

Conceptual and Methodological Clues for Approaching the Connections between Mexico and the Holocaust: Separate or Interconnected Histories?

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Abstract:

Connections between the Holocaust and Latin America have yet to be fully elucidated. Next to the US, Latin America collectively hosted the largest number of European refugees during the 1930s and 1940s. During Second World War, it held a non-marginal place in a highly interconnected global scenario and hence it is essential to incorporate a transnational perspective to examine the multiple contacts, links, and exchanges created by social and political actors across the borders of nation-states and beyond the geographies of the Holocaust on the European continent. By tracing how individual and collective agents interacted at the levels of state, society, and community, it is possible to shed light on a complex history of interconnected and separate processes and decisions. Although Mexico was one of the Latin American countries that admitted a low number of refugees (ca. 2,000), its role as a host country constitutes a rich opportunity for exploring key issues of rescue, survival, and integration and the interconnections among governmental and non-governmental actors remained frequent and intense during the war and its aftermath. Methodologically, it offers some clues for bringing together macro- and micro-histories, as well as historical analysis and oral history.

Keywords: Transnational history, Holocaust, Mexico, Latin America, Jews, Refugees.

Introduction

This article examines the contacts and connections that developed between Europe during the consolidation of the Nazi regime—particularly in regard to its policies of segregating, persecuting, expelling, and ultimately exterminating Jews—and Mexico, where structural traits and conjectural trends determined processes, attitudes, and behaviors. Moving beyond the interconnectedness inherent in the increasingly global nature of history during the twentieth

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century, intensified and also interrupted by the Second World War, our goal is to analyze several main links and interactions developed within and between nation states during this period. Therefore, we examine how individual and collective agents interacted at the levels of state, society, and community.

For this purpose, a transnational analytical perspective is adopted to shed light on the specificities of actors—as well as the convergences and divergences between them—whose linkages and exchanges transcended national borders. When considering types of connectedness, we refer not only to concrete practices—political, material, or even commercial—but also to the circulation of information and knowledge, perceptions, and cultural representations, as well as a comprehensive ideological and ideational universe.

Focusing on a critical era defined by global warfare and the Diaspora condition of the Jewish people, this article considers ideological and institutional frameworks at different levels of analysis: states and societies, as well as Jewish communities and individuals with bonds of cohesion and solidarity across a diversified political and organizational spectrum that characterized their collective life in dispersion. In so far as our research problem is multidimensional and complex, given the participation of diverse actors, countries, and cultures, this article is structured around specific conceptual and methodological clues that guide our analysis while suggesting new avenues of investigation. Our multidisciplinary approach combines history and sociology with contemporary Jewish studies, seeking to connect the national and global spheres with the specificity of the Jewish group and its culture.

Although the Holocaust has been extensively researched, relatively few historical studies integrate the actions and decisions of actors in Germany and Europe with the varied processes that took place in countries geographically distant from the territory of the Holocaust, such as the Latin American nations. In the case of Mexico and Latin America, valuable pioneering studies have outlined these interconnections, but they focus mainly on governmental policies toward Jewish immigration, including the selective and restrictive criteria for admission and the complex national and international realities in which they took shape (Avni, 1986, 2006; Bokser Liwerant, 1991, 1996, 2006; Lesser, 1995; Spitzer, 1998; Milgram, 2003; Wojak, 2003; Kaplan, 2008; Gleizer, 2014). Other studies have placed the victims and their agency at the center of the debate, without necessarily focusing on the complex web of processes and policies to which they responded in their decisions and actions (Shabot, 2002; Mam, 2003).

Researchers point out the importance of approaching the Holocaust through integrated lenses that reveal how different choices and actions were related. Timothy Snyder (2010) observed that the Holocaust is still conceived to be the result of national or European processes that were not necessarily interconnected. Methodologically, the prevailing approximations of the Holocaust are still constrained by the national-political boundaries of individual states. In Snyder's (2012) view, "transnational history is not 'diplomatic' cover for someone else's story. It is a way of researching and reasoning that . . . might help us . . . understand the Holocaust."¹ This suggests that the social and historical processes analyzed cannot be limited to dynamics in the national realm, that is, we must overcome what Ulrich Beck (2007) called "methodological nationalism."

Seen from this perspective, how to connect the geographies of the Holocaust and of Latin America, a potential haven for refugees, in order to trace cultural, political, and social processes

that extend beyond Europe and include rescue and host actors on the local, regional, and global levels? Relations and exchanges between Jewish and non-Jewish actors will also be explored. Mexico, the focus of this case study, is not defined simply according to its territorial borders but instead, without disregarding the central place of the national sphere, we seek to incorporate in our analysis the regional and the global as they are linked by transnational dynamics.

