schapkow’s research to introduce a few of these German Jews who exemplify Sephardi root-seeking and genealogical imagination in the Sephardic Myth 2.0.

Naphtali (Hartwig) Wessley (1725-1805) was one of the most prominent writers of the *Haskalah*. It is believed that Wessley requested to be buried in the Sephardic section of the Jewish community graveyard in Hamburg. In doing so, he asserted his deeply felt Sephardic identity and simultaneously disconnected himself from his Ashkenazi roots. Antithetical to the hostile situation Ashkenazi Jews faced during the Middle Ages, Iberian Sephardim exemplify *convivencia*— thriving integration between Jews and non-Jews. His romanticization reflects the mystical “Golden Age” perception of Medieval Iberian Jewry of the era.

²⁸ Schapkow, *Role Model and Countermodel*, 50.

Heinrich Heine (1797-1856) was a contemporary of Wessley who also saw himself as a Sephardic Jew. Heinrich Heine was a famous German poet of the Romantic era. Like Rivera, he was a politically outspoken and active public individual. He lived in France for some time as a foreign correspondent. Heine saw himself as a Sephardic Jew, as indicated by some of his dreams and also in some of his works, specifically, the novel *Rabbi of Bacherach* (1840).

Heine's participation in the "*Verein für Kultur und Wissenschaft der Juden*" society at his university sparked his interest in Jewish history. Specifically, he was interested in Spanish Jews of the Middle Ages. In 1824, Heine began writing a historical novel on the subject, *Der Rabbi von Bacherach*. Years later, in response to the Damascus Affair of 1840, Heine published the unfinished historical novel.²⁹ In a letter to Moses Moser from July 20, 1824 Heine wrote: "Just this night I was dreaming about you. In old Spanish dress and on an Andalusian stallion you were riding amongst a crowd of other Jews towards Jerusalem."³⁰

Ludwig Phillipson in the 1840s petitioned the Spanish government to let the Sephardim come back to Spain (they had not been allowed to settle in Spain since 1492)—illustrating the political agency he sought to implement. This was unheard of—a German Jew raising his voice, not for his own case as a Jew in Germany, but for the Sephardic Jews who were no longer living. This is the political agenda of the Sephardic Myth 1.0: Heinrich Heine was fine with intellectual, personal identification, but Phillipson went further. He did not do it for himself but for the Sephardim who were no longer living.

The German Jews of the Sephardic Myth 1.0 were not concerned with constructing a family narrative, nor did they feel a personal connection to Spain or their specific ancestors.

²⁹ Jeffrey L. Sammons, *Heinrich Heine: A Modern Biography* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979) 89-96, 243-244.

³⁰ Translation: Carsten Schapkow. See: „Die Freiheit zu philosophieren“. Jüdische Identität in der moderne im Spiegel der Rezeption Baruch de Spinozas in der deutschsprachigen Literatur. Bielefeld, 2001, 96.

Instead, through a scholarly, impersonal approach, they sought to prove their potential value by

“representing themselves as Sephardic Jews.”³¹ Invented ancestral affiliation and identity with

Sephardim was a means to an end: proof that as Sephardim, they were valuable to Germany.

Thus, it was not a quest for roots or rootedness. This represents the key difference between the

more pragmatic, political goals of Sephardic Myth 1.0 to the personal, emotional Sephardic Myth

2.0. The Sephardic Myth 2.0 departs from the “Golden Age” myth by shifting focus to a

Converso mystique.

³¹ Carsten Schapkow, “Max Nordau’s View on Sephardic Judaism and the Emergence of Political Zionism,” in *Sephardim and Ashkenazim: Jewish-Jewish Encounters in History and Literature*, by Sina Rauschenbach (Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG, 2020). 209-211.

Chapter 2: Diego Rivera and the Sephardic Myth 2.0

Newspaper articles and interviews with the Jewish press in Mexico and the U.S. document how Diego Rivera claimed Sephardic ancestry through his paternal grandmother, Ynez d'Acosta. There is no evidence which suggests his grandmother was of Jewish descent, but this was unimportant to Rivera. The artist was never concerned with reality. Of course, according to the *halakha*, Rivera was not a Jew. He was not a “mother-Jew,” nor a “father-Jew,” nor a “grandmother-Jew,” and he was also a proclaimed atheist. Nevertheless, he considered himself Jewish and had a Jewish identity. His Jewish identity provided him a way of identifying with injustice. This is precisely the opposite of the Sephardic Myth of centuries past; before, those who identified with Sephardic Jews looked at the elites among them only.

Thus, Diego Rivera's Sephardic Myth is unprecedented. He inverted the Golden Age Myth of centuries past to self-fashion his revolutionary identity. Rivera not only acquired *noble* ancestry in his invented genealogy—he also leveraged his *Converso* ancestry to affiliate himself with the “downtrodden masses.” In stark contrast to German Jews of the Sephardic Myth 1.0, his identification with the Sephardic story of persecution and expulsion is what makes Diego Rivera a pioneer of the Sephardic Myth 2.0. He was one of the first to highlight the formerly downplayed persecution.

Rivera's interpretation of Sephardi heritage is novel. He invented specifically a *Converso* ancestry that provided him with both an illustrious ancestry and an affiliation with persecution and suffering. He needed this affiliation with the “downtrodden masses” to self-fashion his identity as a revolutionary and a social activist. For the first time, the formerly downplayed history of expulsion and persecution was instead highlighted, as a means of self-aligning with the Jew as a victim of persecution, as *pariah*. The Jews are not only a downtrodden, diasporic group

whose plight the artist was privy to through his many Jewish friends; the Sephardim were victims of early modern Spanish institutions, persecuted by both the crown and the church on religious terms. In his art, he lamented the suffering brought on by the Spanish in the Americas. By aligning himself on the side of the victim of these early-modern Spanish institutions, he positioned himself via his ancestors on the “right” side of conquest history. Moreover, his Sephardi heritage provided Rivera with a pan-Jewish identity, which aligned him with his Ashkenazi friends and positioned him against fascist antisemitism.

To analyze how Rivera created his Jewish origins, it is helpful to first present Diego Rivera’s ancestry on his own terms. Indirectly through New York City journalist Gladys March, the muralist wrote a memoir *Diego Rivera: My Art, My Life* (1960). In the first chapter of the autobiography, “Geographical, Genealogical,” the artist described his diverse ancestry: “There was mixed blood on both sides of my family.” He explained that his maternal grandmother was of “an Indian and Spanish mixture,” and the family of his maternal grandfather was from a region which was “celebrated all over Mexico for ... the gaiety and vigor of its Negroid people.” He concluded that, “It is not unreasonable, therefore, to suppose that my mother passed on to me the traits of three races: white, red, and black.”³²

Being of the three “races” of Mexico made Rivera *mestizo*. The Mexican *mestizo* was a key ethnic construct produced during the era of reconstruction. The nationalist campaign described a national ethnicity in an effort to unite the Spanish, Indigenous, and Afro-Mexican groups along ethnic lines. Being *mestizo* even played a role in collectively evaluating immigrant groups for visas in Mexico. His *mestizo* status also provided the artist with a personal, concrete link to *indigenismo* and pre-conquest history.

³² Rivera and March, *My Art, My Life*, 11.

Next, Rivera described his noble Sephardic ancestry, “My father’s mother, Grandmother Ynez Acosta, was descended from a Portuguese-Jewish family which traced its ancestry to the rationalist philosopher Uriel Acosta.”³³ Throughout his life, Rivera claimed Sephardi descent from Uriel d’Acosta (1585-1640), an exiled Jewish intellectual, son of *Conversos*, and Sephardi hero. In his memoir, Rivera flaunted that his alleged ancestor was a “rationalist” thinker. In this way, he saw Acosta as a Jewish intellectual who was perceived as an early enlightened thinker who questioned the authority of religious texts and leadership.

Rivera’s autobiography established his official genealogical myth. Gladys March, who documented Rivera’s memoir, struggled to separate the artist’s fictional storytelling from his non-fictional past. From 1944 to the final year of his life in 1957, the writer made extended visits to Mexico annually to collaborate with the artist on his memoir. In the introduction of the his memoir—published posthumously in 1960—March described the artist’s idealism and fantastic imagination. She offered Élie Faure’s description of Rivera as a “Mythologer...perhaps even mythomaniac!”³⁴ March then explained the difficulty of writing a complete, factual autobiography of an expert myth-maker. Rivera, able to “transform the history of Mexico into one of the great myths of our century, could not, in recalling his own life to me, suppress his colossal fancy.” She explained,

*He had already converted certain events, particularly of his early years, into legends. Both Bertram D. Wolfe and Ernestine Evans, who wrote books about him, grappled with this problem... The artist’s account of his relations with Leon Trotsky, for instance, all but conceals a genuine attraction he felt toward Trotsky’s Fourth International. But when I met Rivera, in 1944, he was seeking readmittance into the Communist Party. For this reason, also, his description of his journey to Russia in 1927 omits much that he had earlier confided to his biographer, Bertram D. Wolfe, particularly of his skirmishes with Soviet bureaucrats, artists, and art theorists.*³⁵

³³ Rivera and March, 12.

³⁴ Rivera and March, 8.

³⁵ Rivera and March, 7.

The artist's reassessment of these events changed at different times in his life. March's experience confirms that Rivera's personal myths were constantly in flux.

This first look at Rivera's variegated ancestral claims offers a look into how in the later years of life he wanted to document his legacy. March's account of Rivera's imaginative character illustrates how he made up legends and shaped reality to fit his personal narrative. It was in this way that Rivera self-fashioned his ancestral identity. At various junctures in his life, he selectively highlighted his various *mestizo*, Russian, Spanish, and Sephardi origins. The many myths of his memoir showcase his idealism and fantastic imagination.

Diego Rivera felt his Sephardi heritage throughout his life—but was the artist actually of Sephardic descent? Scholars in the 21st century generally reject the “mythologer's” ancestral claims. However, during his life and for decades after his death, it was widely believed that the artist was ethnically Jewish. Sources from the period—and even today—present his ancestral narrative as fact, not fiction. For example, the Spanish edition of *Enciclopedia Judaica Castellana* published in Mexico in 1948 includes an entry on the artist. They refer to his grandmother's Sephardi lineage,

*Rivera, Diego, celebrated Mexican painter; b. in Guanajuato in 1866. His paternal grandmother, Inés Acosta, comes from a Jewish family of Portuguese origin, [who] immigrated in 1822 or 1823.*³⁶

The entry then described Rivera's Jewish identity and activism: “In a card written to *the Bené Berit* of Mexico City (dated October 22, 1942), [Rivera] affirms that he considers it an honor to have Jewish blood in his veins. On various occasions he has spoken out against antisemitism.” Rivera was known to the Mexican Jewish community in this way: an anti-fascist and a proud fellow Jew.

³⁶ Isaac Babani and Eduardo Weinfeld, *Enciclopedia Judaica Castellana : en diez tomos; el pueblo judio en el pasado y el presente* (Mexico, D.F: Editorial Enciclopedia Judaica Castellana, 1949), 159.

Bertram Wolfe (1896-1977) was a contemporary comrade of Rivera who also split with Stalin in the 1920s. Wolfe wrote various biographies of his friend and fellow communist based on the artist's papers and their experiences together. Wolfe's insight into Rivera's politics will be useful later in this chapter. For now, Wolfe's first biography of Rivera published in 1939 serves as a period source that described his ancestry. This first edition was published more than twenty years before the later, more popular version in 1963, six years following the artist's death. In both biographies (1939 and 1963), Wolfe stated that Rivera's grandmother was, "Ynez Acosta, beautiful Mexican girl of Portuguese-Jewish descent."³⁷ This demonstrates that already in the 1930s, Rivera began claiming Sephardi ancestry. Also, this edition utilized a different spelling of his paternal grandmother's name—Ines and Ynez.

In 1963, Wolfe's understanding of Rivera's ancestral narrative changed. In the main text, Wolfe stated, "at fifty [his grandfather] had married seventeen-year-old Ynez Acosta, Mexican of Portuguese-Jewish descent."³⁸ However, in a footnote in this second edition, the biographer commented that he was unable to find any conclusive evidence of such ancestry. Further, he included a widely cited quotation from the artist, "In 1952 Rivera said to an audience in Mexico City that his ancestry was 'Spanish, Dutch, Portuguese, Italian, Russian and—I am proud to say—Jewish.' That same year he told a Jewish reporter that he was 'three-eighths Jewish,' his paternal grandfather being Anastasio de la Rivera Sforza, son of an Italian Jew born in Petrograd, and his great-grandmother on that side Chinese."³⁹ In this instance, Rivera claimed not only

³⁷ Bertram D. Wolfe, *Diego Rivera: His Life and Times* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1939), 5.

³⁸ Wolfe, 14

³⁹ Wolfe may be the origin of the following quotation, which is frequently cited but never consistently. Some say Rivera wrote it in 1935, and others, including Wolfe in 1963, claim Rivera said this at a speech in 1952 in Mexico City. If this quotation is accurate, it makes sense for Rivera to invent Chinese ancestry, as Chinese Mexicans were another discriminated ethnic group in Mexico during the mid-twentieth century.

Jewish ancestry but Russian, too, among others. His genealogical narrative was emblematic of the artist's cosmopolitan, internationalist identity.

Another biography of the Mexican muralist from 2000 also acknowledged how Rivera self-fashioned his *Converso* ancestry. The biographer Patrick Marnham described Rivera's genealogical narrative. His grandmother, "Doña Ines de Acosta y Peredo" was "a beautiful Mexican girl of Portuguese-Jewish descent."⁴⁰ However, like Wolfe, Marnham found no conclusive evidence of his grandmother's Jewish descent. He explained that the Rivera family now maintains that she was the niece of Mexico's first aerial navigator. Benito Leon Acosta was also born Guanajuato and is reported to have learnt the art of hot-air ballooning in France and Holland.⁴¹

Despite being an invention, Marnham suggested that having Jewish roots was of some importance to the painter. He elaborated, "All in all, the painter was satisfied with his exotic ancestry. It provided him with a distant memory of wealth, a connection with the European aristocracy of the Conquest, and a ration of military daring, intellectual distinction and Jewish difference."⁴²

I have similarly observed that Rivera's Jewish ancestry not only supplied him with "Jewish difference" and "intellectual distinction," but it also aligned him with the "downtrodden masses." Rivera weaved this affiliation with the oppressed into his socialist identity. In the 1930s, his Jewish roots made Hitler's "war" on the Jews even more personal. His Jewish identity fueled his ant-fascist activism. Throughout the decade, antisemitic rhetoric employed against him by political enemies further solidified his identity as a Jewish victim. In a similar vein, by

⁴⁰ Patrick Marnham, *Dreaming with His Eyes Open : A Life of Diego Rivera* (New York : Knopf, 1998), 21

⁴¹ Marnham, 23.

⁴² Marnham, 23.

claiming Sephardic descent—and specifically a *Converso* lineage—he made himself a victim of colonial Spanish institutions. As a victim of early-modern Spanish rule, he situated himself historically on the opposite side of the aristocracy of the Conquest. Moreover, Rivera’s imagined Russian ancestry connected him to the land of the Russian Revolution he so romanticized. The artist’s exotic ancestry made him even more modern, more cosmopolitan, and more international. All in all, Rivera’s ancestral narrative played an important role in self-fashioning his identity. This section has sought to address Rivera’s origin story in his own terms in his autobiography, question the truthfulness to his ancestral narrative, and provide examples of his earliest claims to Sephardi descent.

* * *

Though Rivera departed from the Sephardic Myth 1.0 in boasting *Converso* ancestry, he still played with the notion of noble Sephardi ancestry by proclaiming descent from Uriel Acosta (1585-1640). Such descent is unlikely, however, because Uriel Acosta had no children. In fact always, he lamented the loneliness of exile. By inventing descent from Acosta, Rivera aligned himself with a mystical Sephardi hero. This contrasts the way he also identified with Jews in the role of the victim. Rivera’s noble Sephardi root-seeking is in line with the Sephardic Myth 1.0, which exclusively highlighted Sephardi heroes and downplayed the history of persecution and exile. Further, Acosta could be considered anti-establishment free thinker, for which he was exiled. In a similar vein, Rivera was exiled from the Communist Party in 1929 for being independent. The painter’s imagined genealogical tie to noble Sephardic Jews provided him with noble ancestry and also a Jewish intellectual lineage. Uriel Acosta, as an exiled philosopher, affiliated the revolutionary idealist with a Sephardi hero who was also anti-establishment and exiled for his beliefs—just as Rivera was expelled from the Communist Party.

Many famous figures dear to the revolutionary idealist were Jewish by descent. Despite their being Ashkenazi, common Jewish kinship linked him indirectly to other intellectuals of Jewish descent who he admired, such as Karl Marx (1818-1883), Albert Einstein (1879-1955), Leon Trotsky (187-1940), and Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). These intellectuals were ethnically Jewish but very secular. Rivera depicted Karl Marx, the founding father of Marxism, in one of his famous frescos “pointing towards a better future.” Rivera’s communist hero was believed to have had an illustrious, rabbinical heritage. Rivera could have identified with his fellow ‘Jewish’ hero—despite Marx’s infamous expressions of Jewish self-hatred and Judeophobia.

Leon Trotsky gave up his Jewish identity for internationalism, changing his name from Lev Davidovich Bronstein to Leon Trotsky in 1902.⁴³ Rivera did become a Trotskyist during the late 1930s, as the two shared a revolutionary idealism and anti-stalinist sentiments. They became friends when he secured the Soviet exile’s asylum in Mexico in 1937. Rivera and his wife Frida Kahlo even sheltered Trotsky in their home in Coyoacán, but their relationship had a rocky ending. Trotsky and Kahlo had an affair, and shortly after, Trotsky was killed in Mexico City in 1940. Afterwards, Rivera distanced himself from the leader of the Fourth International. It is difficult to determine to what extent Trotsky influenced the muralist’s Jewish identity. That is because the two did not meet until 1938, after Rivera had already been boasting his Jewish lineage for almost a decade. Furthermore, Trotsky exemplified Jewish ambivalence. He never identified as Jewish in any sense; he always considered himself an internationalist. He distanced himself from his Jewish background, always stressing his identity as a socialist. However, like many Jewish intellectuals of the era, Trotsky’s contemporaries did not let him disconnect from his Jewish roots. It could be argued that Rivera saw Trotsky as an intellectual who he admired

⁴³ Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, eds., “Trotsky (Bronstein), Lev Davidovich,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., vol. 20 (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 156–57.

and was also persecuted for his Jewish ethnicity. Because Trotsky did not talk about being Jewish, it would be more difficult to suggest that he showed Rivera what it meant to be Jewish.

Lastly, Rivera admired Einstein—yet another intellectual of Jewish descent. Einstein was known to come from a Jewish family, but he was very secular. He was present during the ceremony when Hebrew University was founded in 1926, which suggests that he was in favor of Zionism. However, the scientist was a secular person. He remained secular while in Germany and opposed violent antisemitism by the Nazis. Like Rivera, he was also a civil rights activist. The two shared universalistic principles of equality and secularism. In Einstein, he saw a model of an intellectual who happened to also be of Jewish descent. Acosta, Marx, Trotsky, and Einstein, among others, were his Jewish heroes. By aligning himself with these Jewish intellectuals whom he admired, Rivera established a noble ancestry.

* * *

Rivera's revolutionary ideology required an association with suffering, which his pan-Jewish identity provided him. Moreover, Rivera was known in the Jewish press in Mexico and the U.S. as an active anti-fascist. Rivera considered antisemitism as a counter-revolutionary, fascist diversion which would disappear with the triumph of socialism.⁴⁴ In this chapter, I discuss how Diego Rivera leveraged his imaginary Jewish genealogy to self-fashion his socialist identity from when he arrived in Paris in 1910 until his death in 1957. His imagined Jewish genealogy—specifically from *Conversos* persecuted by the Inquisition—provided Rivera with an illustrious, intellectual lineage and simultaneously a means of identifying with the “downtrodden masses.” Likewise, it offered the artist an alternative genealogical narrative to his “noble Spanish

⁴⁴ “Rivera’s Portrait of Hitler Too Gentle, Mexicans Claim,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, June 13, 1934.

lineage.”⁴⁵ Being the product of *Conversos* placed Rivera on the opposite side of conquest history by re-contextualizing his Iberian roots to align with the conquered, the persecuted, and—specifically—not the Spanish conquistador. It also provided him with a connection to the fellow cosmopolitan “comrades” in his life in Mexico and abroad who just happened to be Jewish—but shared similar idealistic visions of an utopian international revolution. His imaginary Jewish lineage heightened his sensitivity to the plight of the Jews and strengthened his identity as an anti-fascist.

⁴⁵ Rivera referred to his Spanish noble ancestry various times. For example, “While discussing the Jewish question in Mexico, he told [the journalist] some interesting and little known facts about himself. His grandfather was a Spanish nobleman who participated in an unsuccessful Revolution, and fled to Mexico,” in Phillip Bernstein, “Hodge-Podge,” *Jewish Daily Bulletin*, June 16, 1935. In his autobiography, he elaborated: “Through my paternal grandfather and father, I was entitled to the rank of marquis under the then existing Spanish monarchy.” Rivera and March, *My Art, My Life*, 63.

Rivera's European Years (1910-1921)

Diego Rivera did not grow up around Jews or Jewish culture. It was not until the United States restricted immigration under the Johnson Act of 1924 that Jews looked to Mexico.⁴⁶ Rather, he became acquainted with Jews in Paris during the 1910s. After returning to Europe in 1910 on a government-sponsored scholarship, the artist and his Russian wife, Angelina Beloff, moved into the bohemian art district of Montparnasse. There they became a part of the colony of transnational intellectuals and artists who frequented the cafés of Montparnasse and la Ruche. One coffee purchased a day of discussing politics, art, and philosophy with other bohemian émigrés. They would frequent the *Café de la Rotonde* to discuss politics and paint portraits of each other. This is where Rivera's Jewish identity and communist politics were born—in the cafés of Montparnasse.

In Paris, Rivera rubbed shoulders with icons of modern art. He made friends with Picasso, Modigliani, Apollinaire, Fernand Léger, and Marc Chagall, just to name a few. Many of the artists of Montparnasse came from Eastern European Jewish backgrounds. This gave rise to the nickname, the “Jewish School of Paris.” However, Montparnasse and la Ruche were also homes to many non-Jewish artists; thus, the cosmopolitan art colony was never a strictly Jewish enclave.

Many of these immigrant artists came to Paris during the early 20th century to escape the social and political upheavals in Eastern Europe—especially in Russia and Poland. The Jewish artists were often refugees from persecution or other limitations, such as disinterested collectors. Though they were cultural assimilationists, the artists were also haunted by “nostalgic memories

⁴⁶ Judith Laikin Elkin, *The Jews of Latin America* (Boulder (Colo.); London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2014), 84.

of the life from which they had chosen to escape.”⁴⁷ They carried with them the trauma of the virulent antisemitism they experienced in their youth. In this way, these political dissidents from pre-Revolutionary Russia did not leave their politics behind them. These were exiles in favor of revolutionary solutions.

* * *

At the beginning of the twentieth century, communism became popular among Jews across the diaspora as a possible solution to the “Jewish Question.” Certainly not all Jews were communists during this time. For those Jews who did identify with communism, it promised them equality. Communism is anti-religious, which is problematic for Jewish religionists, because religious identity is erased in an ideal communist world. On the other hand, for Jews striving for assimilation, Jewish particularism would disappear under communist universalism. In this way, communism offered an ideal social scenario in which everyone was made equal and prejudice could not survive.

One must be cautious when discussing Jews and communism. Antisemitic rhetoric classically conflates Jews with communism. The antisemitic trope that Jews are naturally aligned with communism is a senseless stereotype, as being of Jewish descent does not involve a propensity for affiliating with communism. Then, to what extent can one say Rivera’s friends’ “Jewishness” influenced their political attachments? I stress the idealistic nature of communist movements during the 1920s and 30s. Communism was more than just a political affiliation for these artists and intellectuals; it was a quasi-religion, a worldview. Furthermore, it was not an inherit Jewish character that pushed Rivera’s Jewish friends towards communism. Their

⁴⁷ Edouard Roditi, “Paris School of Art,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, 2nd ed., vol. 15 (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 647–51.

experiences as Jews fueled their revolutionary spirit and passion for communist objectives.

Diego Rivera's communist spirit was also fueled by his Jewish self-perception and lived experiences of antisemitism.

However, Rivera's Jewish identity politics were much different than those of his friends. First, Rivera never lived Jewish experiences. He first came to know communism through Jews. He saw in them "the downtrodden masses." Second, instead of distancing himself from his alleged Jewish roots in the name of communism, Rivera embraced and even boasted his Jewish genealogy.

If one cannot assume a Jewish context in his friends' communism, a Jewish "subtext" can be considered. In the section titled, "Jews, Communism, and Art in Interwar America," Ezra Mendelsohn argued, "The subsuming of Jewish particularism within a discourse of universalism is to be expected of anti-nationalist Jewish leftists in general, and of Communists in particular." He posited that universalism was itself a "hallmark of secularized Judaism," and thus, "even if the 'text' does not usually reveal a link between Jewishness and radicalism, a Jewish 'subtext' may nevertheless be postulated, if not proven."⁴⁸

During the first half of the twentieth century, communist ideology and political movements played an important role in Jewish life throughout the diaspora. In the early years of Bolshevism and the Soviet regime, Jewish members of the Communist Party in Eastern Europe were mostly assimilated Jews. They embraced communism's rejection of individual identity, as it promised them a "total disappearance of Jewish identity under advanced capitalism and

⁴⁸ Ezra Mendelsohn, "Jews, Communism, and Art in Interwar America," in *Dark Times, Dire Decisions: Jews and Communism* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 99–132. This edited volume, *Dark Times, Dire Decisions: Jews and Communism* contemplates how communism offered a possible solution to the "Jewish Question."

socialism.”⁴⁹ Most importantly, the triumph of universal communism over fascism and capitalism promised a future in which antisemitism would vanish.

The virulent antisemitism of the White Army first drove these Eastern European Jews to communism. For example, Leon Trotsky (1871-1940) was a key leader of the early Bolshevik revolution and the pre-Stalin period of the Soviet regime. Always downplaying the impact his Jewish background had on him, Trotsky exemplified Jewish ambivalence. However, his own writings make it clear that he was deeply affected by his Jewish experiences. Like other Eastern European Jewish communists, as a child Trotsky lived through the vicious pogroms of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These memories haunted him. In *Trotsky and the Jews*, Joseph Nedava suggested it was “Trotsky the Jew rather than Trotsky the communist” who recounted a vivid description of the pogroms of 1905. In the mid-1920s, Trotsky described this horrific event,

The military band keeps repeating tirelessly: “God save the Tsar”—this being the martial hymn of pogroms [...] The trembling slave, who only an hour ago was himself hunted down by the police and by hunger, feels that he is an absolute despot now. He is allowed everything, he is omnipotent, he rules over property and honor, over life and death. If he so wishes he throws the old woman with her piano out of the window of the third floor, smashes a chair on the head of an infant in arms, rapes a girl in front of the crowd, drives a nail into a living body...annihilates to a man entire families; pours oil over a house and turns it into a bonfire, and whoever throws himself through a window is finished off on the pavement with a cane...There is no torture invented by a brain maddened by wine and rage before which he is obliged to stop short. He is allowed to do everything, and he dares everything. . . "God save the tsar!" Here is a youth who has looked death in the face--and in a moment his hair has turned gray. Here is a ten-year-old boy who has been driven mad at the sight of his parents corpses torn to pieces. Here is an army surgeon, who went through all the horrors of the Port Arthur siege, but has been unable to stand the experience lasting several hours of the Odessa pogrom, plunging into the eternal night of madness. "God save the tsar!..." [...] In these words lies the hellish moral of the pogromist policy. ... Wallowing in blood, the barefooted ragamuffin rushes along forward. He is allowed everything, dares

⁴⁹ Binyamin Eliav, Moshe Mishkinsky, and Jacob M. Landau, “Communism,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, 2nd ed., vol. 5 (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 91–101.

*everything—he reigns supreme. The "white tsar" has permitted him everything—Long live the white tsar!...*⁵⁰

Trotsky's account of the event in its entirety in "The Tsarist Hosts at Work" is disturbing. This small excerpt illustrates the dangerous reality Jews faced in Eastern Europe. The trauma of living through the pogroms unquestionably remained in Trotsky's memory. The words "God save the Tsar!" were seared into his brain as a young man. He associated virulent antisemitism with the Russian empire. As a consequence, Trotsky "the Jew" became committed to destroying the system which incited such violence. Perhaps, then, this Jewish trauma did give him a propensity for identifying with the promises of international revolution.

After the Russian Revolution, Jewish interest in communism as a possible solution to the "Jewish Question" spread across the diaspora. Jews worldwide saw how Jewish life flourished during the early years of the Soviet Union. Following the collapse of the Russian Tsarist Empire, a "dichotomy of Jewish life" evolved, which appealed to both assimilationists and secular, Yiddish-oriented Jews around the globe.⁵¹ The communist state temporarily appeared to be a haven for Jews.

The Jews in the Soviet Union appeared to have had attained an unprecedented level of emancipation and assimilation. Soviet Jews gained socioeconomic mobility and the freedom of movement. Furthermore, in the early years, Jews were not forced to assimilate in the communist state. As a result, an extensive Jewish "secular education and cultural network" emerged in Yiddish. Witnessing the success of the Soviet Jews, the world saw the Soviet solution to the "Jewish question" as an "intrinsic positive approach" which offered possibilities for "various

⁵⁰ Leon Trotsky, "The Tsarist Hosts at Work," *Sochineniia* (Moscow and Leningrad, 1925-1927), 2, part 1, pp. 42-48. Quoted in Joseph Nedava, *Trotsky and the Jews / Joseph Nedava.*, 1st ed.. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1972). 56.

⁵¹ Eliav, et al., "Communism," 91-101.

Jewish trends,” including assimilation, the “preservation of Jewish (secular) identity” and even “Jewish territorialism and embryonic Jewish statehood.”⁵²

Additionally, Jews around the world were also witnessing the rise of antisemitism in Eastern Europe and Palestine, and, simultaneously, fascism in Germany, Italy, Spain, and Japan. Communism was seen as an alternative—and thus, the movement spread to Jewish communities throughout the world. Later in the 1930s, Jews did become disenchanted with Soviet Communism. Stalin’s totalitarian regime had proven to be antisemitic. After the death of Lenin, Stalin embraced Jewish secular institutions. But later in the 1930s, he began implementing anti-Jewish policies. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Agreement of 1939 also put Jewish Communists in a difficult situation. Due to the Jewish lived experience and the changes in communists’ attitude towards the Jewish population, it is easy to understand how and why the Jews’ attitudes toward Soviet communism changed. However, the Eastern European Jewish communists Rivera befriended in the 1910s were not privy to this future; they naively believed in a perfect communist world in which they could escape their Jewish past.

Rivera was a revolutionary idealist who never really experienced revolution. He did not deal with the intellectual, political theory of communism. Despite always calling himself a communist, Rivera was more of a revolutionary idealist dreaming of a utopian international revolution than a veritable “Communist.”

Despite being expelled from the Mexican Communist Party in 1929, he wrote in his memoir that “After 1929, I continued to regard myself as a Communist in spite of my expulsion.”⁵³ However, during the early 1930s the “communist” had no political party affiliation. He was far from a ‘capital-C Communist.’ Certainly not in any official capacity, the artist was

⁵² Eliav, et al., “Communism,” 91-101.

⁵³ Eliav, et al., “Communism,” 91-101.

hardly involved with Communist Party at all. He carried the socialist movement through his art. This is because at heart, Rivera was always more of a revolutionary than a politician. His politics were idealistic, and he romanticized revolution. The artist was not a reader of Marx or Engels; he was not versed in political theory. Diego Rivera was an artist with a creative imagination and an idealistic passion for revolution. But he was not a politician.

Bertram Wolfe described him as a terrible communist. Wolfe was a contemporary ‘comrade’ of Rivera in the Mexican Communist Party during the 1920s. Wolfe also happened to be of Jewish descent. He wrote two bibliographies of the muralist: *Diego Rivera, His Life and Times* (1939) and *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera* (1963). The first edition can serve as a primary source account of a contemporary political comrade, who was very well versed in political theory.

First, Wolfe described him the artist an intellectual “who did not need to be imbued with the philosophy and spirit of the movement by constant contact,” and “whose services best served the revolution behind the paintbrush.”⁵⁴ In fact, Rivera’s contemporary comrade even suggested the painter resign from the Communist Party. Wolfe wrote in 1939,

*Back in 1924, I undertook to discuss with Diego his relationship with the Communist Party, thereby straining our friendship very nearly to the breaking-point. ‘Diego,’ I said awkwardly, “I think you should resign from the party. . . You are not a good committee member or party member anyway. You are always missing meetings, forgetting assignments, being reprimanded, threatened with expulsion for excessive absence. Your participation is sufficient to disturb your painting, which is of the greatest service, and not sufficient to be of any other service. Don't you see, Diego, as a sympathizer you would be the best, the greatest, the most valued sympathizer, more valuable than any member? But as a member you are one of the worst members.”*⁵⁵

Wolfe’s description of Rivera as a party member illustrates his idealistic tendencies and revolutionary politics.

⁵⁴ Bertram David Wolfe, *Diego Rivera: His Life and Times* (A. A. Knopf, 1939), 248-266.

⁵⁵ Wolfe, 248-266.

Despite including Karl Marx “pointing the way to a better future” in his most famous mural, Rivera did not discuss any readings from Marx or Engels. Rather, the artist romanticized Russia for its great revolution and their embrace of a communist system. He even claimed some Russian ancestry, as it suited his needs. He identified with the political refugees he met in Paris, who brought their worldviews and political movements with them. He even tried to speak some Russian, but apparently not very well.

Knowing about the Jewish political and intellectual milieu during the first half of the twentieth century is central to understanding the identity politics of the artist’s leftist, Jewish friends. Rivera’s identification with the general notion of revolution, Russia, communism, and his Russian-speaking Jewish immigrant friends are connected. Discussing the ways in which Rivera conflated Russia, Jews, persecution, and communism is crucial for analyzing how he leveraged his imagined Jewish heritage to self-fashion his socialist identity and to bond with the leftist Jews in his life. With this knowledge, Rivera’s story continues in Paris before the breakout of World War I and the Russian Revolution.

Perhaps it was the artist's first wife, Angeline Beloff, who encouraged Rivera to become active in the Russian emigré movement in 1913, where he met his mistress named Marevna Vorobieff. Outside the café scene, these revolutionaries



Figure 4. Marevna Vorobieff, *Homage to Friends from Montparnasse*, 1968. Oil/canvas. Left to right: Diego Rivera, Ilya Ehrenburg, Chaïm Soutine, Amedeo Modigliani and his common-law wife Jeanne Hébuterne, Max Jacob, Leopold Zborowski and (bottom left to right): Marevna, with young daughter Marika and Moïse Kisling.

gathered in Russian libraries, including the Library of Jewish Workers in the rue Ferdinand Duval.⁵⁶ In this circle of the “Jewish School,” Rivera came to know his close friends Russian Ilya Ehrenberg (1891-1967), Max Jacob (1876-1944), Amedeo Modigliani (1884-1920), Leopold Gottlieb (1883-1934), Moise Kisling (1891-1953), Marc Chagall (1887-1985), and Chaim Soutine (1893-1943). He bonded with them over endless discussions of art and class revolution. From this community, he even picked up some Russian-language skills. The “Studio Collection of Marie Vorobieff” showcases more than fifty sketches, paintings, and portraits of the “Jewish School,” which depict the artists’ antics between 1912-1921 (Figures 4, 5, and 6). Diego Rivera is a protagonist in a great number of her works from this time.

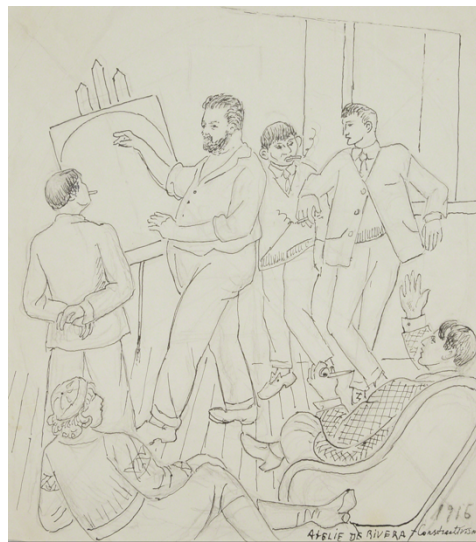


Figure 5. Marevna Vorobieff, *Atelier de Rivera- Constructivisme*, 1916. 1916. Black ink and pencil on paper, 22 × 20.5 cm.

⁵⁶ Patrick Marnham, *Dreaming with His Eyes Open*, 113.

In his memoir, Rivera recounted how he became friends with the Russian émigré and the Jewish School of Paris: “After I had returned to Montparnasse from Spain and sent for Angeline to rejoin me, I began associating with a group of Russians who gravitated around the writer Ilya Ehrenburg.”⁵⁷ Rivera introduced this group of friends as a way of explaining his acquaintance with a former lover and a Russian Jewish painter named Marevna Vorobieff (1892-1984): “Among these companions was a gifted young woman painter named Marievna Vorobiev. Outside the circle of her fellow Russians, Marievna seemed to have no friends in Paris.”⁵⁸

Marevna Vorobieff was Rivera’s first close relationship with a person of Jewish descent. They had a love affair which was equally passionate and chaotic. In 1992, the U.S. *Jewish Chronicle* announced an exhibit of Vorobieff’s work. The article, “Left Bank Artist is Honoured,” described the artist’s Jewish heritage and her involvement in the Jewish School of Paris. She was born in 1892 near Kazan in Russia. Her father was a “Polish nobleman and a Jewish artist.” The journalist, Barry Fealdman, described her as a “child prodigy” who left for Paris in 1912. She quickly became friends with the “circle of Jewish émigré artists who had flocked there from Eastern Europe—the so-called “Jewish School of Paris.”⁵⁹

Fealdman then elaborated on her relationship with the “Jewish School of Paris:” “Marevna’s art flourished within this eminent group of artists, among them Modigliani, Pascin, Chagall, Soutine, Lipshitz, Zadkine, Kisling and Mane-Katz. Her other friends included Stravinsky, Cocteau, Gorki and Ehrenberg.”⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Rivera and March, *My Art, My Life*, 116.