We are aware that this poses important conceptual, methodological, and empirical challenges, including the need to weave together macro- and micro-histories, to connect geographies, and to understand the connections and tensions between local, regional, national, and global processes, and between the Jewish singularity of the Holocaust as well as its universality. Whereas in the European East, an integral historical approach sheds light on the particular dynamics of local collaboration in the killing, in Latin America it raises new questions about rescue, survival, and integration.

At the root of our analysis is a fundamental distinction between interconnected and separate histories. By *interconnected histories* we refer to situations where close contacts, exchange of information or ideas, pressures, relations, and links developed between individuals, community leaders, political elites, and governmental officials across the borders of nation states. Intense and frequent interactions impact the decisions of social and political actors. For instance, Jewish transnational organizations collaborated with other humanitarian groups that sought to rescue Jews by identifying new opportunities for refuge in Mexico. By *separate histories* we refer to situations where processes develop locally, totally independent from events in other states. When a crisis or question of international import arises, decision makers respond according to national or personal considerations. For example, disputes and divergent opinions on the Jewish refugee issue among Mexican governmental agencies and public officials led actors to separate the plight of the victims from national concerns. One illustrative case is Mexico's refusal to allow the disembarkation of European ships carrying Jewish refugees, such as *Orinoco*. Additionally, several local initiatives in Mexico were undertaken to stop the arrival of refugees, block their entry, or deny their requests for asylum.

Between the poles of interconnectedness and separation lies a wide spectrum of intermediate situations in which external and internal factors alike play a role in decision-making processes and influence historical developments. A review of events in Mexico in the 1930s and 1940s shows that some processes remained separate from international concerns while others were closely interconnected. Thus, interconnected and separate histories are not mutually exclusive scenarios.

Interconnected phenomena may coexist with social and political efforts by a society to disassociate itself from the issue or problem at hand. International forums that addressed the refugee crisis during Nazism are exemplary cases. At both the Evian Conference (France, July 1938) and the first meeting of the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees (London, August 1938), the Latin American nations were influenced by each other's positions as well as by pressure from the great powers and thus acted as a regional bloc, rather than making decisions solely on the basis of local or national considerations. Debates in these arenas expressed, transmitted, and reinforced prejudices that shaped national attitudes, yielding arguments that strengthened ambivalence, fostered indecision toward the refugee problem, and ultimately led to policies of exclusion. Through these transactions the mental representations and perceptions that

guided the actors were mutually reshaped, leading to alterations in how Jewish Otherness was conceived. Thus, prevalent notions of the Jew in Mexico as a hard-working immigrant, vigorous entrepreneur, and an element that would contribute to the building of the nation were displaced by arguments that emphasized the separateness of the Jewish community and its differences from the general population or, as we will see, the notion that collectively, Mexican Jews brought inconveniences and risks to the country.

Latin America was connected to the Holocaust through the refugees' urgent need for a haven, and various ways in which the nations in that region responded. When refugees sought to emigrate but potential host countries maintained their restrictive quotas without making humanitarian concessions, their indifferent or negative responses may be seen as deliberate attempts to draw a line between the plight of the victims and national interests while prioritizing the latter, resulting in separate rather than interconnected histories. A country could downplay the role of stereotypes and prejudices in making these decisions by recurrently appealing to national interest.

The first two sections of this article provide background on Latin America's response to the Holocaust, including a discussion of the role of the Holocaust and the refugee question in Latin American foreign policy. The third section focuses on the situation in Mexico, particularly as it was handled by the government, as an example of the separation of histories. In the fourth section we survey the broad range of international connections that linked various sectors in Mexico—including Jews, German-speaking exiles, Mexican intellectuals, Mexican government, and the press—to events in Europe prior to and during the Holocaust. The fifth section tracks the experience of Jewish refugees in Mexico, processes whereby they accommodated themselves to life in their new country, and their status in Mexico in the decades following the Holocaust, thus extending the temporal dimension of Mexico's interconnections with the geographies of the Holocaust into the present. The concluding remarks include some suggestions about how the conceptual framework and methodology used in the article can be applied to other countries geographically distant from the territory of the Holocaust.

The Holocaust and Latin America: A Brief Overview

While the Holocaust has generally been regarded as an event without direct connections to Latin America, studies challenging this view began to emerge in the 1980s and 1990s (Avni, 1986; Lesser, 1995; Bokser Liwerant, 1991, 1996; Spitzer, 1998). On the one hand, Latin America was geographically remote from the Holocaust and its perpetrators and victims and on the other, the number of Jewish refugees admitted to Latin American nations is second only to the number received by the US. The traditional openness of Latin American countries toward immigration granted them a non-marginal place within a highly interconnected scenario, as multiple contacts and exchanges developed both within and beyond the region (Avni, 2003; Milgram, 2003; Bokser Liwerant, 2003; Wojak, 2003; Kaplan, 2008; Gleizer, 2014). A historical approximation of the subject reveals a complex reality: the same nation could simultaneously, on different levels, be historically separate from as well as interconnected with events in Europe.

The number of Jewish refugees entering Latin America between the rise of Nazism and the end of the Second World War was not insignificant, and indeed could have been larger. It is estimated that between 1933 and 1943 close to 100,000 Jewish refugees immigrated to Latin

America and the Caribbean (Milgram, 2003).² In comparison, between 1933 and 1942 about 140,000–160,000 European Jews entered the US, and 66,500 reached Mandate Palestine (Avni, 2000). The number of refugees admitted to each Latin American country, however, varies greatly; from over 35,000 and 23,500 in Argentina and Brazil, respectively, to less than 2,000 in Mexico (Milgram, 2003). Statistics for other host countries—including Chile, Uruguay, Bolivia, Paraguay, the Dominican Republic, and Ecuador—vary widely depending on the sources and availability of data.³ It is noteworthy that some small, less developed Latin American countries such as Bolivia were more willing to receive refugees than countries with a greater capacity to do so, such as Mexico.

It is not only the number of refugees that arrived in Latin America that matters, but also their individual circumstances and experiences: who came to the region, their awareness of prevailing interconnections during their decision-making process, what possibilities they faced, what types of experience they brought with them, and the particular links they established with the local community and the host society. Thus, in addition to rescue and survival, issues of integration are also central to this analysis.

International/Intergovernmental Connections

As stated, the most important connection between Latin American countries and the plight of the persecuted Jews was the potential of the region to accommodate part of the flow of Jewish exiles that began when Hitler took power and increased sharply in 1938 when Germany annexed Austria. The beginning of the Second World War and the adoption of the “Final Solution” gave further urgency to the question of Jewish refugees. Although Latin America was not originally considered a potential refuge, the region acquired unprecedented importance due to its history as an extra-European space traditionally open to immigration.

Latin American countries first confronted the refugee question in 1935, when the League of Nations adopted measures to coordinate global assistance for refugees who left Germany and began to issue a certificate of identity to German nationals who did not enjoy the protection of the Nazi government. Some of the first contacts between Latin America and the crisis in Europe were established by James McDonald, the League of Nations’ high commissioner for refugees from Germany, during a tour of the region in 1935. His purpose was to evaluate the region’s ability to receive refugees and concluded that “increased nationalist tendencies [...] amongst which stood the problem of immigration”, ruled out Latin America as a destination for fugitives (Avni, 2005, p. 312). Nevertheless, in 1936 Latin American governments were invited to sign the Provisional Arrangement concerning the Status of Refugees Coming from Germany, and later the 1938 Convention on the same topic, and therefore had to define their position on this question.

Mexico, however, did not sign either of these treaties, choosing to regard the refugee question as a European problem. In addition, Mexico did not distinguish between immigrants and refugees, who received no special treatment despite their dire condition. On the other hand, the foreign policy of President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–1940) was characterized by its explicit positions on European matters. At the League of Nations, Mexico protested the invasions and conquests undertaken by the great powers: the Italian invasion of Abyssinia (1935), the German annexation of Austria (1938), and the Soviet invasion of Finland (1939). Mexico’s protests were merely

rhetorical, but its condemnation of European oppressors was significant in the context of international relations during the pre-war period. As part of its foreign policy, Mexico defended the principles of non-intervention, national sovereignty, right of weak countries to defend themselves, and the imperative to protect the persecuted.

Although Mexico refused to take a stand on the refugee question in the League of Nations, its participation in the Refugee Conference at Evian signaled its apparent willingness to host victims of dictatorships. The speech of the Mexican representative Primo Villa Michel at Evian revealed empathy and sensitivity toward the victims of totalitarian regimes without, however, expressing a commitment to act. Villa Michel underlined that this was not “a normal case of immigration or asylum, but of international solidarity imposed by the interdependence of the people, so that Mexico will cooperate to its utmost insofar as possible” (AHSRE, file III-1246-9-I). His words were interpreted with optimism by refugees and by leaders of the Jewish community in Mexico. Applications for asylum increased significantly and the local Jewish community, expecting a steady flow of exiles, organized the Comité Pro-Refugiados (Committee for Refugees) in 1938, which unfortunately did not have much work to do.