⁵⁸ Rivera and March, 116. Marevna Vorobieff’s name is spelled a variety of ways. Rivera utilized the Russian spelling of her name: Marievna Vorobiev.

⁵⁹ Barry Fealdman, “Left Bank Artist Is Honoured,” *Jewish Chronicle*, July 31, 1992.

⁶⁰ Fealdman, “Left Bank Artist Is Honoured.”

Various period sources indicate Rivera was close to these same iconic figures as well. That is because Marevna was Rivera's introduction to the Jewish world. The two lovers met as early as 1915, evidenced by the three cubist portraits of Vorobieff and Ehrenburg he painted that year. The muralist in his memoir wrote, "In 1917, I left Angeline and lived with Marievna as my wife for about half a year."⁶¹ Their turbulent love affair ended in Rivera abandoning Vorobieff with their illegitimate child, Marika Rivera. He forever adamantly rejected the possibility of Marika's parentage. Rivera mentioned the writer, Ilya Ehrenburg, was a part of their Left Bank circle. Rivera and Ehrenberg wrote about each other at various points in their life. The two became close friends.

It would not have been possible for Diego Rivera to feel a Jewish identity if he had not had a model of Jewish realities. It was the artist's Jewish friends who provided him the materials he needed to weave a Jewish identity. The Jewish artists he befriended in Paris acquainted him with Jewish issues and perspectives. These Russian émigrés were culturally assimilated Jews. Thus, they also provided the proclaimed atheist with a model of secular Jewish identity. Most important, their revolutionary discourse



Figure 6. Marevna Vorobieff, Ilya Ehrenburg, Marc Chagall, Oscar, Diego Rivera, Marevna and Angelina Beloff, 1917. Pencil, blue pen and green marker on paper, signed, inscribed and dated after the event, in pencil, 21x26.5cm.

⁶¹ Rivera and March, *My Art, My Life*, 116.

educated Rivera about the historical and contemporary persecution of Jews. At this period of time, most Mexicans would not have been aware of the difficulties the Jews faced.

It was in the caf  s of Paris that Rivera gained insider knowledge about the Jewish experience. He became privy to how Jewish questions are discussed amongst Jews. Like other marginalized social groups, Jews speak differently amongst themselves about particular issues—for example, about antisemitism and its most violent form, pogroms. Non-Jews have historically invalidated their experiences, not believed them, or said they were exaggerating. By discussing political issues with Jewish refugees of the violently antisemitic Russian Empire, Rivera came to understand Jewish realities. The pogroms began in the Russian Empire in 1871 in the areas from which these immigrants came. Violence against Jews was so ubiquitous in the Russian Empire that there is no question that these traumatic memories remained in their revolutionary consciousness.

Most, if not all, the Jewish   migr   artists experienced antisemitism in Eastern Europe. For that reason, they distanced themselves from their Jewish roots. A few artists of the Jewish School focused on Jewish themes in their art, such as Marc Chagall and Armedo Modigliani. Others portrayed their experiences of violence and poverty subliminally in their art. Overall, the Ashkenazi   migr  s distanced themselves from their Jewish identity, but they could not disconnect themselves from their Jewish experiences.

In contrast, consider the case of the painter and sculptor of Italian-Sephardi descent, Arredo Modigliani (1884-1920). He was a Sephardic Jew from Livorno who lived a totally different Jewish experience. Livorno was a safe place for Sephardim with an environment of cultural pluralism—antithetical to the situation faced by Jews in Eastern Europe. Unlike his Eastern European Jewish counterparts, Modigliani actively stressed his Jewish identity. At times, he introduced himself in French, "*Je suis Modigliani, juif*" and called himself "*un juif du patriciat*"—a Jew of noble class. Modigliani is known to have claimed noble ancestry.⁶²



Figure 7. Amedeo Modigliani, Portrait of Diego Rivera. 1914. Oil on canvas, 100 × 81 cm. Private collection, France.

In researching Modigliani, I have observed that the reason he was so proud of his Sephardic identity was because of his maternal grandfather, Isaac Garsin. Grandfather Garsin was an intellectual during an era of Sephardic intellectual inquiry in Livorno during the nineteenth century. His grandfather, fluent in an array of languages and literature, was responsible for Modigliani's and his sisters' education. It was Grandfather Garsin who inspired Modigliani, the scholarly artist. His sisters recounted that their grandfather taught them French, art, history, and philosophy. He discussed Jewish issues with his grandchildren. While Modigliani did not have a traditional Jewish background, he came to understand the history and philosophy of Sephardi heroes. In particular, his sisters remembered how Garsin idealized Baruch Spinoza and the rationalist philosopher Uriel Acosta.⁶³

⁶² Amedeo Modigliani, Klein, Mason., Berger, Maurice., Jewish Museum (New York, N.Y.), Art Gallery of Ontario., Phillips Collection., *Modigliani: Beyond the Myth* (New York; New Haven: Jewish Museum; Yale University Press, 2004).

⁶³ Modigliani, et al.

Unlike Rivera, Modigliani and his sisters actually read philosophy. It was because the scholarly artist was actually versed in Jewish intellectual thought that he understood the rationalist philosophy of Acosta and Spinoza. Therefore, he genuinely identified with these anti-establishment figures that rejected "fixed identities." These Sephardi heroes wanted to fashion their own identities. So did Rivera and Modigliani—which was a novel concept at the beginning of the 20th century.

Modigliani's Jewish identity was rooted in a family legend which made him a direct descendant of Spinoza. The family's ancestral myth was based on the last name of Modigliani's great-great-grandmother, Regina Spinoza Garsin. Because his great-great grandmother shared a surname with Spinoza, his grandfather taught him the family's Sephardic myth of noble lineage. The family myth was that they were direct descendants of the Sephardi exile. The Garsin family legend is certainly fiction, as Spinoza had no children. Note, this is exactly the case of Diego Rivera. Rivera coincidentally shared a last name with a great Sephardi hero—a child of *Conversos*, who was also an anti-establishment free-thinker. Based on this mental connection, Rivera imagined a genealogy in which his grandmother came from a long line of conversos dating back to Uriel Acosta, a Sephardi hero and a rationalist philosopher. In this way, Rivera was able to point to his last name, Acosta, and claim a noble, intellectual Jewish lineage.

Thus I propose that it was through Modigliani that Rivera learned of the Sephardic story: the expulsion, the Inquisition, and noble ancestry from the Sephardic Golden Age. I postulate that this proud Livornese Sephardi Jew introduced Rivera to the *Converso* story and the Sephardic Myth. Modigliani openly discussed his Jewish identity and noble ancestry. Therefore it is plausible that Modigliani is where Rivera got the idea to claim descent from Uriel Acosta based on a shared surname. Further, Spinoza and Acosta were particularly appealing for the

bohemian artists. These philosophers were also anti-establishment free-thinkers who held true to their beliefs even in the face of exile. Based on Rivera's colorful imagination, it makes sense that Modigliani would say, "you know, there is a famous exiled rationalist philosopher with the same last name..." And the idealist Rivera responds, "well, yes, of course..." In fact, he did do this.

In 1952 during a portrait session, the Jewish portrait artist, Marcel Sternberger, secretly taped a conversation with Rivera. The archivist at the Sternberg Collection described a moment in the interview in which Marcel's wife, Ilse, remarked that "D'Acosta is a famous name." Rivera replied, "Yes, this is the atheist philosopher...Uriel D'Acosta...and I suppose that I might have some inheritance from him."⁶⁴

Claiming *Converso* ancestry provided Rivera with an intellectual, noble lineage. Additionally, a common Jewish connection formed a solidarity between Rivera, Modigliani, and their Ashkenazi friends in the Jewish School of Art. This is precisely what Diego Rivera did: the artist picked identities that were appealing to him and pieced together a dynamic autobiographical narrative. The idealist wanted so badly to be a part of everything he was involved in that he created identities for himself. Rivera was so sure of these identities that he convinced everyone around him: his biographers, press, and his friends.

Rivera befriended many other Jews in Paris. For example, the French poet and novelist Max Jacob (1876-1944) wrote often about the Mexican painter. Rivera reminisced in his memoir about the "Admirers of Charlie Chaplin" clique, which included the group leader Picasso, Ilya Ehrenburg, Guillaume Apollinaire, and Picasso's roommate, Max Jacob.⁶⁵ Apollinaire also remembered Rivera's "remarkable figure sitting on the terrace of the *Rotonde* with Moise

⁶⁴ Loewentheil, Jacob. "Jewish Identity" *Sternberger Collection*. <https://www.sternbergercollection.com/jewish-identity>.

⁶⁵ Rivera and March, *My Art, My Life*, 146.

Kisling and Max Jacob.”⁶⁶ Jacob descended from German Jews who immigrated to France in 1816. He was troubled by his Jewish identity, and he converted to Christianity in 1915. It is plausible that Jacob worked through his spiritual and identity crisis via philosophical dialogue in *la Rotonde* amongst other Jews. Despite his conversion, upon the Nazi occupation of France in 1940, the Gestapo arrested Max Jacob. He died in the Darcy concentration camp in 1944. Rivera recalled his friendship with Jacob in his memoir written at the end of his life. This suggests that he was fond of the French poet. It is likely that Rivera the antifascist was touched by his friend’s death by the hand of Nazi antisemitism.

Vorobieff, Picasso, Jacob, Chagall, Modigliani, Soutine, and Rivera were part of the cosmopolitan café crowd who did not go to war in 1914. They continued the *Rotonde* tradition of making art and discussing politics during the war. For example, Vorobieff sketched Rivera, Soutine, and Chagall at a café table 1915 (Figure 8).

This shows that Rivera and Chagall did hang out together in *la Rotonde*. Per *Rotonde* tradition, Chagall painted a portrait of Rivera in 1914. One could cautiously argue that the artist contributed to the formation of Rivera’s Jewish identity by presenting him with Jewish subject matter through his art. In 1887, Marc “Segal” was



Figure 8. Marevna Vorobieff. *Diego Rivera, Chaïm Soutine and Marc Chagall*, 1915. Pencil, blue pen and green marker on writing paper, signed, inscribed and dated after the event, in pencil, 21x26.5cm.

⁶⁶ Marnham, *Dreaming with His Eyes Open*, 94.

born in Liozno, Vitebsk in Belurussia. Hasidism was prevalent in his family, and the artist had a traditional Jewish upbringing. Chagall's father worked for a herring-monger, and as a child, he attended *heder*, or a Jewish elementary school. Before leaving for Paris in 1910, the young artist changed the spelling of his family name to "Chagall." Adopting a new spelling of his last name suggests that he sought to distance himself from his Jewish background. At least, it was a way to avoid being immediately identified as Jewish.

The prevalence of Jewish subject matter in Chagall's oeuvre tells a different story. The painter dealt directly with Jewish themes. He was well-versed in Jewish tradition, and the inspiration for the painter's Jewish subject matter was characterized by a specific and clearly definable milieu from the period of 1887-1907.⁶⁷ Chagall differentiated himself from other artists of the Jewish school who only subliminally hinted at their Jewish experience.

Chaim Soutine (1893-1943) was one of these artists. The Russian-French painter did not draw subject matter from memories of his youth in the ghetto at Smilovitchi in Lithuania.⁶⁸ Born the tenth of eleven children of a poor tailor, Soutine grew up in poverty. This did not change in Paris, when he met Modigliani in 1913. Modigliani was eight years older than Soutine, and he took the starving artist under his wing. While the French artists were at war, Rivera became close friends with Soutine and Modigliani. Once again, Marevna sketched the three at a café table in during the war years. Unlike the proud Sephardi Modigliani, Soutine distanced himself from his Jewish heritage. He was an "expressionist who rendered in violent color all of the agony he felt" in heavy impasto. Even more than his technique, his choice of colors "betrayed his troubled mind. "His paintings often resembled "bleeding, tortured flesh. Everything is broken, twisted,

⁶⁷ Alfred Werner and Rohan Saxena, "Chagall, Marc," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, 2nd ed., vol. 4 (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 556–57.

⁶⁸ Alfred Werner, "Soutine, Chaim," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, 2nd ed., vol. 19 (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 63–64.

and distorted.”⁶⁹ Despite distancing himself from a Jewish identity, Soutine was forced to hide in a small village in Touraine after the Nazi invasion of France in 1940. Unlike Max Jacob, he did survive Nazi occupation.

Pinchus Krémègne (1890-1981) was also a part of the movement of Eastern European Jewish artists which evolved into the “Paris School of Art.” The young sculptor and painter accompanied Chaim Soutine to Paris in 1912, where he achieved great success. He was born in Vilna and experienced pogroms as a child. His work was characterized by Maximilien Gauthier as “Judaic disenchantment.”⁷⁰

During the summer of 1912, the Polish-Jewish portrait painter Leopold Gottlieb (1882-1934) accompanied Rivera and his wife, Angeline Beloff, and another émigré artists to Toledo, Spain. There he painted an impressive portrait of Rivera, which was shown in that year’s Salon d’Automne. Gottlieb’s older brother was a famous Jewish painter that suffered from antisemitic taunts



Figure 9. Marevna Vorobieff, *When will the Marevna war end?* 1916. Drawing. Left to Right: Diego Rivera, Amedeo Modigliani, and Ilya Ehrenberg in the studio of Rivera.

as a young man. As a way of dealing with this experience, he painted a self-portrait called a “Ahasuerus”—referring to the legend of the “Wandering Jew” shunned by everyone. During

⁶⁹ Werner, 63-64.

⁷⁰ Charles Samuel Spencer, “Krémègne, Pinchas,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, 2nd ed., vol. 12 (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 351.

World War I, Leopold Gottlieb went off to war as a part of the Polish Legion. He later taught at the Bezalel school in Jerusalem.

Finally, Diego Rivera had a lasting friendship with another intellectual of the Jewish School, Ilya Grigoryevich Ehrenburg (1891-1967). He was a Russian refugee forced to flee because of his revolutionary activities. His stay in Paris coincided with Rivera's. The Mexican painter talked about the Soviet Russian writer and journalist several times in his memoir. Ehrenburg also wrote frequently about Rivera. For example, he recalled what the revolutionary idealist said to him when he went off to fight in the Red Army in 1917, "I was going to see a revolution. He had seen a revolution in Mexico; it was the gayest thing imaginable."⁷¹

The two met at the beginning of World War I. When the French artists went off to war, Rivera and Ehrenburg were a part of the Rotonde clique who stayed in Paris. Marvena sketched the two plus Modigliani ("Mody") at *la Rotonde* in 1916. In 1917, she sketched the Rotonde crew discussing and dancing: Ilya Ehrenburg, Marc Chagall, Diego Rivera, Angelina Beloff, and herself. Rivera also painted Ehrenburg's portrait in 1915. The Russian refugee was born in Kiev to a culturally assimilated Jewish family. Despite having zero connection to Jewish culture or religious tradition, Ehrenburg was like many other left wing intellectuals of this century, "whom Hitler and Stalin would not allow to disconnect from their origins." The Encyclopedia Judaica describes, "A feeling of outrage at antisemitism recurs and his books and journalistic output throughout his career and was a major factor in his youthful revolt against the Czarist and, at the end of his life, against Stalinist injustice." However, he was a Stalinist sympathizer for many years. Ehrenburg was very active as an anti-fascist during World War II. He was part of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, and he stressed his Jewish identity during the war. Part of his

⁷¹ Marnham, *Dreaming with His Eyes Open*, 133.

activism with the committee was collaborating on two books documenting Soviet Jewry: the “Red Book” documented Jewish resistance and heroism, while the “Black Book” documented the “Soviet Holocaust.”⁷² A deeper analysis of their friendship would shed light onto how Ehrenburg influenced Rivera’s construction of a Jewish identity. Though he was not Jewish, Ehrenburg received antisemitic attacks. Like Rivera, Ehrenburg was a victim of antisemitism, which also made him Jewish in the eyes of the artist.

During his European years, Diego Rivera laid the foundation for the Jewish identity he created. He came into contact with many Jewish refugees, who lived as *pariahs*, as poor refugees fleeing antisemitism.

⁷² Maurice Friedberg and Shmuel Spector, “Ehrenburg, Ilya Grigoryevich,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, 2nd ed., vol. 6 (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 237–39.

Rivera Returns to Reconstruction Mexico (1920-1932)

The 1920s were an important decade for Mexico and Mexican Jewry. As a result of the Johnson Act of 1924, the 1920s welcomed the first major wave of Jewish immigrants to Mexico. The 1920s was also an era of reconstruction in Mexico. After ten years of bloodshed and revolution, the new Mexican government needed to unite the fragmented nation. The new regime recruited artists and intellectuals to define what it meant to be Mexican. This involved a national cultural and “psychological revolution” to “win the hearts and minds of ordinary Mexicans.”⁷³ Diego Rivera played a key role in this national identity-building project during Mexico’s Reconstruction era (1920-1930s). The first three presidents following the revolution—Adolfo de la Huerta, Alvaro Obregón, and Plutarco Elías Calles were known as the “Sonoran Dynasty.” The Sonorans undertook the process of reconstructing a nation after a decade of bloodshed and political instability.

Gilbert Joseph, leading scholar of Latin American and specifically Mexican history, described the infant nation’s “modernizing” state-building strategy as, “the forging of a capitalist society with guarantees for Mexican ownership and a modicum of social reforms for campesinos and workers [...] and a cultural revolution designed to foster national cultural values and an official version the Revolution “across a far-flung nation.”⁷⁴ The Sonorans “reshuffled the deck, giving campesino and worker organizations a chance to challenge entrepreneurs yet continuing to favor capitalist development.”⁷⁵ They recruited artists in their effort of constructing a united Mexican identity from an ethnically and geographically fragmented population.

⁷³ Gilbert M. Joseph and Jürgen Buchenau, *Mexico’s Once and Future Revolution: Social Upheaval and the Challenge of Rule since the Late Nineteenth Century*, 2013, 107.

⁷⁴ Joseph and Buchenau, 115.

⁷⁵ Joseph and Buchenau, 88.

In 1916 Anthropologist Manuel Gamino coined the term *forjando patria*, or “forging the fatherland.”⁷⁶ *Forjando patria* was the cornerstone of the Mexico’s nation-building project during the reconstruction era. Gilbert Joseph explained how constructing the new nation required a campaign to “turn campesinos into Mexicans” by winning “the hearts and minds of ordinary Mexicans.” This “psychological revolution” involved “a cultural nationalist movement that paid homage to both indigenous and *mestizo* traditions as ingredients of a national culture in which all Mexicans participate.”⁷⁷ Moreover, Mexico’s cultural nationalism should be contextualized in an “era of extremes” with nationalist movements in myriad forms—some more destructive than others.⁷⁸ In Eastern Europe, Jews even explored Yiddish and secular Jewish nationalism.