In addition to Villa Michel’s statement at Evian, the Mexican government’s attitude toward the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and its decision to offer asylum to defeated Republicans raised hopes that Mexico would also open its doors to Jewish exiles. Mexico’s hospitality toward Spaniards was interpreted, then and even later, as an evidence of its humanitarian attitude that did not distinguish between different kinds of refugees, although the reality was different.

Mexico was represented in the Intergovernmental Committee in London that emerged from Evian. It also participated in several Latin American meetings where European emigration to the region was discussed, and later hosted the Inter-American Conference on Problems of War and Peace (1945). But Mexico’s participation in international forums had the effect of reducing its willingness to accept Jewish refugees. Although in early 1938 Mexico was willing to take in a certain number of refugees, when its representatives abroad learned of the global indifference toward Jewish exiles, it reversed its position. The Evian Conference prompted Latin American governments to form a regional bloc opposed to the admission of refugees—a more or less unified response to pressures from the great powers to welcome them, although this pressure was more imagined than real.⁴

The Mexican government cited its uncertainty about the prospects of international cooperation as an excuse to refrain from acting on the refugee question. Minister of the Interior Ignacio García Téllez declared in 1938 that insofar as no conclusions had been reached regarding international cooperation, the country would only admit persecuted refugees who were “outstanding fighters for social progress” or “selected exponents of the sciences or the arts.” Later, García Téllez maintained that for Mexico’s response to be consistent with that of the other countries represented in the Intergovernmental Convention in London, it was first necessary to establish the contribution that each of the participating countries would make to aid the refugees. Mexico’s participation in international organizations allowed it to demonstrate its willingness to contribute to solving the refugee problem without being obliged to take concrete action.

International dynamics coexisted alongside regional and bi-national ones. In the US, the tension between President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s global project and his inability to play a central role

in European and Asian events strengthened his conviction that it was necessary to construct a united hemispheric platform if the US was to exert an influence on international diplomacy. In this context, the conflict between Mexico and the international oil companies operating in the country, which led to the nationalization of the foreign oil industry, was a test of the Good Neighbor policy and the principle of non-intervention (Gellman, 1979, pp. 24, 73). Roosevelt consented to this test, privileging hemispheric unity over the interests of the affected oil companies. The use of force against Mexico would undermine the trust that the US was cultivating and would also invite a more aggressive intervention by the Axis powers, something that had to be prevented at any cost (Cline, 1963, p. 243). President Cárdenas affirmed that he preferred to maintain commercial relations with democracies but also warned that if democracies were not interested, Mexico would find other markets—mainly among the Axis powers, which it eventually did.

Thus, from Roosevelt's point of view, the creation of an Inter-American system was an urgent priority. Efforts in this direction began at the Seventh International Conference of American states in Montevideo (December 1933), where the foundations were laid for the Good Neighbor policy, non-interventionism, and principles of peace and economic cooperation. Other regional forums included the Inter-American Conference for the Maintenance of Peace (Buenos Aires, 1936), the 8th Pan American Conference (Lima, 1938), conferences at Panama (1939) and La Habana (1940), the Consultative Meeting by Ministers of Foreign Relations (Rio de Janeiro, 1942), and the Inter-American Conference on Problems of War and Peace (Mexico, 1945).

Between Connections and Disconnections: Mexico and the Refugee Crisis

As discussed above, the Mexican government used its participation in international organizations as a way to define its policy toward the Jewish exiles. Nevertheless, domestic considerations and national interests were paramount. Thus, while Mexico responded to the refugee question in forums that transcended national borders, separate decisions were made by local actors as well.

In contrast to other Latin American countries, Mexico is not a country that encourages immigration but rather one that has expelled significant numbers of persons. Thus, it did not have the experience to host a great influx of refugees, nor any legislation that could help chart a course of action. For the most part decisions on immigration were improvised, resulting in laws and policies that were incoherent if not contradictory. In addition, the need to repatriate 350,000 Mexicans expelled by US authorities between 1929 and 1933 as a result of the Great Depression (Alanís Enciso, 2007, pp. 17–18) and the government's offer of asylum to defeated Spanish Republicans may have constrained its ability to accommodate Jewish exiles (Avni, 1986; Bokser, 1996; Gleizer, 2009). On top of all this, during the 1930s the post-revolutionary Mexican state was in a process of institutional consolidation, and in 1938, the same year that the exodus from Germany acquired a worrisome character, the government of Lázaro Cárdenas faced a profound internal crisis.