The new government employed artists and intellectuals to create a national identity. The Mexican muralists contributed to the cultural revolution through their accessible art-for-all. Through their murals, they were able to inculcate Mexican citizens with a set of national cultural values and a national historical narrative. Diego Rivera stands out from the other muralists in how he celebrated Mexican history and romanticized the revolution. Whereas the muralists Siquieros and Orzoco depicted the bloodshed of the revolution, Rivera incorporated positive elements of Mexico’s revolutionary past. He created national historical legends that contributed to the formation of a national historical narrative. He was able to teach Mexican history even to the large population who were unable to read or write. Rivera reached the masses through his preferred medium of fresco painting. Painting a wall was art for all.

Joseph described a third player in the national cultural revolution project: cosmopolitan intellectuals. Rivera was a part of these transnational political circles. In the 1920s and 1930s

⁷⁶ Joseph and Buchenau, 107.

⁷⁷ Joseph and Buchenau, 107.

⁷⁸ Joseph and Buchenau, 107.

Mexico City became a hub for waves of transcultural, progressive intellectuals and artists who were “drawn by the transformative potential of the revolution defining itself next door.” He explained,

Nonconformist academics and writers like Anita Brenner, Frances Toor, Katherine Ann Porter, Frank Tannenbaum, and Carlton Beals, to name but a few, engaged in ongoing discussions with Mexican intellectuals, artists, and cultural workers commissioned by the new revolutionary state to define a new national culture, identity, and aesthetic. Many of these Mexican artists and cultural workers, like Diego Rivera, were similarly cosmopolitan and sought out kindred transnational spirits in polyglot circles that encompassed Mexico City, New York, and Paris.⁷⁹

Anita Brenner was a Mexican Jew who was also a part of this transnational, intellectual network. Brenner ran in the same circles as Rivera from early on in the artist’s career. They were photographed together in New York City as early as 1924.⁸⁰ Moreover, Brenner was the one to advocate for Trotsky to Rivera, who managed to convince President Calles to grant the Soviet exile asylum.

During reconstruction, both had a huge impact on the national identity-building project. Brenner was born in Mexico to Russian Jewish immigrant parents, and her Jewish identity was impacted by the antisemitism she faced attending university in Texas. She was a part of the transnational, bohemian community writing about Mexico’s political process of revolution and social reform. Pointing to the Mexican example and its unique revolutionary ideology, they sought to spread the word to other potential revolutionaries worldwide. The “glittering notion of popular revolutionary promise” is what attracted transnational, leftist artists and intellectuals to Mexico. During the interwar period, they acted as “citizen diplomats” who were “spreading the

⁷⁹ Joseph and Buchenau, 112.

⁸⁰ Picture in Marcela Lopez Arellano, *Anita Brenner: una escritora judía con México en el corazón*, (Aguascalientes, Mexico: Universidad Autónoma de Aguascalientes ; México, D.F. : Centro de Documentación e Investigación Judío de México, 2016).

message of what they understood to be the revolution” taking place in Mexico.⁸¹ Anita Brenner’s efforts to spread awareness of the Mexican Revolution materialized in the first book published in English about the Mexican Revolution.

Through her concepts of “*lo mexicano*” (“that which is Mexican”) and “*la mexicanidad*” (Mexicanness), Brenner helped define what it meant to be Mexican. In her writing, Brenner played a role in “fashioning the state’s new formulations of the popular national character (*mexicanidad*).” *Mexicanidad* was based on the concept of a national mixed-ethnic identity, *mestizaje*. *Mestizo* was the official ethnicity of the Mexican nation. *Mestizo* united all Mexicans under an Afro-Indigenous-Spanish ethnic mixture. The idea was, “We are all *mestizo*, we are all Mexican.” For Anita Brenner, exploring what it meant to be Mexican was also a way of reconciling her own mixed-ethnic identity as an assimilated Mexican Jew.

In Ana Indych’s article, “*Entre mundos: Anita Brenner, identidad transcultural y arte mexicano en Nueva York*,” she described Brenner’s Mexican-Jewish identity and how she reconciled with it. She considered Brenner’s interest in Mexican art and identity as a personal search for her own Jewish identity. “Jewish, modern, and liberal”—Indych suggested that Brenner’s status as a cosmopolitan, transcultural intellectual made her receptive to radical art and revolutionary ideology.⁸²

Anita Brenner was born into the growing Mexican Jewish population during the 1920s-1930s. Her relationship with Rivera and the other Mexican muralists is discussed in historian Ana Indych in *Muralism Without Walls. Rivera Orozco, and Siqueiros in the United States*,

⁸¹ Joseph and Buchenau, *Mexico’s Once and Future Revolution*, 7.

⁸² Ana Indych, “*Entre mundos: Anita Brenner, identidad transcultural y arte mexicano en Nueva York*,” cited in Lopez Arellano, *Anita Brenner*, 40.

1927-1940.⁸³ It was Brenner who informed Rivera of the perilous situation of Leon Trotsky in 1937. It was George Novak, a member of the socialist group Menorah, who told Brenner that Trotsky was hiding out in Norway. Stalin's mighty fist was on the brink of attaining Trotsky, closing in on the dissident by putting pressure on the Norwegian government. Brenner sent a telegram to Rivera, urging the artist that Trotsky's situation was fatal. By meeting with Mexican President Calles, Rivera was able to secure Trotsky's exile.

Anita Brenner's parents were among the Jewish immigrants that trickled into Mexico between 1880-1920 and stuck it out through the violent revolution. However, the first true wave of Jewish immigration to Mexico was in the 1920s. In addition to Sephardim arriving from Damascus and Aleppo, Ashkenazi Jews were fleeing from Russia after the Russian Revolution. Upon the Russian empire's collapse, antisemitism was rampant. Jews suffered and died in the clash between the White and Red Forces. Due to the hostile situation, including the pogroms, many Russian Jews tried to flee. In the early 1920s, Jewish émigrés turned to Mexico. This was in response to the U.S.'s immigration policy under the Johnson Act of 1924. Many saw Mexico as a temporary home, where they could live as residents for two years before they were permitted to enter the U.S.

Diego Rivera's Jewish identity was shaped by his interactions with Mexico's growing Jewish community. Once again, Rivera identified with a group of Russian-Jewish émigrés. They shared a passion for revolution, communism, and even a bit of the Russian language. They were anti-fascist and anti-Stalin in the 1930s. One of the founders of the field of Mexican Jewish history, Judit Bokser Liwerant, explained that Eastern European Jewish immigrants to Mexico brought the "worldviews, ideologies, and political movements that had proliferated within

⁸³ Ana Indych-Lopez, *Muralism Without Walls. Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros in the United States, 1927-1940* (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 2009). Cited in Arellano, *Anita Brenner*, 41.

European Judaism since the late nineteenth century.” These included “various expressions of Jewish nationalism, both diasporic and Zionist, and within it, different secular and religious currents, left and right.”⁸⁴

Similarly, a wide range of radical currents were brought in, both those that expressed Jewish specificity and those that emphasized the universal character of social transformations, fundamentally communism.” They believed that antisemitism was a counter-revolutionary diversion employed by fascists and imperialists which would disappear with the triumph of socialism over capitalism and fascism. Leftist Mexican Jews began to organize politically as early as 1927. It was in 1940 that the “Jewish League in Support of the USSR,” later titled the “Popular League,” was formed. In particular, with Mexican women in general, Jewish women mobilized politically and played a primary role in the establishment of socialist organizations.⁸⁵ Many of these Mexican Jewish female-activists were friends of Diego Rivera.

Brenner, the communist-journalist also wrote for Jewish newspapers in the U.S. On various occasions, she advertised Mexico as a haven for Jews:

*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. . . . 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.*⁸⁶

Her experience as a Mexican Jew in the early 1920s was similar to what Isaac Berliner described in his poetry. Both friends of Rivera experienced the depths of cultures. They knew both worlds.

⁸⁴ Judit Bokser Liwerant, “De exilios, migraciones y encuentros culturales,” in Ranatta von Haffesntangel (ed.) *México: el Exilio Bien Temperado* (México: UNAM, Instituto de Investigaciones Culturales Germano Mexicanas, 1995), 23-35.

⁸⁵ Liwerant, 23-35.

⁸⁶ Anita Brenner, “The Jew in Mexico,” *The Nation*. August 27th, 1924.

Anita Brenner was a transcultural intellectual who transcended social boundaries. Mexico's embrace of mixed-ethnic identities allowed Mexican Jews to integrate during the 1920s. Brenner and Rivera's role in Mexico's national identity-building project was important for two reasons. First, they were experts of creating identities. Second, the concept of *mestizo* gave the two a propensity for embracing multiple identities, multiple ethnicities. In this way, Rivera was open to the idea of having multiple ethnic identities.

Jewish Press Tour (1930-1940)

Another layer of Diego Rivera's Jewish identity was imposed on him by others. He played with this perception in turn by offering up information regarding his own family narrative. This made him Jewish in the eyes of his contemporaries. Perhaps it made him Jewish amongst those left-leaning Jews from Russia or Poland that came to Mexico—finding their idea of utopian socialist society in Mexico. The legend also emerged that Rivera spoke Yiddish.

Sometime during the early 1930s, Rivera began claiming Sephardic Jewish ancestry. The first time I have observed the artist claim Jewish ancestry was in 1932 with an interview with the *Chicago Jewish Star*. The journalist began by stating, "I am primarily interested in finding out if Mexico's national artist is a Jew." He described Rivera's diverse ancestry,

His pedigree on his father's side shows Spanish and Tarascan Indian stock, and on his mother's, Portuguese Jewish and Spanish Russian descent. But when I boil down this ancestral potpourri of Spanish, Indian, Russian and Jewish lineage to a realistic racial conception, I discover that Diego Maria Concepción Juan Nepomuceno Estanislao de la Rivera y Barrientos de Acosta y Rodríguez - better known as Diego Rivera - is a one hundred per cent Jew..

Then the interviewer asked him directly, "You are a Jew, are you not, Monsieur Rivera?" The muralist smiled and said, "Of course, I have never hidden the fact, although I feel myself rather a cosmopolitan."⁸⁷

And cosmopolitan he was. Diego Rivera was a chameleon. He ran in transnational artist, intellectual and political circles between New York, Paris, Mexico, and the Soviet Union. It could be argued that his cosmopolitan self-perception—augmented by the public's perception of him as a transnational, transethnic, cosmopolitan figure—reinforced the artist's Jewish identity.

Rivera then elaborated on what his Jewish heritage meant to him, and his comments become very important later in 1935:

⁸⁷ Joseph Brainin, "Diego Rivera: The Modern Raphael." *Chicago Jewish Star*. January 8, 1932, sec. Community.

*Of course, we were not religious at home. If you ask me what my Jewishness consists of, I'll be frank and will answer you: I do not know.*⁸⁸

At this point in 1932, Rivera was not sure what his Jewish identity meant to him. He had no understanding of Jewish religiosity or cultural tradition. There remains no evidence to suggest that his grandmother was actually of Jewish descent; the artist was only exposed to Jewish life by his many Jewish friends.

For these reasons, Rivera did not know in 1932 what it meant to be Jewish. He explained, "I remember my grandmother, Ines de Acosta, who prided herself upon belonging to one of the oldest Portuguese Jewish families. She was in no way old-fashioned or religious. But there emanated from her the consciousness of a strong old race. I have inherited that same indefinable feeling."⁸⁹ Rivera's Jewish identity rested on a Jewish "feeling." His Jewish identity was not rooted in Jewish experiences.

This interview with the U.S. Jewish press in 1932 offers insight into Rivera's early Jewish identity. The artist had few materials with which he could craft a Jewish identity for himself. The journalist, Joseph Brainin, subsequently inquired about Rivera's opinion of the *kibbutzim* in Palestine. In a subsection titled, "Vision of Palestine," the muralist offered his opinion, "Yes, I would like to go to Palestine . . . I was told that there are model cooperative colonies there. I would like to see what kind of Jews have set themselves the task of building a new social structure in Palestine ... that is happening there ... is it not?"⁹⁰

He was apparently aware of the *kibbutzim*, perhaps by following the news. However, he did not mention where this land in Palestine came from. He offered no comment on the Israel-Arab conflict. Though, he seemed optimistic about Jewish nationalism. The journalist responded

⁸⁸Joseph Brainin. "Diego Rivera: The Modern Raphael." *Chicago Jewish Star*. January 8, 1932, sec. Community..

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

to Rivera's characteristic idealism: "I have not the heart to disappoint him. He is so eager for a confirmation of his views. He is a revolutionary, this Jew who has become the idol of Mexico's peasantry, which loves him because he understands it so well."⁹¹

Rivera then discussed the thriving Soviet-Jewish life following the Russian Revolution—before Stalin's regime reared its antisemitic head in the later 1930s.

*Later, Rivera tells of his trip to Russia three years ago. He is happy at the Communist achievements and en passant remarks: "The Jew feels at home there, doesn't he?" I do not contradict him. In the light of recent events in Eastern and Central Europe, it is true, regardless of what some professional anti-Soviet alarmists say.*⁹²

Two years later in 1934, the *B'nai B'rith Messenger* reported on the "Mexican-Jewish artist: "The Misrachi Book Shop in Mexico City has received threatening letters from men who disapprove the store's proposed exhibit of reproductions of paintings by Diego Rivera, Mexican-Jewish artist."⁹³ Also in 1934, the *Jewish Exponent* included an announcement about Rivera in a "list of Jewish achievements:" "Diego Rivera was selected by the Mexican Government to decorate the walls of the Capitol at Mexico City in his revolutionary style."⁹⁴

In January 1935, the *Jewish Daily Bulletin* published a fantastic story about Rivera. Like Anita Brenner, this journalist referred to the national rebel who instigated the Mexican Revolution, Francisco Madero (1873-1913), as being "part-Jew." He explained: "Since Diego Rivera, the great fresco painter and citizen unusual of Mexico has claimed that Jewish blood flows in his veins, many of our people have been making the artist's native land a vacation resort [...] many Jews are visiting the land that once had Madero, a part-Jew as its president."⁹⁵ Mexico appears to have been a nice place for Jews.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ David Mann, *B'nai B'rith Messenger*, April 13, 1934, sec. Book Notes | Travel Notes, National Library of Israel.

⁹⁴ "Hebrew Poet Met in Rivera's Library Surprises New Yorker," *Jewish Daily Bulletin*, January 20, 1935.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

The *Jewish Daily Bulletin* journalist described the experience of his friend the “Hebrew Poet,” “A friend of mine recently spent a month in Mexico City and came back amazed because he had found some kindred spirits.” Rivera was one of those kindred spirits. The poet paid a visit to the artist’s home. The journalist reminisced about Rivera’s cosmopolitan embrace:

[Rivera] nodded courteously to our friend and addressed him in Spanish but, alas, the New Yorker was unable to answer. The dark gentleman then tried French but with no more of a response. The New Yorker fidgeted and timidly attempted a few words in German. The response was instant. “Ah a Jew,” said the Castilian in Yiddish and immediately began to converse in the mother tongue. In his “patois” the New Yorker was very much at home and learned that the Castilian was a Spanish Jew who not only spoke Yiddish but also Hebrew and who was, in fact, at that moment waiting to present Rivera with a copy of his latest book of poems, written in Hebrew.

In this fascinating article, the journalist suggested the cosmopolitan artist was a fellow Jew—a speaker of Yiddish, the “mother tongue.” In this way, the *Jewish Daily Bulletin* contributed to Rivera’s public image as a Jew. This story stressed Rivera as an insider. Interestingly enough, Rivera was also working on a Yiddish book of poetry in 1936.

Between 1932 and 1935, Diego Rivera figured out what his Jewish heritage meant to him. Three years after he told the *Chicago Jewish Star* that he was not sure what his Jewishness meant to him, Rivera changed his story. In June of 1935, the muralist responded quite differently when Phillip Bernstein with the *Jewish Daily Bulletin* asked him, “Does your Jewish descent mean anything to you?” His Jewish identity was now strong. He explained in the aforementioned, powerful quotation,

*My Jewishness is the dominant element in my life [...]Wherever I have gone, I have acknowledged myself a Jew. Whatever disabilities our people have suffered, I have experienced with them. From this has come my sympathy with the downtrodden masses which motivates all of my work.*⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Bernstein, Phillip. “Hodge-Podge.” *Jewish Daily Bulletin*, June 16, 1935.

Also worth noting in this article, Rivera offered the journalist information into his variegated ancestry: “While discussing the Jewish question in Mexico, he told me some interesting and little known facts about himself. His

In this article titled “Hodge-podge,” the journalist described how by 1935, he spoke English “fluently and colorfully” and noted how the artist “loves to talk.”

The Jewish press in Mexico began interviewing the muralist in 1935.⁹⁷ Many of these interviews are discussed throughout this thesis. In 1935, the Mexican daily Yiddish periodical, *Der Weg*, published an interview with him. The Mexican Jewish Journalist L. Forem described the muralist and his home. At first, he described how he felt “very small next to a person of so much talent.” For that reason, to be close to him, face to face with Diego Rivera, Forem called him ‘*maestro*’ (master)—to which the painter responded, ‘I would like it more if you call me friend or just plain Diego (*Diego a secas*).’⁹⁸ In this way, the journalist glorified the muralist.

Further, Forem’s description of the communist’s cosmopolitan nature is noteworthy. He saw in the artist’s home, “a mixture of people, of faces of all of the nationalities. All languages, accents, and dialects are heard.” Rivera was a mystical, cosmopolitan figure who transgressed boundaries all over the world. It could be argued it was for that reason that Rivera was further perceived as a Jew. The journalist recounted that Rivera spoke various languages. He spoke Spanish, French, Italian, and English fluently, and not so fluently Portuguese, Russian, and some Indigenous languages. In the article, Forem questioned if the artist’s knowledge of so many languages could be due to his Jewish origin. *Der Weg* reported, “Forem asked himself if his knowledge of so many languages is not owed to his Jewish origin, as Rivera had already told him, ‘that he comes from Jews, that his grandfather was a Spanish *Converso* and his mother was

grandfather was a Spanish nobleman who participated in an unsuccessful Revolution, and fled to Mexico. There he met and married a Portuguese Jewess.”

⁹⁷ Rivera’s interviews with *Der Weg* were published in Yiddish. The archivists at the Jewish Documentation and Research Center of Mexico (*El Centro de Documentación e Investigación Judío de México*) (CDIJUM) provided digital copies of the entries as well as translations in Spanish from Yiddish.

⁹⁸ L. Forem, “*Una Tarde con Diego Rivera* (An Afternoon with Diego Rivera)” *Der Weg*, April 20, 1935, n. 331, año VI, 5.

influenced by Judaism.”⁹⁹ Note: once again, this ancestral claim was totally out of left field. He contradicted his earlier, 1932 interview with the *Chicago Jewish Star* in which he averred that there was no influence of religious Judaism in his grandmother’s life and that they were “in no way religious at home.”