In April 1934, Mexico's Ministry of the Interior issued a confidential document prohibiting the immigration of Jews as well as members of other ethnic, national, religious, and political groups (Circular Confidencial nº 157). Specifically, Mexico sought to block the entry of “non-assimilable” or “non-desirable” persons. Immigrants' capacity to assimilate was assessed in

relation to the Mexican nationalist ideology of *mestizaje* (literally “miscegenation”), which celebrated the country’s racial mix of indigenous people and Spaniards as an ethnic, social, and political resource for building national identity. This ideology justified attempts by post-revolutionary governments to homogenize the ethnic character of the local population. Beginning in 1926, the Population Laws promoted the immigration of “similar races,” including persons who belonged to the two main original branches of *mestizaje* or to a culturally related group and Jews were not included in these categories (Bokser, 1991, pp 102–120; Gleizer, 2014, pp. 29–39).

Nor were Jews considered to be political refugees. Initially they were classified as potential immigrants, but when it became apparent that their emigration was compulsory, the minister of the interior coined the term “racial refugee” to describe someone who “had sought asylum due to racial persecution” (Gleizer, 2014, p. 89). He also acknowledged that the policy followed in the case of racial refugees differed from the one applied to political refugees. As he declared regarding Jewish refugees: “It is advisable to avoid that those individuals who are dedicated to undesirable economic activities enter the territory through their immoderate, disorganized, and fraudulent affluence. We have no information on their status as persecuted people” (AGN, PLC, file 549.2/18).

The contradiction between the government’s official discourse, which at times alluded to a longstanding Mexican tradition of asylum, and its refusal to admit Jewish refugees was acknowledged by some public officials (AHSRE, file III-541-5-I). Traditional tensions between the Ministry of Foreign Relations and the Ministry of the Interior intensified, as the former was willing to accept a certain number of Jewish refugees under a controlled scheme of rural colonization while the latter rejected the proposal outright.⁵ These disagreements led to a direct conflict 1939 when President Cárdenas sought advice from both agencies which ended with the Ministry of Interior achieving complete control over immigration issues, except for Spanish refugees, who were treated separately and remained under Cárdenas’s direct control.

As the search for refuge became more urgent, many Jewish and non-Jewish organizations tried to negotiate with the Mexican government a scheme for colonization. Ramón Beteta, the vice-minister of foreign affairs trusted by Cárdenas, elaborated a plan that had the support of the Joint Distribution Committee—one of the main American Jewish organizations financing European emigration—as well as the American Friends’ Service Committee (a Quaker organization), but was ultimately rejected by the government. Another interesting project was promoted by the governor of Tabasco, Francisco Trujillo Gurría, who sought to bring Jewish refugees to his state but the proposal was cancelled after it was leaked and severely criticized in the national press (AGN, PLC, file 546.6/16).

Aside from these colonization projects, some failed attempts to settle Jewish refugees in the countryside (in Tabasco, Hidalgo, and Veracruz) showed that, as in the case of Spanish refugees, Europeans had a hard time adapting to rural Mexico. Projects to rescue orphaned children (whose parents were sent to forced labor in France) likewise failed. This was also the case with the last effort in 1944 to rescue Hungarian Jews, even though the Mexican government planned to provide them with documents allowing them to exit Hungary but without, however, granting them visa to enter Mexico. All of these failures were characterized by a lack of volition, delays, difficult negotiations, communication problems, and a neglect of humanitarian considerations.

The Mexican public opinion, sympathetic toward Germany, did not favor the entry of Jewish refugees. Additionally, commercial and industrial organizations cited national economic interests as they proposed measures to rectify what was considered disloyal competition and the displacement of nationals by immigrants, mainly Chinese and Jews (Bokser, 2006). Nationalist groups that endorsed Fascism, anti-Semitism, and xenophobia, although not politically relevant, were very effective in voicing their opposition to immigration and organizing demonstrations.⁶ While Cárdenas's government combated nationalist organizations on the extreme right, it struggled to control middle-class union groups that defended the national interest—also a priority of Cárdenas' progressive administration—but had not yet been incorporated by the ruling party. However, it is possible that the combined pressure of all these groups converged with and reinforced by the anti-Semitic prejudices of certain individuals in the government, resulted in these groups exercising a greater influence on the refugee question than they were able to wield in other matters, especially given the absence of a clearly defined governmental policy toward the Jewish exiles.

When Mexico joined the Allied forces in May 1942, it closed its doors to non-American or non-Spaniard immigrants. This closure coincided with the Nazis' prohibition of Jewish emigration from occupied territory. News of the "Final Solution" did not change the government's policy (Gleizer, 2009). With its ban on foreign immigration, Mexico effectively disconnected itself from the refugee crisis in Europe.