Forem then continued with a remarkable statement: “The same Diego Rivera—the Mexican, the international artist, the communist—transforms when he begins to talk about Jews in general and above all when he refers to his Jewish origin. All of the sudden, he becomes more sentimental, more poetic. Also, he speaks about it with great speed, and he didn’t have to force his tongue to say any word.”¹⁰⁰ Diego Rivera loved to talk; he was passionate and loved to connect with others. One could say he was embellishing his ancestral narrative to Forem, as a journalist with the Jewish press.

The journalist then offered more of Rivera’s musings. While they dined, Rivera “showed a lot of affection for Jewish women.” The painter told him, “all of my lovers have been half or whole Jews.” Rivera seems to have fetichized the “Beautiful Jewess,” as described by Florian Krobb in 1992. Krobb described in her book “the ambivalent image of the “beautiful Jewess” as depicted in European literature of the 19th-20th centuries. She explained, “The image has functioned as an object of desire and envy. An erotic attraction was attributed to her that was conceived as a threat to the Christian man and hence had to be fought. During the 19th century she was portrayed either negatively as being over-ambitious and destructive, or positively as a tragically suffering figure, depending on the author’s position regarding assimilation and

⁹⁹ Forem, “Una Tarde con Diego Rivera.”

¹⁰⁰ Forem, “Una Tarde con Diego Rivera.”

emancipation.”¹⁰¹ Rivera described many of the Jewish women in his life as being a “beautiful Jewess”—including his grandmother, Ynez Acosta.

The Jewish Documentation and Research Center of Mexico amended the *Der Weg* article to introduce his two former Jewish lovers: the aforementioned Angelina Beloff and Marevna Vorovieff-Stebelska.¹⁰² The article continues, “Forem asked him in that moment, ‘if all of your lovers have been half or whole Jews, why did you marry a genuine Mexican?’” To this, Rivera replied, “My wife Frida is not a genuine Mexican. She comes from German Jews.” The Mexican-Jewish journalist detailed his surprise upon learning that Kahlo descended from German Jews, saying, “Who could know about these secrets of the union of the races [*de las razas*], only Hitler and Goebbels could be interested in such a complicated matter.” Forem’s response also reflects the sociohistorical context in 1935.

In 1936, the *Jewish Exponent* announced Rivera’s collaboration with Berliner on *City of Palaces*. They described him as the “famed mural artist who is reportedly part-Jewish,” and stated that he had “illustrated a Yiddish book with original line drawings.” The book was *City of Palaces* by Isaac Berliner.¹⁰³

Rivera built for himself the reputation of an anti-fascist. In 1938, the *Jewish Telegraphic Agency* reported,

*Diego Rivera, noted painter in whose home Leon Trotsky is a guest, denounced anti-Semitism this week in an article published in the Mexican daily "Novedades" under the title, "Anti-Semitism Betrays Mexico." He attributes prejudice on the part of workers against Jews and Chinese to an inferiority complex. The article was said to be the strongest denunciation of anti-Semitism thus far voiced by a Mexican intellectual.*¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Florian Krobb, “*La belle juive*”: “cunning in the men and beauty in the women” *Jewish Quarterly* 39 no. 3. 1992: 5-10. This image of the “Beautiful Jewess” is precisely how Rivera depicts Marevna Vorovieff in her memoir. See chapter “Marevna” in *My Art, My Life; An Autobiography*: 114-118.

¹⁰² His common-law marriage with Angelina Beloff was described in previous chapters. In my research, I have not found evidence which identifies her as Jewish, in contrast to Marevna Vorovieff. This deserves further investigation.

¹⁰³ “Between You and Me.” *The Jewish Exponent*, July 10, 1936.

¹⁰⁴ “Diego Rivera Sees Anti-Semitism Rooted in Inferiority Complex,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, April 13, 1938.

In 1952, the *Philadelphia Jewish Exponent* announced the marriage of a former student of Diego Rivera named Arnold Lee Lippman: “Miss Ross . . . said that Diego Rivera was the grandson of a Portuguese Jewess, and that the father of his wife, the surrealist painter, was a German Jew—Kauffman—who settled in Mexico.” Thus, as late as 1952, Rivera’s Sephardic myth survived in the U.S. Jewish press.

Rivera’s Jewish press-tour during the 1930s laid the foundation for his public and self-perception as a Jew. As he went about boasting to everyone that he was Jewish, the U.S. and Mexican Jewish press began to write about him as a “Mexican-Jewish painter.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ David Mann, “Book Notes | Travel Notes.” *B’nai B’rith Messenger*, April 13, 1934.

The Birth of an Antifascist (1930-1940)

Diego Rivera was a revolutionary idealist. During the early 1930s, he was not officially involved in any communist organization, and a key facet of the social activist's political identity was as being an anti-fascist. Not only did Rivera see Hitler before he came to power in 1933, but he caught on early to rising fascism and antisemitism in Germany. Furthermore, his Jewish self-perception reinforced his identity as an anti-fascist. Then antisemitic attacks by radical right-wing groups in Mexico further solidified his Jewish, anti-fascist identity. Being on the receiving end of antisemitic attacks also put the activist in close contact with Jewish suffering. In other words, Rivera's Jewish identity made him stand up.

In his memoir, the artist recounted how he was impacted by a speech he saw Hitler give in 1928. His fellow communists from Germany, Wilhelm "Willi" Münzenberg (1889-1940) and Ernst Johannes Fritz Thälmann (1886–1944), translated the speech for him. He recalled how friends wrote off Hitler as a "funny little man," and "considered those who saw a threat in him to be timorous or foolish." They laughed his comments off as "stupidities."¹⁰⁶ The event was a part of a temporary united front between the National Socialists and Communists against other political groups in Germany. He described the gathering which took place at the Communist Party headquarters in Berlin,

As he warmed up, Hitler began screaming and waving his arms like an epileptic. Something about him must have stirred the deepest centers of his fellow Germans, for after awhile I sensed a weird magnetic current flowing between him and the crowd. So profound was it that, when he finished, after two hours of speaking, there was a second of complete silence. Not even the Communist youth groups, instructed to do so, whistled at him. Then the silence gave way to tremendous, ear-shattering applause from all over the square. As he left, Hitler's followers closed ranks around him with every sign of devoted loyalty. Thaelmann and Muenzenberg laughed like schoolboys. As for me, I was as mystified and troubled now as when I had witnessed the decadent ritual a few days before in the Grunewald. I could see nothing to laugh at. I actually felt depressed.

¹⁰⁶ Rivera and March, *My Art, My*, 141.

“You must be joking,” he said. “Haven’t you heard Hitler talk? Haven’t you understood the stupidities I translated for you?” I replied, “But these idiocies are also in the heads of his audience, maddened by hunger and fear. Hitler is promising them a change, economic, political, cultural, and scientific. Well, they want changes, and he may be able to do just what he says, since he has all the capitalist money behind him. With that he can give food to the hungry German workers and persuade them to go over to his side and turn on us. Let me shoot him, at least. I’ll take the responsibility. He’s still within range.”

Rivera told of his premonition of the tragedies to come with Hitler’s rise to power, “My ‘crazy’ artist’s imagination was later bitterly substantiated. Both Thaelmann and my friend Muenzenberg were among the millions of human beings put to death by the ‘clown’ we had watched in the square that day.”¹⁰⁷

The muralist invented his Jewish ancestry sometime in the early 1930s. This timing coincided with the rise of National Socialism in Germany. By 1933, the U.S. and Mexican Jewish press began to describe the “Mexican-Jewish painter’s” activism as an anti-fascist. This was in response to the two ways the artist publicly denounced rising antisemitism and fascism in Germany in 1933. First, he spoke out against the infamous public burning of books by Jewish authors in Nazi Germany in 1933. The muralist was a discussion leader at the Menorah Society’s symposium in New York City in opposition of the book burning. Second, he painted a mural protesting the dire situation of the Jews in Hitler’s Germany.

To begin an analysis of 1933, one must consider that fascist movements were also emerging in Italy, Japan, and Spain during the 1930s. Further, Hitler came to power on April 20^t, 1933. Only two weeks later, the front page of the *Jewish Daily Bulletin* on May 4, 1933 announced an “auto-da-fé” of books by Jewish authors to take place in Germany on May 10, 1933:

One more German-Jewish Nobel Prize winner, twenty-one professors at the University of Berlin, nine at the University of Cologne, a world-famous surgeon and a world-famous neurologist, were dismissed from their posts today as Bernhard rust, Nazi Minister of

¹⁰⁷ Rivera and March, *My Art, My*, 141-143.

Education for Prussia, continued the work of eliminating “Jewish influence” from German cultural centers. Meanwhile systematic instructions were given to libraries for preparing books of Jewish authorship for the auto-da-fe on May 10. All libraries have been instructed to turn over such books to the authorities, and special squads of Nazis are touring the residential districts, collecting “fodder” for the flames. Students have been instructed to turn in all textbooks that are of Jewish authorship. Universities also extended their boycott on Jewish culture into the fields of commerce, forbidding the purchase of ink, paper, and other school supplies from Jewish shops, for fear that the taint of Jewish culture might reach the students through such contact.¹⁰⁸

Here the journalist described the book-burning as an “auto-da-fé.” By choosing the term “auto-da-fé,” the author made a direct connection between the Nazi book-burning and the public burning of Judaizers during the Inquisition. In their book of poetry in 1936, Rivera and Berliner made this same connection between persecution of Jews during the sixteenth and twentieth centuries.

Page three of the May 4 edition of the *Jewish Daily Bulletin* featured the following article titled, “Menorah Writers, Artists Meet on Book-Burning Day.” The periodical announced the Menorah Society’s anti-book burning symposium. Diego Rivera was one of the guest speakers who attended a group dinner and gave a lecture on the role of the artist in the current political climate,

On the date decreed by the “neo-medieval government of Germany” for an auto-da-fe of books by Jewish authors, the Menorah Society will conduct a symposium on “The Function of the Artist in These Times” at the Park Crescent Hotel, Riverside Drive and 87th Street. Prominent artists and writers will lead the discussion, which will take place after a dinner for the group. Lee Simonon, theatrical designer, Diego Rivera, distinguished painter, and Gilbert Seldes, author, will be the chief speakers.¹⁰⁹

The Menorah Society defended “freedom of thought and expression” in “modern civilized society”—in contrast to the control of information and self-expression of centuries past. The group refers to the “auto-da-fé” of books sponsored by the “neo-medieval government of

¹⁰⁸ *Jewish Daily Bulletin*, May 4, 1933. 1.

¹⁰⁹ “Menorah Writers, Artists Meet on Book-Burning Day,” *Jewish Daily Bulletin*, May 4, 1933, 4.

Germany”—again drawing the connection between Jews in the Inquisition. Further, they acknowledged how the Nazis were leveraging a “Jewish red herring across the basic issues of humanity and freedom.” This reflects how Rivera’s anti-establishment, downtrodden, and Jewish identity fit together with his anti-fascist activism.

Rivera was aware of antisemitism in Germany from early on. The front page of the same edition of the *Jewish Daily Bulletin* said, “German Christians Ask Law Banning Conversion, Intermarriage of Jews: Intermarriages Considered ‘Jewification’ of German Nation.”¹¹⁰ Rivera addressed this German rejection of relationships between Jews and non-Jewish Germans in his 1933 “Hitler” mural.

The Mexican artist painted the mural for the New Workers School of New York in 1933.¹¹¹ In the panel titled, “Hitler,” Rivera denounced the public antisemitic demonstrations happening in Germany: the book-burning and humiliation of Jews and non-Jews allegedly had intimate relations. The mural includes several scenes. The top-left features a bonfire of books and large swastika flags. The muralist depicts Hitler through his eyes, after seeing the charismatic leader shouting a speech, “screaming and waving his arms like an epileptic”—which Rivera experienced firsthand five years prior.¹¹² On the bottom-left, Albert Einstein points to an antisemitic riot. Public demonstrations of antisemitic violence were becoming commonplace in Nazi Germany during



Figure 10. Diego Rivera, *Hitler*, 1933. Panel of Mural. New Workers School, New York City.

¹¹⁰ “Menorah Writers, Artists Meet on Book-Burning Day,” *Jewish Daily Bulletin*, May 4, 1933, 4.

¹¹¹ Rivera’s “comrade” Bertram Wolfe was head of the New Workers School at the time.

¹¹² Rivera and March, *My Art, My Life*, 141-143.

the early 1930s. The scene at the bottom-right could be interpreted many ways. It appears to be a German Jewish man and a non-Jewish German woman. The ethnic German woman's head has been shaved, and a sign tied around her neck with rope reads, "I have given myself to a Jew." Next to her looks to be a Jewish man with lacerations on his skin and ropes around his arm. A Gestapo agent hits the victim with the butt of his gun. This mural from 1933 makes it clear that not only was Rivera speaking out against fascism in Germany from the beginning; he was also aware of how Hitler was at war against the Jews and actively fought against him through his art.

Rivera followed the news about antisemitism in Germany. The Hitler mural was based on photographs snuck out of Germany which showed what was happening. Underground Jewish resistance groups circulated miniature newspapers to inconspicuously spread the word about the dire situation of the German-Jews. In 1934, the *Jewish Daily Bulletin* described the photos and Rivera's use of them:

[The "German Exhibition" at the New Workers School will] include pictures of the burning of a pile of books by brown-shirted soldiers, and a striking photograph of Goering making a speech. Both of these pictures were used by Diego Rivera while painting his murals, also displayed at the New Workers School...

A large map of the concentration camps in Germany is posted, showing the number of prisoners at each camp. The School estimates that there are at present over 118,000 prisoners being retained in these camps, just 100,000 more than is admitted by the German government. The exhibition begins at 8 o'clock with a lecture on "One Year of Hitler Germany" by Jay Lovestone, and will continue to February 12.¹¹³

These news articles demonstrate the type of news Rivera read about Nazi Germany. They also illustrate Rivera's anti-fascist and anti-antisemitic activism during the early 1930s. The artist was aware of and actively fighting against antisemitism and fascism in Germany already in the early 1930s. It was during this time that he began to boast about his imaginary Jewish ancestry.

¹¹³ "Hostility to Nazis Seething in Reich, Newspaper Exhibit Here Reveals," *Jewish Daily Bulletin*, January 28, 1934.

Rivera was a part of many symposiums by Jewish organizations in Mexico and in the U.S. For example, *Der Weg* reported to Mexico's Jews about a public talk given by Rivera on the topic of "Modern Art and Painting." Hosted by the Committee for Aid to the Victims of Fascism in Europe, the conference took place in 1935 at the local Jewish Youth Association, (*Asociación de la Joventud Judía / Idisher Yugnt Gesellschaft*). The *Der Weg* article reported, "The conference was attended by a large audience who listened very carefully to the content of it, since they gave it in a very colloquial way."¹¹⁴ This is how Rivera was known to the Mexican Jewish community—as an antifascist and a proud fellow Jew.

Another organization that invited the artist as a guest speaker was the B'nai Brith (Mexico), led by Dr. Samuel Fastlicht. In 1939, Fastlicht invited Rivera to a meeting of activists of the "University Club" of Mexico City. The muralist gave a talk about "Art and Antisemitism." When introducing Rivera, the director spoke about the efforts Rivera had made to protect the Jewish community in Mexico. He remarked that Rivera responded to B'nai Brith's invitations by saying, "I am always at your service."¹¹⁵

The *Der Weg* article told how Rivera began his speech, "I have not come here as a stranger but rather as one of you all, because I belong to you." Here, he made it clear that he was an insider, not an outsider.

The proudly-proclaimed Jew mentioned the antisemitic propaganda attacks forged against him in Mexico. His political opponents attacked him for his "Semitic origin," which he "did not negate but rather felt proud of his Jewish origin." The artist told that one of his grandmothers "rigorously kept the Jewish religion," as she came from a Portuguese Jewish

¹¹⁴ "Interesante conferencia de Diego Rivera," *Der Weg*, Mexico, May 28, 1935, año VI, No.342: 6.

¹¹⁵ "Diego Rivera llama a la comunidad judía a que se contraponga al antisemitismo" *Der Weg*, Mexico, June 17, 1939. año X, No. 893: 1-8

family by the name of Acosta.¹¹⁶ Note: this is precisely the opposite of what he told the *Chicago Jewish Star* in 1932. By 1939, he had yet again changed his ancestral story. In 1932, his grandmother was “in no way religious.”¹¹⁷ However, when he needed to establish himself as an insider, he remembered her as a religious Jew. His ancestral narrative was never consistent. The artist loved to talk, and he constantly contradicted himself. The lack of consistency in his ancestral claims suggest that his genealogy was completely made up. Despite grasping for a Jewish lineage, Rivera seemed to have genuinely felt a Jewish identity.

Rivera continued his speech by discussing antisemitism in Mexico, noting how it was on the rise—sometimes violently. Again, stressing his position as an insider, as a fellow Jew, the activist urged it was necessary to do something “against our enemies,” such as propaganda to put a stop to the antisemitic movement: “We don’t do anything to let the world see our strength in labor that is stronger than that of the great nations.” The United States “should be thankful for the Jews’ contributions to country’s development,” the artist explained.¹¹⁸ This speech is emblematic of how Rivera leveraged his imaginary Jewish ancestry to make himself a part of the antifascist movement in Germany and in Mexico.

Rivera was on the receiving end of antisemitic attacks in Mexico during the 1930s. Fascism and antisemitism were spreading in Mexico. The Calles administration restricted immigration on ethnic terms.¹¹⁹ Instead of individual evaluations of immigrants, the Mexican immigration authorities evaluated incoming groups of immigrants. They favored groups who fit

¹¹⁶ “Diego Rivera llama a la comunidad judía a que se contraponga al antisemitismo” *Der Weg*, Mexico, June 17, 1939. año X, No. 893: 1-8

¹¹⁷ Joseph Brainin, “Diego Rivera: The Modern Raphael.” *Chicago Jewish Star*. January 8, 1932, sec. Community.

¹¹⁸ “Diego Rivera llama a la comunidad judía a que se contraponga al antisemitismo” *Der Weg*, Mexico, June 17, 1939. año X, No. 893: 1-8

¹¹⁹ The Calles years, however, allowed for freedom of speech. The political atmosphere provided Rivera and Mexican Jews the liberty to express themselves. Artists and Jews did not share this liberty in the Soviet Union. For this reason, Rivera was able to so openly criticize the Soviet regime.

into the ethnic category of the *mestizo*. Mexico's change in policy since the golden era of Jewish immigration during the 1920s corresponded with tightened restrictions of Mexican immigration to the U.S. Unemployment rates increased, and Mexico's

societal focus shifted to prioritizing *paisanos* or fellow Mexican countrymen. Thus, anti-immigrant sentiments emerged. Anti-immigrant rhetoric was not limited to Jews. Chinese Mexicans were another primary target. In this way, antisemitism in Mexico stemmed from more a general anti-immigrant sentiment.



Figure 11. *Guardia de honor en la Columna de la Independencia de la Mesa Directiva de la Cámara Israelita de Industria y Comercio*. Center for Documentation and Investigation of the Ashkenazi Community in Mexico.



Figure 12. *Allegorical Car of the Jewish Chamber of Industry and Commerce in a national parade*. Center of Documentation of the Ashkenazi Community in Mexico.

Judith Elkin described the emerging antisemitic movements in Mexico during the 1930s:

*The phasing-out of peddling among Jewish immigrants to Mexico came as a response to anti-foreign agitation that made these isolated merchants feel too vulnerable to continue in their occupation. Xenophobia worsened in Mexico in 1930 as the depression took hold. The price of silver dropped, thousands of Mexican workers were expelled from the United States, and economic pressures built up within Mexico that found an outlet in hostility toward Chinese and Jews. Many newspapers, including the Nacional Revolucionario of the country's ruling Partido Nacional Revolucionario, published anti-Jewish articles. Merchants publicized such slogans as, "Buy from Mexicans- boycott Jews."*¹²⁰

¹²⁰ Judith Laikin Elkin, ed. *The Jewish Presence in Latin America*, (London: Routledge), 2020, 136-137.

In response, 298 Mexican-Jewish merchants and manufacturers established the Jewish Chamber of Commerce (*Camara Israelita de Industria y Comercio*). By the end of its first year, membership doubled.¹²¹ The organization was created on March 24, 1931 with two objectives. First, the Jewish Chamber of Commerce was an instrument for defending the members' business interests against the national government. Second, the organization united Mexican Jewry against antisemitic campaigns.¹²²

The Jewish Chamber of Commerce was formed days before the Mexican government made it difficult for Jews to attain licenses and limited the location of their market booths. A month later—despite the Mexican-Jewish merchants' cooperation—200 were forcibly evicted from the Lagunilla market and had their licenses revoked. The community's subsequent panic was exacerbated by plans for a "Day of Commerce" parade that featured anti-Jewish slogans. In light of these events, the New York-based American Jewish Committee sent a representative to Mexico. Their report is interesting, as they found that "the antagonism did not extend beyond the commercial targets, small peddlers, and market merchants. Only these were being called "*judío*." The use of the term *judío* is significant. *Judío* means Jew in Spanish literally, but Jews in Mexico are typically referred to as *Israelitas*. This seems to imply a sense of degradation. Lastly, the report notes that it was only these little-league businessmen who were called "*judío*"—"Jewish professional men and representatives of foreign firms were not considered *judios*."¹²³ This important explanation of the specific anti-foreign and business-based variant of antisemitism in Mexico explains the sort of environment in which Rivera and his Jewish friends were attacked for being Jewish.

¹²¹ Elkin, 136-137.

¹²² Center of Documentation and Investigation of the Ashkenazi Community in Mexico, *Fondo Cámara Israelita de Industria y Comercio*, Actas, Caja 1, Exp. 1, May 18, 1931, 4.

¹²³ Elkin, *The Jewish Presence in Latin America*, 136-137.

Antisemites in Mexico had started attacking Rivera as early as 1934. The *B'nai B'rith Messenger* reported on threats received by a book shop in Mexico City due to their presentation of the “Mexican-Jewish artist’s” work, “The Misrachi Book Shop in Mexico City has received threatening letters from men who disapprove the store’s proposed exhibit of reproductions of paintings by Diego Rivera, Mexican-Jewish artist . . .”¹²⁴ Moreover, this edition of the paper from April 13, 1934 was full of descriptions of antisemitism in Nazi Germany. Again, these news articles reflect the signs of the times. Rivera was not just aware of it, but he experienced antisemitism in the 1930s. He stood up against it. His experiences with antisemitism made the activist’s fight against fascism personal.

¹²⁴ Mann, David. “Book Notes | Travel Notes” *B'nai B'rith Messenger*, April 13, 1934.

Rüdt von Collenberg was the ambassador of the Third Reich in Mexico when he said, “The true fascists of Mexico are the *Camisas Doradas* [“Gold Shirts”], [who] took as their flag the fight against communism and the Jews.” Trailblazing scholar of Mexican Jewish history, Alicia Gojman de Backal, described the right-wing movement in Mexico called the *Camisas Doradas* from 1934-1940. After their leader, General Nicolás Rodríguez, was expelled by President Lázaro Cárdenas in 1936, the organization evolved into the *Vanguardia Nacionalista*.¹²⁵

These right-wing groups circulated propaganda pamphlets about “the Jew Diego Rivera and his activities.”¹²⁶ The *Vanguardia Nacionalista Mexicana* was formed from the *Camisas Doradas* of the Mexican Revolutionary Action. In 1938, the group circulated a pamphlet directed to “the Jew Diego Rivera.” The pamphlet reads:

LETTER TO THE JEW DIEGO RIVERA

TO THE WORKERS:

Read this brochure, know who are those who shake the world and for what purposes. Unmask the treacherous leaders.

TO THE MIDDLE CLASS:

The class struggle has the goal of making you disappear in order to enslave the country.

TO THE EMPLOYER CLASS:

Buy this brochure and distribute it. It is the defense of national capitalism absorbed by Jewish capitalism. Become leaders of your country, defend your life and that of your wives and children; be men, not lambs destined for slaughter.

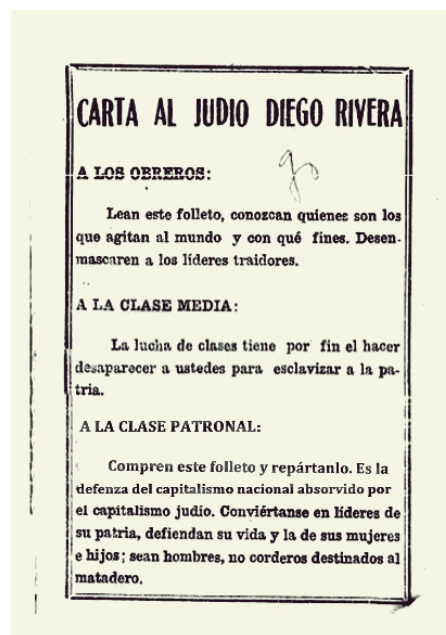


Figure 13. *Vanguardia Nacionalista Mexicana, Carta al judío Diego Rivera, 1938.*

¹²⁵ For more information regarding the *Camisas Doradas* or *Vanguardia Nacionalista* movements in Mexico during the 1930s, see the following: Alicia G. de Backal, *Camisas, escudos y desfiles militares: los Dorados y el antisemitismo en México, 1934-1940* (Mexico: Escuela Nacional de Estudios Profesionales Acatlán (UNAM) : Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2000); Laura Pérez Rosales, “Anticardenismo and Anti-Semitism in Mexico, 1934–1940,” in *The Jewish Diaspora in Latin America* (Routledge, 1996); Alicia G. de Backal, *Testimonios de historia oral : judíos en México* ([Jerusalem] : Universidad Hebrea de Jerusalén, Instituto de Judaísmo Contemporáneo; México, D.F., México : Asociación Mexicana de Amigos de la Universidad Hebrea de Jerusalén, 1990., 1990).

¹²⁶ Alicia G. de Backal, *Camisas, escudos y desfiles militares: los Dorados y el antisemitismo en México, 1934-1940*. México: Escuela Nacional de Estudios Profesionales Acatlán (UNAM) : Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2000.

Titled “*El Anti-semitismo traiciona a Mexico*,” this pamphlet was published in the periodical *Novedades* in April of the same year.¹²⁷

Furthermore, during the late 1930s another political party in Mexico called the *Partido del Rescate Popular* organized antisemitic attacks on Jewish institutions and businesses. The right-wing radicals plastered the walls of Mexico City with propaganda against the presidential candidate Almazán, his followers, and also Diego Rivera. They warned that Almazán was supported by Jews and that a large wave of European Jewish immigrants was looming. These political opponents called Rivera “the Jewish traitor.” They claimed the communist was a child of Jews and that he wanted to “Bolshevik-ize” Almazán’s government.¹²⁸ The antisemitism Rivera and the Mexican Jewish community faced should be considered in a global context. Thus, during the 1930s, a fascist strain of antisemitism emerged in Mexico, too—not just Germany.

Der Weg again published an interview with the artist in Mexico in 1940. His interviewer, Abraham Teitelboim, mentioned that, “feeling ‘at home’ in the studio of Diego Rivera, he dared to comment that it was the first time he had found himself in a studio with a painter who carried a pistol on his belt.” The revolutionary responded, “How could it be any other way when you continuously rub shoulders with people that want to settle their differences with you through the mouth of a gun?” Rivera added, “Recently, I have suffered attacks by fascist. All kinds of arguments have been thrown in my face, including my Jewish blood and Semitic origin.” The *Der Weg* article contextualized Rivera’s remark: “As is known, Abraham Teitelboim wrote: “one of Diego Rivera’s grandmothers was a Portuguese Jew, descendant of the Acosta family.”¹²⁹

¹²⁷ “Carta al judío Diego Rivera [con motivo de su artículo publicado el 3 de abril del corriente año en el periódico ‘Novedades’: ‘El Anti-semitismo traiciona a Mexico.’” *Vanguardia Nacionalista Mexicana*, 1938.

¹²⁸ Alicia G. de Backal, “Diego Rivera y la comunidad judía de México.” *Diario Judío: Diario de la Vida Judía en México y el Mundo*. July 19, 2010.

¹²⁹ Abraham Teitelboim, “*En el estudio de Diego Rivera*,” published by M. Glikovsky; “*El Segundo Abraham Teitelboim*,” *Der Weg*, May 20, 1939, año X, no. 881, 5.

This is noteworthy, as *Der Weg* does not always present Rivera as a “Mexican Jew.” Perhaps this is because he was Jewish by descent, a more ‘distant’ Jew. They did not need to consistently boast his Jewish origin, as reflected in their comment, “As is known”—it was a known fact that Rivera was a descendant of Jews.

Rivera further lamented the antisemitic political campaigns during his aforementioned speech to the B’nai B’rith of Mexico in 1939. He addressed these propaganda attacks forged by his political opponents concerning his “Jewish origin,” which “he did not negate, but rather [he] felt proud of his Jewish origin.”¹³⁰ Thus, Rivera empathized with the Jewish experience during the 1930s.

He reflected on these antisemitic attacks in his memoir, over a decade after the war, “Soon after the war began, the pro-Nazi, anti-Semitic elements in Mexico, disguised, as was then fashionable, in the garb of nationalism, began to attack me. Infuriated by my action in the Columbus affair, these vermin now organized a full-scale campaign of character assassination”. He further described the pamphlets circulated by his fascist political opponents, “They even printed leaflets calling me a traitor and an agent of the Jews. One of these, following Gestapo models, contributed two rabbis to my genealogy, a grandfather from Poland and a great-grandfather from Russia. This handout was being circulated at the time the police occupied my studio.”¹³¹ Both allies and enemies called Rivera a Jew, which solidified his public and self-perception as a Jew from the 1930s to the end of his life.

¹³⁰ "Diego Rivera llama a la comunidad judía a que se contraponga al antisemitismo," June 17, 1939, año X, No. 893, 1-8.

¹³¹ Rivera and March, *My Art, My Life*, 143, 226.

Rivera's Jewish Friends

Diego Rivera maintained close friendships with numerous like-minded individuals—who happened to be Jewish. It was through these friends, however, that the artist learned what it meant to be Jewish. Many of his Jewish friends in Mexico, New York, and Paris shared his leftist politics. Specifically, several things fostered a connection between Rivera and Eastern European Jews. Rivera prided himself in speaking some Russian and even having Russian ancestry. Therefore, in his mind, they shared Russian roots and the language of the Revolution. Further, during the 1930s when Rivera doubled-down on his Jewish identity, Rivera and the Eastern European Jews shared anti-Stalin sentiments. Additionally, in the late 1930s, the activist became familiar with the experience of antisemitism. If their Jewishness was not the center of their relationship, their common identity as Jews united them. Though Rivera did not proclaim to be an Eastern European Jew, broader Jewish kinship formed a bond between them. Their common Jewish origin allowed them to share something other than their politics and Russia. Their Jewish experience made them conscious of the importance of revolution.

His wife, Frida Kahlo, also claimed Jewish ancestry throughout her life. Though her father was not Jewish, his last name of “Kaufmann” solidified her claims to German Jewish heritage. Though neither Rivera nor Kahlo were actually of Jewish descent, averring Jewish ancestry throughout their lives made them Jewish in the history books. Almost all biographies of Kahlo describe her father's Ashkenazi roots, though today writers acknowledge the myth. Rivera and Kahlo were the ones to write this history. For example, Rivera described his wife's Jewish ancestry in an interview with *Der Weg* in 1935, “While we dined Diego referred to Jewish women and mentioned that some had been his lovers, adding ‘My wife Frida is not a genuine Mexican, she comes from German Jews.’” Forem was surprised that Kahlo descended from

German Jews, saying, “Who could know about these secrets of the union of races (*de las razas*), only Hitler and Goebbels could be interested in such a complicated matter.”

Frida’s equally puzzling Jewish identity was clearly imaginary. Like Rivera, scholars have traced her genealogy to find that her father Guillermo Kahlo (1871-1941) was definitely not of Jewish descent.¹³² Despite both husband and wife having invented a Jewish lineage, it could be argued that their shared Jewish identities formed a bond between them. These were artists who tried to understand the world through their own perspectives. Both proud leftists, the husband and wife shared a connection to the “downtrodden masses” through their imaginary Jewish roots.

The muralist also had many Jewish students who shared his communist ideals and also dealt with Jewish subject matter in their art. Some were even present as his assistants during the infamous Rockefeller mural incident in 1935. He described them in his memoir, “My assistants [were] present at this dark moment, Ben Shahn, Hideo Noda, Lou Bloch, Lucienne Bloch, Sanchez Flores, and Arthur Niedendorff.”¹³³

According to the Encyclopedia Judaica, Louise Nevelson was also one of Rivera’s Jewish protégés. Rivera and his pupils were a part of a transnational, interwar artists network based in New York. Ezra Mendelsohn described the interwar artists in a section of the edited volume *Dark Times, Dire Decisions: Jews and Communism* titled, “Jews, Communism, and Art in Interwar America.” Mendelsohn explained,

It was generally agreed within the pro-Communist artistic world that art must reflect aspects of social reality, convey a social message, and be intelligible to the "masses." The radical artists of the 1920s and 1930s were viewed as maintaining a tradition that reached back to Goya, Daumier, and van Gogh—the last was praised by the celebrated left-wing critic Harold Rosenberg for his efforts "to develop an art for the poor."²¹The

¹³² Frida’s ancestry was traced back to the 1600’s and found to be German Lutheran by *The Great Hispanic Heritage: Frida Kahlo*.

¹³³ Rivera and March, *My Art, My Life*, 127.

*interwar artists were also much influenced by Mexican mural painters, and above all by the works of the Mexican Communist Diego Rivera.*¹³⁴

Recalling Rivera's "art-for-all," these interwar communist-artists shared his passion for uplifting art which was "intelligible to the 'masses.'" In this way, Rivera inspired the movement to push away from creating elitist paintings destined to hang on a wall. He sparked the movement towards art *on walls*, art that was immovable, painted on the wall for all of the "masses" to learn from and be inspired by.

Encouraged by the passion for creating art for the masses, Rivera and his assistants refused to back down to the powerful Rockefeller. They did not give in, and as a result, the mural was destroyed in 1935. The artist described the incident in his memoir. When Rockefeller insisted that Rivera substitute Vladimir Lenin's face for an anonymous man, his assistants "were all for a flat denial of the request and threatened to strike if I yielded."¹³⁵ It was his pupil of Jewish descent, Lucienne Bloch, who managed to preserve the design of the Rockefeller mural. Thanks to her photograph, the mural was able to be recreated in Mexico City. Sensing that "something terrible was going to happen," Rivera explained, "I summoned a photographer to take pictures of the almost finished mural, but the guards, who had been ordered to admit no photographers, barred him. At last, one of my assistants, Lucienne Bloch, smuggled in a Leica [a type of camera], concealed in her bosom. Mounting the scaffold, she surreptitiously snapped as many pictures as she could without getting caught."¹³⁶

Lucienne Bloch had a close relationship with Rivera and his wife Frida Kahlo. She wrote a memoir reflecting on their relationship titled, "On Location with Diego Rivera and Lucienne

¹³⁴ Ezra Mendelsohn, "Jews, Communism, and Art in Interwar America," in *Dark Times, Dire Decisions: Jews and Communism* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 102.

¹³⁵ Rivera and March, *My Art, My Life*, 202.

¹³⁶ Rivera and March, 202.

Bloch.”¹³⁷ In January of 1952, the *Jewish Chronicle* described the friendship of Bloch and Kahlo in an announcement for an exhibition titled, “Modern Art in Mexico,”

The exhibition also includes photographs of Kahlo by two Jewish women photographers who became close friends. Lucienne Bloch, who had been born in Switzerland but came to the US in 1917, worked with Diego Rivera as a muralist in New York. Bloch accompanied Kahlo back to Mexico when her mother was ill and also was with Kahlo in Detroit when the artist had a miscarriage. ¹³⁸

Ben Shahn (1898-1969) was the first assistant Rivera identified as present at the Rockefeller incident in his memoir. The two artists shared their leftist political beliefs, rejection of European elitist artistic tradition, and a passion for mural painting. Shahn came from a traditional Eastern European Jewish background. His family left Lithuania in 1908, during a period of antisemitic violence when many other Jews fled to America. Shahn’s obituary published by *Jewish Telegraphic Agency* in 1969 provides a brief vita of the Jewish artist,

Funeral services were held here today for Ben Shahn, an internationally prominent American Jewish artist and champion of liberal causes, who died here Friday at the age of 70. Mr. Shahn was born in Kovno, Lithuania, the son of a woodcarver and carpenter. He came to the United States with his family in 1908 and worked as an apprentice in a lithography shop to pay for his studies at college and at the National Academy of Design. ¹³⁹

His obituary continued to describe the artist’s relationship to his Mexican *maestro*: “Mr. Shahn was an assistant to the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera and from 1933 to 1943 was active in the Federal Government’s public art works projects.”¹⁴⁰ Diana L. Linden’s 2015 monograph, *Ben Shahn’s New Deal Murals: Jewish Identity in the American Scene*, described the impact *maestro* Rivera had on his muralist-pupil. In sum,

Shahn’s relationship with Diego Rivera is particularly important. The famed Mexican muralist introduced his young apprentice to “authentic fresco painting,” as well as his

¹³⁷ Lucienne Bloch, “On Location with Diego Rivera,” February 1986.

¹³⁸ Julia Weiner. *The Jewish Chronicle Archive*, sec. Culture: Art.