Nevertheless, refugees who had family members in Mexico were still able to enter the country legally because the Population Law allowed the immigration of relatives; this explains why the majority of the Jewish refugees who did reach Mexico were Polish. Landlords or investors were also permitted to enter, as well as those who received special permits from the Mexican government. The rest had to seek out other paths of entry. This led to widespread corruption, including the sale of Mexican visas and passports in Europe and bribery in Mexican harbors. As a result, a few Jews were in fact able to enter the country as political refugees.

To sum up, the position of the Mexican government toward Jewish exiles was not defined in advance but was improvised along the way. There were moments of relative flexibility when the Mexican government was willing to allow the entry of a greater number of refugees, frequently in response to external pressures, but none of the proposed frameworks for organized Jewish immigration materialized. Instead, the government devoted itself to preventing the arrival of Jewish refugees, blocking the entry of stateless people, and rejecting requests for asylum on the grounds of various laws and provisions, some of which had been designed explicitly for this purpose.

Transnational Interconnections: Actors, Decisions, Implications

During the War, social and political non-governmental actors, both Jewish and non-Jewish, exchanged information and ideas and established contacts, links, and networks of collaboration to facilitate the movement of Jewish refugees across the borders of European nation states, and beyond Europe. These actors included humanitarian associations, the press, and intellectuals. At the individual level, refugees made decisions based on prevailing interconnections, although they were not always conscious of them.

The Jewish World

Historically the Jewish world has exhibited a wide inner diversity with respect to ideologies, social movements, and political parties, resulting in sustained dialogues, internal debates, struggles, and confrontations. During the 1930s and 1940s, however, the great vulnerability of the Jews in Europe became the leading factor in evaluating potential solutions formulated by adherents of different worldviews and ideologies regarding the critical question of survival, which now required nothing short of fleeing the continent. The ideological diversity and the interconnectedness of the Jewish people, as well as their weakness in the face of the Nazi threat, found complex expression both in the internal debates over rescue and in the efforts to collaborate in this endeavor.

As a potential host nation, Mexico favored making connections with the Jewish world. Early on, Jewish organizations explored the specific options that Latin American nations offered for refugees. In spite of difficulties in communication and the Mexican government's refusal to define its position on refugees, international Jewish organizations were aware of the legal obstacles facing Jews seeking refuge in Mexico. Although Mexico's prohibition of Jewish immigration in 1934 remained confidential, details of its denial of entry to foreign workers were published in the *Informations blatter* of the Central Jewish Agency in Berlin in November 1935. Before 1938, when the situation turned critical, none of the Jewish international organizations believed that Mexico was a good refuge option.

Beginning in that year, which coincided with the creation of the Comité Central Israelita de México (CCIM; Jewish Central Committee of Mexico), organizations such as HICEM,⁷ Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), and the World Jewish Congress (WJC) were attuned to any changes in Mexico's immigration policy, including the immigration laws themselves (which were translated into different languages and widely distributed), the differential quotas that regulated the entry of foreigners, and options for immigration related to specific initiatives, such as colonization projects or importation of certain European industries.

American and Mexican Jewish communities developed a close relationship—although not without conflict—because of Mexico's proximity to the US, as well as the support American Jews gave to the new Jewish community of Mexico, established in the first part of the twentieth century. American organizations and individuals who tried to negotiate frameworks for Jewish immigration with the Mexican government, however, frequently overlooked local Jewish leaders in Mexico who had been living in the country for a short time but better understood local mechanisms of negotiation and modes of relation. After the Evian Conference, the local Jewish community—which numbered nearly 10,000 in the early 1930s and swelled to 18,000 in the 1940s—began to act in organized ways to accommodate refugees and to negotiate with the Mexican government, under the assumption that these measures would lead to a policy of acceptance. However, local Jewish leaders had interpreted with too much optimism the declarations of the Mexican representative at Evian. In preparation for the supposed arrival of Jewish refugees, the local leadership created the Comité Pro-Refugiados (Committee for Refugees), soon reorganized as the CCIM, in 1938.

As the local political representation of Jews in Mexico, the CCIM tried to create dialogues with various agencies, including the presidency, to increase the flexibility of Mexico's policy toward Jewish refugees. It also collaborated in the design of colonization projects, and intervened in

particular cases managed by the Ministry of Interior (for example, when refugees came to Mexico with tourist visas in 1938 and ran the risk of being deported from the country). Later on, when Mexico entered the war, the CCIM collaborated with Menorah, an association for German-speaking Jews, to protect refugees from the suspension of individual guarantees. Although the CCIM failed to alter Mexico's immigration policy and did not achieve much success in founding Jewish colonies, its maneuvers greatly benefited individual refugees (Gleizer, 2009a, 2014).