¹³⁹ “Services Held in New Jersey for Ben Shahn, American Jewish Artist, Dead at 70,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, March 17, 1969.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

future (second) wife, Bernarda Bryson. Equally consequential was Nelson Rockefeller's decision to destroy Rivera's mural commissioned for his new Rockefeller Center, Man at the Crossroads Looking with Hope and High Vision to the Choosing of a New and Better Future in 1934. The incident proved to be a formative experience for Shahn in protesting against art censorship. As Linden summarizes, the two artists were united in "their shared commitment to creating political art in order to stir the masses into revolutionary action." This aim did not always please the government administrators and corporate capitalists who paid the bills.¹⁴¹

The two muralists' revolutionary and social activism via artistic mediums were characteristic of interwar artists in New York. Alan Wald described this mid-twentieth century cultural movement from which an "activist, progressive, and constructive 'identity politics' emerged, one characterized by solidarity with the oppressed and cross-ethnic alliances." The American Jewish radical of the New Left era, George Lipsitz, termed this, "inter-ethnic anti-racism."¹⁴² For example, Ben Shahn was one of the many American Jewish artists who addressed the "African American experience" in their works. *Dark Times, Dire Decisions* explained, "Bernard Wolfe explored African American music and Ben Shahn engaged in anti-racist painting."¹⁴³ Thus, Shahn and Rivera also shared a passion for cross-ethnic alliances.

Shahn was a pupil of Rivera for a decade (1933-1943). During this time, the painter dealt with Jewish issues and identity politics. Linden suggests that his family's new American home in the enclave of Jewish immigrants in New York felt like 'back home' in Eastern Europe. She believes it was for that reason that Shahn always identified with the Jewish community of Williamsburg.¹⁴⁴ In America, the immigrant artist was confronted by the pressures of

¹⁴¹ Amy Werbel, "Ben Shahn's New Deal Murals: Jewish Identity in the American Scene." *Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art*, 2017.

¹⁴² Alan Wald, "Between Insularity and Internationalism: The Lost World of the Jewish Communist 'Cultural Workers' in America," in *Dark Times, Dire Decisions: Jews and Communism* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 146.

¹⁴³ Jonathan Frankel, *Dark Times, Dire Decisions: Jews and Communism* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 27.

¹⁴⁴ Amy Werbel, "Ben Shahn's New Deal Murals: Jewish Identity in the American Scene." *Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art*, 2017.

assimilation. He had to work through what it meant to be both Jewish and American, and he expressed this life-long reconciliation in his art.

Shahn's obituary in the *Jewish Telegraphic Agency* described his reputation for dealing with Jewish subject matter, "He was known for blending written messages into many of his paintings which were on universal Jewish themes. He illustrated recently a Passover Haggadah."¹⁴⁵ Ben Shahn was of the few Jews of the interwar, transnational artist network who directly addressed Jewish themes in his art. In *Dark Times, Dire Decisions: Jews and Communism*, Ezra Mendelsohn explained,

*This is not to say that left-wing Jewish artists never produced work that contained Jewish texts, or at least Jewish subtexts. A few examples will have to suffice. Ben Shahn, who signed the 1935 Call for an American artists' congress and was definitely a man of the Left (though never a card-carrying Communist), completed in 1931 a series of watercolors devoted to the infamous Dreyfus affair.*¹⁴⁶

Rivera spent ten years with Shahn as his protégé. During this time, his pupil reconciled his American and Jewish identities through his art. Shahn was also outspoken about the dire situation Jews faced in Europe during the 1930s. His work under Rivera should be considered in this context. For example, Shahn denounced the 1933 book-burning in Nazi Germany, *Kristallnacht* in 1938, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's denial of asylum to Jewish refugees, the travesty of the SS *St. Louis* in 1939, and the case of Sacco and



Figure 14. Ben Shahn, *Portrait of Captain Dreyfus*, 1931. New York City.

Vanzetti. He dealt with other Jewish subject matter as well. For example, he painted a fresco for Jersey Homesteads from 1936 to 1938. The Jersey Homesteads was a newly-built "Jewish agro-

¹⁴⁵ "Services Held in New Jersey for Ben Shahn, American Jewish Artist, Dead at 70," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, March 17, 1969.

¹⁴⁶ Jonathan Frankel, *Dark Times, Dire Decisions: Jews and Communism* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 105.

industrial community” in which farming and garment production were communal efforts. The mural told a three-part story about the Jewish immigrants who organized the Jersey Homesteads. Most importantly, Shahn’s artwork reflects his perspective as an American Jewish immigrant intellectual in the late 1930s,

Although the mural overall conveys pride and an optimistic outlook on the future, dark figures loom as well. In the upper left corner, Shahn painted the dead bodies of the Italian immigrants Sacco and Vanzetti, who were tried and condemned to death via a sham trial tainted by nationalist xenophobia. A Nazi soldier stands behind their coffins, sporting a sign that declares (in German): “Germans! Defend Yourself! Don’t shop from Jews!” (54) Shahn and his circle were activists as much as artists, and they were keenly attentive to an exploding landscape of both national and international threats.¹⁴⁷

Ben Shahn was a long-time friend and pupil of Diego Rivera. They were in close contact throughout the 1930s when the artist was building his Jewish identity.

Busia Kostov described her friendship with the Mexican muralist in an oral history interview with Alicia Gojman in the 1990s. Kostov was active in the same Mexican Jewish leftist organizations as Rivera. These organizations were organized largely by Mexican Jewish women. One example is the League for Support of the USSR (*Liga de apoyo a USRR*). Kostov exemplified the burgeoning women’s rights movement in Mexico during the 1920s. Several hundred women received university degrees during the 1920s. Kostov was one of the them. She held a degree in Chemistry.

Rivera came to know Kostov through his exiled house guest, Leon Trotsky. In the interview, she explained that she was invited to celebrate the New Year at the Rivera home. The dinner took place just days before they were anticipating the arrival of Trotsky in January of 1938. She was surprised when they asked her to serve as Trotsky’s secretary. This was because she spoke Russian and was a fellow leftist. However, because her husband was pro-Stalin, she

¹⁴⁷ Werbel, “Ben Shahn’s New Deal Murals.”

had to decline. Kostov recommended her friend instead. Her friend was also Jewish, and the two hung out at the Rivera-Trotsky compound frequently. Kostov got to know all of them. She told how the muralist frequently drew sketches for her daughter in his little notebook.

What these friendships suggest is that Diego Rivera did have Jewish acquaintances. In fact, he had Jewish friends. He had intimate relationships with people who were similarly of Jewish origin. These aforementioned friends did identify as Jews. The Jewish experiences they shared with the artist provided him with the materials he needed to build a Jewish identity. The next figure was a close friend of Rivera with whom he bonded over their exploration of Mexican Jewish identity.

One of Diego Rivera's close Jewish friends was Isaac Berliner. The poet and the muralist united over their shared social activism, interest in Mexico, socialist politics, and Jewish identity. Their commitments were aligned with the times: Reconstruction Mexico, the Great Depression, the wave of Eastern European Jewish immigration to Mexico, and worldwide revolutionary sentiments. He and Berliner had a lasting friendship. They were first photographed together in 1934, and Berliner was present for several of the local

Yiddish periodical's interviews of Rivera in 1935. Then they published a Yiddish book of poetry together in 1936, *City of Palaces*.¹⁴⁸ The title "City of Palaces," a nickname for Mexico City, is ironic, as Berliner did not reflect on the beauty of Mexico City but only referenced bourgeois parts of the city to contrast the destitution of the back alleys of Tepito. This section focuses first on an in-depth analysis of their friendship as fellow Mexican-

Jewish root-seekers. Berliner was one of the close friends

of the muralist who shared his idealistic communist worldview—and just happened to be Jewish.

Rivera's imagined Sephardi genealogy provided him with a pan-Jewish identity, which connected him to his Jewish friends through a broader Jewish kinship connection, despite their being Ashkenazim. Rivera's encounters with secular Jewish identity via his Jewish friends



Figure 15. Diego Rivera, Portrait of Isaac Berliner, 1934. Published in *City of Palaces*, 1936. Mexico City.



Figure 16. Photograph of Rivera and Berliner, 1934. Published in *City of Palaces*, 1936.

¹⁴⁸ Yizhak Berliner and Diego Rivera, *Shṭot fun palatsn lider un poemes*, (Meksike : Der yeg, 1936). In English: Isaac Berliner and Diego Rivera, *City of Palaces: Poems*. (Basking Ridge, NJ, 1996).

provided him cloth with which he could weave a symbolic Jewish identity. He was able to express this identity alongside Berliner during the two-years they collaborated on the project.

Isaac Berliner (1899–1957) was a Mexican Jewish poet born in Lodz, Poland at the turn of the 20th century. According to the *Enciclopedia Judaica Castellana* published in Mexico between 1948-1951, “Itzjok” Berliner received his education in a *cheder* for some time during secondary school. However, poverty forced him to leave school and “earn his bread as a worker.” To be discussed further, Berliner’s lived experiences of poverty made him sensitive to the plight of the poor. Thus, he was attracted to socialism at a young age. He maintained this sensitivity throughout his life. His disdain for the stark social contrasts of the world he witnessed as a “wanderlust” materialized in the first collection of poems he wrote upon arriving to Mexico in 1922, titled *Tepito*.¹⁴⁹

Berliner arrived in Texcoco, Mexico in 1922 and earned a precarious livelihood as a peddler in the Mexican provinces.¹⁵⁰ This aligned with the moment of Mexican Jewish history. The largest wave of European Jewish immigration to Mexico occurred during the 1920s, as U.S. immigration policy was restricted in 1924 with the Johnson Act and many turned to Mexico as an alternative. There was little room for workers in industrializing Mexico. Jews were excluded from the proletariat, and eventually they formed a merchant class by means of a peddler-to-professions pipeline. European immigrants were subsequently ousted from occupation of peddling or selling in the marketplace. This ousting sparked a movement out of commerce and into industry and free professions.¹⁵¹ In 1927, Berliner alongside two other “Mexican Yiddish

¹⁴⁹ *Enciclopedia Judaica Castellana : en diez tomos; el pueblo judio en el pasado y el presente*, 175.

¹⁵⁰ Melech Ravitch and Alan Astro, “Berliner, Isaac,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, 2nd ed., vol. 3 (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 461,

¹⁵¹ Judith Laikin Elkin, *Jews of the Latin American Republics* (Chapel Hill: Chapel Hill : University of North Carolina Press, 1980). 116.

poets” and leftist friends of Rivera, Jacob Glantz and journalist Moses Glikovski, created the first book published in Yiddish in Mexico, *Drai Vegn* (*Tres Caminos*, or *Three Roads*). This timing in 1927 corresponds with the arrival and integration of the primary wave of Eastern European Jewish immigrants who came to Mexico during the early 1920s. Berliner’s experience was consistent with Anita Brenner’s description of Mexico as a Jews’ haven in 1924,

*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. . . . 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.*¹⁵²

The foreword of *City of Palaces* paints Berliner’s Mexican experience as a similar picture,

*Isaac Berliner, born in Lodz, Poland in 1899, arrived in Texcoco, Mexico in 1921 and sold images of saints for a living. He wanted to participate fully in the culture. To become less distinguishable from the men around him and to get to know the Mexicans better, he let his mustache grow.*¹⁵³

Like Isaac Berliner, Jacobo Glantz, and Moses Glikovsky, the first generation of leftist Eastern European Jewish immigrants learned Spanish and began to participate in the nation’s literary and artistic circles at the core of the nation’s “cultural revolution.” The foreword of *City of Palaces* describes how Berliner took the initiative to learn Spanish and became interested in Mexico’s history, culture, and socioeconomic situation. This drew him to Mexican artistic circles. The foreword then elaborates on how the two Mexican-Jewish root-seekers came to know each other,

Diego Rivera, the muralist, painter, and artist, was well-known for his sensitivity toward issues of social justice. Through word of mouth, Rivera learned of Isaac Berliner’s interest in Mexico and his contributions to Der Veg. The artist sent for the poet, and a bond of friendship was formed. They would get together on Sundays. The topics were always political affairs, the poverty of Mexico and its social contrasts... Sometimes they are joined by Frida Kahlo, Rivera’s wife and a well-known artist in her own right.

¹⁵² Anita Brenner, “The Jew in Mexico” *The Nation*, August 27, 1924.

¹⁵³ Berliner and Rivera, *City of Palaces*, x.

Rivera and Berliner shared a passion for uplifting the global downtrodden. In his memoir, Rivera recalled the connection he made between the poor of the Old World and of Mexico: “The workers I had seen in Europe were brothers of the poor in Mexico, from whom sprang everything I have ever loved.”¹⁵⁴ Berliner had a similar perspective. According to *City of Palaces*, “Berliner identified with the unfortunate of his adoptive mother country; he, too, was a pariah. He was a Jew, a marked being, born of stigma, a displaced child in the city which neglected its children.”¹⁵⁵ Thus, the connection Berliner made to the shared plight of *Tepito*’s poor and himself as a Jewish peddler in Mexico City is what forged the bond between Berliner and Rivera.

The foreword provided insight into their collaborative project, “One day the idea was born to collaborate on a book [...] created with Berliner’s words and Rivera’s illustrations. It would be the subject of their Sunday encounters and aimless wanderings through the streets of Mexico City; the fruit of their unconditional friendship and their passion for art and social justice.” By 1934, Berliner met Rivera. Berliner’s early anthology of the *Tepito* poems made its way into their Yiddish book of poetry in 1936. The volume was very well received in Mexico and abroad and received acclaim in the Jewish press also in the United States and Argentina. Its appeal was that it the first piece of Yiddish literature to introduce Mexican themes.¹⁵⁶ The U.S. *Jewish Exponent* announced the volume’s release in 1936: “Diego Rivera, famed mural artist who is reportedly part-Jewish, has illustrated a Yiddish book with original line drawings...The book is “The City of Palaces” by Isaac Berliner.”¹⁵⁷ The Mexican Jewish Press also praised the

¹⁵⁴ Rivera, *My Art, My Life*, 57.

¹⁵⁵ Isaac Berliner and Diego Rivera, *City of Palaces: Poems*, xii.

¹⁵⁶ At this same time, his poems began to appear in reviews from the U.S. and Argentina, such as *Frai Arbeter Shtime*, *Tzukunft*, *Shpigl*, then in European annuals and reviews (*Belguishe Bleter*, etc.) *Enciclopedia Judaica Castellana : en diez tomos; el pueblo judio en el pasado y el presente*, 175.

¹⁵⁷ Paul A. Peters, “Between You and Me.” *The Jewish Exponent (1887-1990)*. July 10, 1936.

book in various articles in 1936. For example, *Der Weg* reported, “The Poet Moishe Glikovsky tells us that *City of Palaces* is the first Mexican Jewish book. It marks the beginning of a new Jewish literature that contains its own subject matter and its own cultural values. The book describes the process of Jewish assimilation [*arriago*, literally “putting down roots”] in the country.”¹⁵⁸

City of Palaces will be discussed in depth in the next section. However, to include a broader global context, it is worth noting that this book was created at a time of thriving Yiddish literature and secular culture under the Soviet Regime in its infancy, before Stalin’s later, antisemitic years. For example, Berliner was influenced by a fellow poet from Lodz, Moses Broderzon (1890-1956), although Berliner was more “socially conscious.” Broderzon experienced the revolution in Moscow. The Polish poet wrote a volume titled, *Yud: Lid in Fuftsik Kapitlen* (“Yod: Poem in 50 Chapters,” 1939) which was “laden with premonitions of the catastrophe looming over Polish Jewry.”¹⁵⁹ This work, written around the same time as Berliner emerged in Mexico, expressed a sensitivity to Eastern European Jews and also the impact the lived experience of revolution had on Jewish émigrés and their political identity. Though Berliner did not directly address antisemitism and the persecution of Jews in Eastern Europe, he was influenced by Broderzon who did deal with these Jewish themes. This further demonstrates that Berliner lived through and was conscious of the difficult history of Eastern European pogroms and the rise of fascism. Through Berliner, Rivera came to understand the plight of the Jew as an immigrant, an exile, and—as Rivera saw Berliner—as a *pariah*.

¹⁵⁸ This quotation is from July by Moishe Glikovsky, “Una importante publicación cultural”, *Der Weg*, June 21, 1936, año VII, Núm. 461, p. 2; However, the poetry anthology was also announced in the following articles: In May of 1935, “Anuncio sobre la publicación del libro *Shtot fun Palatzn*” en *Der Weg*, May 30, 1936, año VII, Núm. 447, p. 7; In June, “*Shtot fun Palatzn*,” *Der Weg*, June 20, 1936, Núm. 453, año VII, p.5; and yet again in August, Ravitch, Melej, “Mi leksikón (My Lesson)”, *Der Weg*, 10 de agosto 1940, año XI, Núm. 1064, p.5

¹⁵⁹ Melech Ravitch and Jerold C. Frakes. “Broderzon, Moyshe,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 195–96.

Further evidence of their close friendship lies in Berliner's presence at three different interviews of Rivera with the Jewish press in 1935. For example, he facilitated an interview between the artist and the journalist with *Der Weg*, H. Sh. Kazshdan. The journalist described Berliner's role, "We communicated in Russian. Diego had been in the USSR for a year or two [Rivera was only there 6 months!] but his Russian was very poor. On occasions, it was difficult for him to understand what I was asking him. What helped us in our communication was our mutual friend Itzjok Berliner, who translated from Spanish to Russian and from Russian to Spanish."¹⁶⁰

Berliner was also present when L. Forem interviewed the artist in 1935. Coming to the end of his "afternoon with Diego Rivera," *Der Weg* reported that Forem stayed over for dinner and that they were joined by none other than Rivera's friend, Isaac Berliner. The journalist described the evening,

*Having stayed for dinner was a coincidence. It was around 6 in the evening, when all the other guests had already left. The only two who remained were Forem and Itzajk Berliner who was going to pose to be painted, as Diego Rivera was going to paint his portrait without charging anything. Possibly this could have been one of his artistic impulses, since he could not tell them how much he is paid to paint a picture. Probably he did the job because his Jewish sentiments.*¹⁶¹

After Rivera's aforementioned comments about his Jewish lovers, Forem romantically reminisced about how the artist sketched his friend's portrait. Eventually, he explained, the sketch came to look like the face of "his friend Isaac." However, Forem thought it was more than that; the image "was an entire head with an open mind [*cerebro*] and a personal form that one could see what was going on inside him, one could understand what he was thinking, what he

¹⁶⁰ H. Sh. Kazshdan, "Con el grán pintor revolucionario Diego Rivera sobre los andamios" *Der Weg*, September 27, 1935, año VI, Núm. 377, 2: 7.

¹⁶¹ L. Forem, "Una tarde con Diego Rivera."

was believing.”¹⁶² If this interview does not elaborate on the extent of Rivera and Berliner’s friendship, it certainly makes it clear that the Jewish journalist imagined it as a friendship between Jews. Berliner’s appearance at two other interviews with the artist conducted by the Mexican Jewish press also support the idea that the two did bond over a common Mexican-Jewish link.

¹⁶² Ibid.