The CCIM not only maintained relations with the Mexican government and diplomatic representatives from other countries (such as the Polish Minister in Mexico), it also represented the community before international Jewish organizations and served as its official representation at the World Jewish Congress in Mexico. It had contacts with HIAS, HICEM, JDC (which helped to fund the CCIM's activities), and the American Jewish Committee (AJC), among others and also supplied Jewish refugees with information on genuine opportunities offered by Mexico, provided follow-up on immigration projects, and supported the process of issuing visas. The CCIM and other groups were a key in assisting refugees who reached Mexico by their own means. They assisted newcomers with their documents when they disembarked and transported them from the port of Veracruz to Mexico City. Later on, they provided loans to refugees and supported them as they searched for work, and their lawyers assisted in normalizing their migratory status. As Mexican law permitted the immigration of direct family members, the CCIM and its fellows also helped European refugees find their relatives in the country.

Because the CCIM was relatively new and not all Jewish groups recognized its authority, it faced particular difficulties when coordinating projects within the community. Ideological differences exacerbated the strain (Gleizer, 2009a, 2014). The Jewish world was characterized by diverse and even opposing opinions on the refugee crisis, the "Jewish question" and strategies for developing Jewish life and fostering integration in the broader society. Ashkenazi Jews who immigrated to Mexico brought with them a variety of political experiences and beliefs and participated in a broad spectrum of political discourse that included Communism, Bundism, and Zionism. The differences among them—all of which were reflected in the Jewish press—frequently resulted in rivalries and disputes.

Conflicts between them were expressed in struggles over strategies and the allocation of resources for rescue, since each group conducted its own fundraising campaigns. When a united campaign was finally launched in 1945, however, it further polarized views on the rescue and reconstruction of European Jewry.⁸ The question of whether the Jewish future lay in Europe or Palestine came to the forefront. In the opinion of Zionists, resources should be expended in ways that fostered the unity of the Jewish people, as epitomized by the aspiration to establish a national home, which was seen as a resource for normalizing the global Jewish condition (Austri-Dan, 1957, p. 62). The Zionists maintained that a sovereign national home would solve the problem of the restrictions other countries placed on Jewish immigration.

Bundists, for their part, considered Europe, even in 1944, a viable setting for Jewish life, with culture and language as the main identity referents. They did not consider Palestine to be an alternative center for developing the Jewish cultural legacy, and objected to the Zionists' focus on purchasing land in Palestine, which minimized the funds available to rescue European Jews while rescue was still possible (Zacharías, 1944; 1945). At the same time, Bundists criticized Zionists for citing rescue as a motive when soliciting funds for a national home (*Fofois*, 1944).

Indeed, rescue campaigns had been mounted by Zionists since the rise of Nazism. Thus, in July 1933, the Comité de Acción para establecer en Palestina a los israelitas perseguidos en Alemania (Action Committee to Settle Persecuted German Jews in Palestine) was created (ZCA, File KH4/B/1437), and in 1939, Keren Hayesod (United Israel Appeal) launched a campaign under the umbrella of the World Zionist Organization to buy “ship tickets for the refugees’ trip to Eretz Israel” (ZCA, file A346/95, 1940).⁹ The debates between Bundists and Zionists continued as Mexican Jews launched cooperative efforts with the Joint Distribution Committees well as the World Jewish Congress (ZCA, file S1/781, 1941). The Bundists’ critique extended to other issues as well, including the strategic alliance between Communists and Zionists (Alifaz, 1942). Lively debates over strategy emanated from the intersection of cultural ferment and extreme vulnerability.

Communists and Zionists formed a strategic alliance among Jewish groups in Mexico, collaborating in the framework of one of the important Mexican Jewish organizations of that period, the Liga Judía de Apoyo a la URSS (Jewish League of Support to the USSR, 1941–42), later called the Popular League, which had contacts with the non-Jewish anti-Fascist movements. Such alliances, however, did not dilute ideological differences that had appeared in the early 1930s, before the Ribentrop-Molotov Pact between the USSR and Nazi Germany, and that split opinions on whether a Jewish national home should be established in Birobidjan or Palestine.