Chapter 3: Performing Symbolic Ethnicity

City of Palaces:

The illustrations Rivera provided for his friend Isaac Berliner's Yiddish Book of Poetry, *City of Palaces* are the most compelling expression of the artist's Jewish identity. The title page of the anthology reads, "Isaac Berliner and Diego Rivera 1936." Even this detail is significant, as it suggests the two visioned the project collaboratively. It does not read, "Isaac Berliner, Illustrated by Diego Rivera." The book is published by the two as co-authors. The volume they created together was the fruit of the two Mexican-Jewish root-seekers' pursuit of Mexican-Jewish identity and a tangible product of their symbolic ethnicity. A journalist of *Der Weg* described the collections as "Jewish poetry."¹⁶³ The poetry book exemplifies the sort of cultural hybridity that is characteristic of Sephardic history. The work is a symbol of the cultural fusion which constituted Berliner's and Rivera's Mexican-Jewish identity.



Figure 17. Diego Rivera, illustration for *City of Palaces*, 1936.

Shtot fun palatsn (*La Ciudad de Palacios*, or *City of Palaces*) is a sad book of poetry with a happy ending. The two social-justice activists juxtaposed the human suffering still present in the twentieth century to early modern suffering under Spanish rule. The collection featured several themes, both Jewish and Mexican, including, *indigenismo*, diaspora, exile, persecution, condemnation of the power of the church and the Inquisition, the "jarring disorientation"

¹⁶³ Melej Ravitch, "Mi leksikón", *Der Weg*, August 10, 1940, XI, no. 1064, 5

experienced by Eastern European Jewish immigrants in Mexico, the process of putting down roots in a new home (*arraigo*), and the unique, abysmal poverty of Mexico City's backstreets. Berliner lamented the brutal poverty he saw on the streets of Mexico City, and his own experiences as a poor immigrant peddler are exposed by his sensitivity to hunger, lack of protection from the elements, beggars, and isolation, as he had also been a lone wanderer. These experiences shaped the poet's passion for social justice and communist objectives.

The two self-proclaimed Mexican Jews longed for roots, and they found them in their persecuted 'ancestors' who suffered under early modern Spanish institutions alongside the Indigenous people of the New World. In this way, the poetry book is central to this discussion of Rivera's self-fashioned Jewish identity and the ways he performed symbolic ethnicity. Several of Rivera's works dating back to as early as 1929—most notably his two most-famous murals of Mexican history—feature the theme of Jewish martyrdom under the Inquisition. Thus, Rivera's illustration of a Jewish martyr dressed in Inquisitorial garb in *City of Palaces* remains one of the most compelling sources which confirm Rivera's '*converso* consciousness.' Berliner's poems confirm that the two Mexican Jews made a mental-connection between Jews and the Inquisition. *City of Palaces* showcased the artist's sensitivity for the plight of the Jew as both a *pariah* and a *converso*. His sympathy for the *Converso* as a victim of the church who was persecuted for their religious beliefs aligned with the anti-clerical and anti-church power atmosphere of Mexico. Being Jewish positioned the artist against the power of the church.

Also pertinent to the discussion of Sephardi root-seeking, despite being an Ashkenazi Jew, Berliner distinctly connected his roots to the Sephardim and *Conversos* who were persecuted under Spanish rule in the Old Continent and in New Spain. Similarly to the Ashkenazi Jews of the Sephardic Myth 1.0, Berliner did not imagine specific Sephardic

ancestors. In contrast to Rivera, Berliner had more of a biographical imagination as opposed to a genealogical imagination. To be analyzed in this section, these poems suggest that as a result of his identification with the story of the Sephardim's exile and persecution, Berliner—an assimilated Ashkenazi Jew—self-fashioned an affiliation to persecuted Sephardim through their common Jewish ethnicity. This however contrasts the German Jews of the Sephardic Myth 1.0, who repressed the memory of expulsion and instead exclusively celebrated the “Golden Age” and its Sephardi heroes.

Reading between the lines uncovers Berliner's own experiences of poverty. These experiences taught Rivera what it meant to be a *pariah*. Berliner and Rivera used the example of Tepito to indirectly contrast the poverty of immigrants, Poles, and Eastern European Jews to the destitution on the streets of Mexico City. The anthology is remarkable in its focus on local Mexican themes through the eyes of Berliner as an exiled immigrant, a former peddler. In an impactful poem, Berliner described what he saw:

I have seen:— [...]
Man and dog stood at the wall with no place to lie down on the open street with the rain
painfully storming.
I have seen:— a hand tearing posters off the wall,
and putting them down on the cold, muddy sidewalk of stone:
Man and dog huddled together on paper pillows...
And both dreamed – of gnawing discarded bones
from the garbage can there... [...]

and way out there, beyond the city. . .
And somewhere a man is tearing posters off the wall,
to serve as a cover on the raw, hard stones.
Such grey, shuffling shadows are everywhere,

looking for a threshold at a closed door...
It's every man for himself; thin, weary bodies,
huddled with their dogs on cold sidewalks.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁴ Rivera and Berliner, *City of Palaces*, 100-101.

These poems illustrate Berliner's sensitivity to being exposed to the elements: cold, rain, and relentless sun. He was especially sensitive to the plight of children—as a consequence of his experience as a poor child in Poland.

CHILDREN

*little children-
One is smaller than the other ..
Little skinny hands stretching
toward the men,
toward the women.
Little children
drag themselves around Tepito
like experienced beggars:
"Look, my father's blind,
Can't you give an old, grey man
just one cold and dry
tortilla"
The troubled heart of the old man weeps in silence-
He can't stand the begging
He can't listen to the voice of
the small boy—¹⁶⁵*

Aside from their social activism, Rivera and Berliner also shared an interest in the pre-conquest history of Mexico and *indigenismo*. They drew a link between the persecution faced by the Indigenous people of pre-conquest Mexico and the Sephardi exiles and *conversos* under the early modern Spanish state. The first example of how Rivera and Berliner established this connection can be found in one of the first poems,

TEOTIHUACAN

*Perhaps you have the steps of my great great grandfather
upon you
and my blood bears the heritage of a secret from afar,
Do my origins lie buried beneath your stones
in their endless, timeless silence?-
Who were those marvelous giants, those strong men,
who laid the granite and the heavy stones?-
Older peoples have given birth to new ones,
Only the pyramids remain unchanged
You pyramids-
Were your builders Egyptians,*

¹⁶⁵ Rivera and Berliner, *City of Palaces*, 77-78.

*Phoenicians,
 Jews, perhaps?
 I know, the holy Christian faith
 of the Spanish Inquisition
 besmirched Toltek's name
 to scare the whole world with wild indian stories,
 to rob
 the quiet peace,
 to erase
 these nations from the earth—¹⁶⁶*

Berliner made a direct connection between Jews, the Egyptian pyramids and the famous, giant pyramids among the remaining ruins of the Aztec city, *Teotihuacan*, which was mysteriously destroyed in 600 C.E.

The poem preceding *Teotihuacan* is called, “*Desierto de los Leones*.” The book’s glossary of “Mexican Terms” defines *Desierto de los Leones* as an “area near the capital, where there is a temple of the Spanish Inquisition.” The poem begins with an indirect reference to the martyrs of the Inquisition—his Jewish ancestors and the Indian he sympathizes with.

*DESIERTO DE LOS LEONES
 Out of the ruins of the old convent,
 out of the earth, out of iron and stone,
 I still hear the stifled cries,
 the bitter wailing that comes
 out of every corner and crack
 crawling along the walls
 I seem to see an old capuchin monk
 out of the old convent-
 spreading his hands like a spider
 and his scornful lips whisper;
 “A man has profaned God”
 A man has been burned.*

The clearest reference to the persecution of Jews under the Inquisition is the illustration corresponding to the poem, Churches.

*And I still seem to hear the singing,
 the choirs of pious nuns,*

¹⁶⁶ Rivera and Berliner, *City of Palaces*, 10.

the Spanish inquisitors. . .

*And I still seem to see them leading
a victim through streets large and small,
the curses, the jokes and the laughter
of the pious crowd in his wake. . . .*

*And I still see the faggots cracking
along with the bones and the ribs—
and the burned victim collapsing
with the word of God on his lips.¹⁶⁷*

Berliner imagined the “gruesome Spanish knights,” “Spanish inquisitors,” and *auto-da-fés* of centuries past when he looked at the Mexico City’s churches. Rivera shared a similar anti-clerical perspective of Mexican religious life. He associated the church with the crown. The two root-seeking Mexican Jews made a connection between the Spanish Inquisition in New Spain and back in the Old World who had forcibly converted the Jews and the Indigenous people of pre-conquest Mexico. The two expressed this theme in their art: Berliner’s poems and Rivera’s drawings. By this time in 1936, Jews under persecution by the Inquisition had become a key motif in the muralist’s work.

¹⁶⁷ Rivera and Berliner, *City of Palaces*, 44.

Painting the Inquisition

Another way the artist expressed his symbolic ethnicity was by painting the Inquisition. The sensitivity he felt towards the Jewish experience was strong enough that he included depictions of Jews being persecuted by the Inquisition in several of his most famous murals portraying the history of Mexico. His mural titled *The History of Mexico* spans three walls of Mexico's National Palace. Rivera included the *auto-da-fé* of books and religious images in the triptych mural. This scene recalls the Inquisition's attempt to eradicate Indigenous culture and religion during the colonial era. On the west wall, Rivera painted a scene of an *auto-da-fé*. When the journalist Kashdan interviewed the muralist in 1935, Kashdan described the mural objectively: the construction of the Inquisition, its activities and brutal actions; the depiction of Karl Marx; red flags which read "all of the power of the working class," and "land for the campesinos" and, between the two, a swastika. It appears Rivera had already made the mental connection between Jews, Indigenous Americans, the Inquisition, book-burnings, and Nazi Germany early in the 1930s.

Figure 12. Diego Rivera, *Dream of a Sunday in Alameda Park* (*Sueño de una tarde dominical en la Alameda Central*), 1947. Mural. Mexico City.

Diego Rivera's
"autobiographical mural"



A decade later, after the end of World War II, Rivera painted another scene of Judaizers, or people were accused of living as Jews by the Inquisition. This time, Mariana Violante de Carvajal is featured on the far left side of Rivera's "autobiographical mural," *Sueño de una tarde dominical en la Alameda Central* (Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in Alameda Central, 1946), alongside other legendary figures of Mexican history. These Mexican legends include the conquistador Hernán Cortés, Bishop Zumárraga, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, President Benito Juárez and his triumph over emperor Maximiliano de Habsburgo, President Porfirio Díaz, and hero of the Mexican Revolution, Victoriano Huerta. The National Institute of Fine Arts and Literature of Mexico explained how these legends "live together in a historical weaving of light and shade which are intimately related with a social and historical satire." He romanticized and exaggerated certain historical periods to juxtapose the poorly treated *campesinos* and the bourgeois that turn their back to the viewer with the dark period of the Inquisition and independence movements surrounded by a halo of glory.¹⁶⁸

At the far left side, indicating the beginning of Mexican history or rather New Spain, a half-nude woman is being burned at the stake. She is garbed in the infamous *sambenito* and conical hat of shame. The Museo Mural Diego Rivera, Museum of Mexican History at Monclova, Monterrey, and the National Institute of Fine Arts and Literature of Mexico consider Rivera's Jewish roots as very important to him. These institutions are also not Jewish-affiliated, suggesting they have no interest in projecting a Jewish identity onto Rivera. These art historians maintain that Rivera was painting Mariana de Carvajal—the daughter of the martyred Carvajal family, who arrived with her uncle, conquistador and founder of the state of Nuevo Leon, Luis de Carvajal y de la Cueva (1539-1591). The Carvajals were a family of

¹⁶⁸ Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura. "Recorrido Del Mural 'Sueño de Una Tarde Dominical En La Alameda Central' En Lengua Maya," 2020.

conversos in New Spain who were accused of Judaizing heresy in the 1590s. The conquistador-patriarch of the family, Luis de Carvajal y de la Cueva was a genuine convert. Mariana's brother, Luis de Carvajal, was a crypto-Jew. His precious manuscripts were confiscated by the Inquisition. His prayer book and memoir are the only extant writings from a crypto-Jew in colonial Mexico. While Uncle Carvajal died in the Inquisitorial prison, Luis, Mariana, and their mother Francisca were burned at the stake by the Holy Office of the Inquisition at an *auto-da-fe* in the center of Mexico City at the end of the 1590s.

It is in the same location that the Museo Mural de Diego Rivera is located, adjacent to the Palace *Bellas Artes* in Mexico City's historic center. The public burnings of alleged heretics in the *autos-da-fe*, including that of the Carvajals, took place right in front his autobiographical mural. From 2008 to 2009, the museum featured an exhibit "*Diego Rivera y la Inquisición: un Puente en el tiempo*" (Diego Rivera and the Inquisition: a Bridge in Time) which then traveled to the Mexican History Museum in Monterrey and Monclova and then to New York City. The opening of this traveling exhibit marked an important development in the legend of Rivera's Jewish roots.

The exhibit inspired much of the lore surrounding Rivera's claims to Jewish ancestry. Numerous secular and Jewish newspapers in Mexico, the United States, and abroad reported on the exhibit's inauguration between 2008 and 2010, highlighting Rivera's depiction of Mariana de Carvajal and his feelings about his "Jewish blood."¹⁶⁹ The opening even inspired the newspaper *Diario Judío* to create a lengthy history of Rivera and Mexico's Jewish community. The online Jewish press and root-seeking community *eSefarad* reported that the purpose of the exhibition was to "stimulate reflection on the religious and legal machinery that operated for three

¹⁶⁹ Among others, *El Universal* of Mexico, the *Jewish News of Greater Phoenix*, *eSefarad*, and *el Diario Judío*.

centuries.” Additionally, the exhibit offered a “testimony of the friendly and artistic relationship and solidarity that existed between the painter and the Jewish community residing in Mexico, for which Diego Rivera felt great appreciation.”

Rivera’s inclusion of Jews persecuted by the Holy Office of the Inquisition of New Spain in several of his pivotal works makes it clear that he was conscious of the plight of the *Conversos*. The imagery seen in his sketch for *City of Palaces*, his mural in the National Palace of Mexico, and his autobiographical mural, *Dream of a Sunday in Alameda Central*, illuminate Rivera’s familiarity with the history of *Conversos* in New Spain. These scenes offer evidence of the artist’s *Converso* consciousness. He was an expert in Mexican history and mythology, and he saw the Inquisition as an important, dark moment in Mexican history. He dealt with the tale of the crypto-Jew, Luis de Carvajal, years before the *schmaltzy* story became trendy in the post-1992 era. Rivera identified with the plight of the *converso*. Moreover, Carvajal was also an anti-establishment free-thinker who rejected fixed identities. Rivera identified with the freedom-fighting crypto-Jew through his imaginary *Converso* lineage. The anti-establishment, crypto-Jewish story fit his personality. Introducing the Sephardic Myth 2.0, Rivera highlighted not Sephardic heroes but victims in his art.

Conclusion

Diego Rivera was an expert myth-maker. His own identity was among the legends he created. His genealogical claims were completely unfounded, and yet the artist still created a Jewish identity because it aligned with his worldview. From the beginning of his life, he was a revolutionary idealist and a social activist. Introducing the Sephardic Myth 2.0, Rivera's imaginary *Converso* genealogy aligned him historically with the “downtrodden masses.” In the late 1920s, he became an anti-fascist. In response, he invented a Jewish lineage. His Jewish root-seeking was politically motivated, and his genealogical imagination was a product of external factors. His imaginary pan-Jewish identity united him against the rise of fascism in the 1930s.

His Eastern European émigré friends in Paris and Mexico shared his revolutionary sentiments and leftist politics. It was in the cafés of Montparnasse that his friends taught him about the Jewish historical experience of persecution. Then during the 1920s, Rivera became a part of the Mexican Reconstruction project, where he began adopting multiple identities and multiple ethnicities. In the 1930s, he came to know even more Jews in Mexico and the U.S. He shared his antiestablishment temperament and socialist politics with his pupils. Sharing a Jewish connection was also a way of gaining community acceptance—with his Jewish friends and Jewish organizations. By dealing with Jewish themes in his art, Ben Shahn further showed the artist what it meant to be Jewish. His Jewish friends provided him with insider knowledge into the Jewish experience, and the muralist's Jewish identity was reinforced through these friendships.

His deep friendship with Isaac Berliner contributed to his perspective of Jews as victims of poverty and persecution—as *pariahs*. The muralist and the poet together made a mental connection between the *Conversos* and the Indigenous people who both suffered under the

Inquisition in New Spain. This was in line with his anti-imperial rhetoric; by making himself a *Converso*, he positioned himself on the “right” side of the colonial history of Mexico. His imaginary *Converso* genealogy also reinforced his anti-clerical and anti-church power beliefs.

In the early 1930s, the artist went on a Jewish press tour in Mexico and the U.S. In each interview, he altered his ancestral narrative. His genealogical claims were never consistent. At times, his grandmother was “in no way religious,” and at others, she was “influenced by Judaism” and “rigorously kept the Jewish religion.” Thus, his symbolic Jewish ethnicity was a way of responding rhetorically and artistically to social issues surrounding him. Because he told them over and over again that he descended from *Conversos* or Sephardic Jews—depending on which narrative suited his needs—Rivera became Jewish in the eyes of his Jewish contemporaries. His public perception as a Jew was solidified by the antisemitic attacks he experienced during the late 1930s. In the Mexican Jewish community, Rivera was known as a social activist, an anti-fascist, and a proud fellow Jew who acted on their behalf.

Rivera projected his anti-fascist posture and social activism onto his genealogical past. His Jewish identity was motivated by factors outside of himself. He imagined himself as Jewish in response to the rise of fascism. He spoke out against fascist movements through participating in symposiums hosted by Jewish organizations in Mexico and the U.S. He performed his symbolic Jewish ethnicity through denouncing antisemitic demonstrations in Nazi Germany in 1933. He was most certainly known as an anti-fascist to the Mexican Jewish community.

Diego Rivera imagined new versions of his genealogical myth at his convenience. And this is what he was known for—his artist’s imagination and his ability to create myths. The man was a myth himself—the Jewish press described how he spoke many languages, was everywhere, and was surrounded by people of all nations. His cosmopolitanism reinforced his

perception as a Jew in the eyes of the public and in the artist's own consciousness. The revolutionary idealist aligned himself with marginalized groups.

Diego Rivera invented a Jewish identity through his genealogical imagination. By presenting himself as a product of *Conversos*, he aligned himself with an anti-colonialist perspective. By making a kinship connection through his imaginary Sephardi ancestry, the artist adopted a pan-Jewish identity. This also allowed him to identify with the Ashkenazi Jews in his life who were victims of persecution by fascist and imperial regimes.

This work has sought to illustrate how Diego Rivera created a Jewish identity in response to external politics during the 1930s. The revolutionary idealist responded to the pressure to align with the “downtrodden masses.” The consequences of his fictitious kinship ties were threefold. First, he doubled down on his anti-colonialist rhetoric by asserting his *Converso* origins in painting the Inquisition. Second, his pan-Jewish identity made his fight against fascism personal and united him with the fellow Jewish leftists in his life. Third, he channeled his passion for social justice activism into the Jewish social sphere. The artist made himself Jewish in the eyes of his contemporaries by averring his Jewish roots.

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