In a complex web of interconnections during this critical period, we find that the CCIM established contacts not only with the Jewish world but also with the Mexican Working Left, particularly its leader, Vicente Lombardo Toledano and with the new local anti-Fascist movement. The relationship between CCIM and the Left led the organized labor movement to support protests against Nazism and to spread information on attacks against Jews in Europe. Lombardo Toledano, as leader of the Confederación de Trabajadores de América Latina (CTAL; Latin American Confederation of Workers), and his close friend Tuvia Maizel (a Bundist member of CCIM) organized a 15-minute labor strike on 1 December 1942, that mobilized all affiliated Latin American workers to protest the murders carried out under Nazism and express solidarity with the victims, a massive demonstration without equaling other parts of the world.

The Central Committee also developed a close relationship with the Liga pro Cultura Alemana (League for German Culture) and with organizations such as Acción Republicana Austriaca (Austrian Republican Movement of Mexico) that brought together German-speaking anti-Fascists, as discussed below. To a large extent, the Jewish community financed the activities of the Mexican anti-Fascist movement, a topic that requires additional research.

The Jewish press, an essential conduit for news of developments in Europe, reflected the national and transnational connections of the Jewish group, as well as its contacts with foreign actors and Mexican society. The two main newspapers were published in Yiddish: *Di Shtime* (The Voice), produced by left-wing forum of Bundists who had close relations with the Jewish Labor Committee in New York, and *Der Weg* (The Road), which was liberal and pro-Zionist. Both newspapers featured international news reports that originated in Berlin, London, and later in Palestine, as well as local Mexican news. Information on the destruction of European Jews also came from the *Jewish Telegraphic Agency* and the World Jewish Congress. In addition, other Yiddish newspapers published by different political parties provided a platform for debates over

the future of Jews and of Judaism in Europe; the Bundists published *Foroís* (Forward), the Zionists *Unzer Tribune* (Our Tribune), and the Communists *Fraiwelt* (Free World).

These Yiddish newspapers, however, did not serve the Sephardic community or the youngsters who spoke Spanish. *La Verdad* (The Truth), written in Spanish, was a short-lived (1937–1938) attempt to reach these sectors. The journal *Tribuna Israelita* (Jewish Tribune), also in Spanish, was founded in December 1944. Its editor was Otto Katz, and Leo Katz its first manager. It featured articles by German-speaking Jews who belonged to Alemania Libre (Free Germany, discussed below), such as Bruno Frei, Egon Erwin Kisch, and Theodor Balk. The journal became a venue for reflecting on contemporary problems and the Jewish question, and a platform for important Mexican intellectuals such as Samuel Ramos, Julio Jiménez Rueda, and Alfonso Reyes, who collaborated in its foundation. Thus, this periodical manifested key intersections between world trends and local conditions.

The Yiddish-speaking Jewish intellectuals fostered a public discourse that nourished and enhanced the community as a public-private space. Indeed, most of the contributions made by Jewish left-wing intellectuals who produced literature, poetry, and journalism in Yiddish stayed within the Jewish community's confines due to the socio-ethnic and economic composition of Mexican society, on the one hand, and political developments in the Jewish world on the other. Thus, their main interlocutors were other members of the local Jewish community. Distinguished figures include Isaac Berliner and Jacobo Glantz, for whom condemning social injustice was an essential principle, as it was in the poetry and novels of the Mexican Revolution and in European social movements. Illustrative works are Berliner's *La Ciudad de los Palacios* (City of Palaces; published in *Der Weg*, 1936), illustrated by Diego Rivera, and the poems written by Berliner and Glantz in the late 1930s and the first half of the 1940s condemning both persecution and silence. Other intellectuals and writers included Moises Glikowski, Abraham Golomb, I. Zacharías, Boris Rosen, and Salomon Kahan. During the years when the persecution of Jews intensified, their contribution to the Jewish press had a meaningful impact (Bokser Liwerant et al., 1991).

Many of these figures were able to establish close links with Jewish intellectual elites abroad—both in Europe and in the US—as well as with non-Jewish intellectuals in and beyond Mexico. Paradoxically, one of the main sources of their cultural identity—language—was, simultaneously, a barrier to forming closer links.

The Circulation of Ideas: Intellectuals, Activists, and the Political Elite in Mexico

The German Speaking Exiles: The core of the anti-Fascist movements in Mexico was formed by German-speaking refugees (from Germany and Austria) who began to arrive in 1939, taking advantage of the political asylum offered by the governments of Cárdenas and Manuel Ávila Camacho (1940–1946) to fugitives from Fascist persecution. The newcomers included intellectuals, writers, publicists, and politicians, the great majority of whom had been active in German and Austrian Communist parties. They created organizations that reflected both ideological commonalities and conflicts within the Left. Well-known Mexican intellectuals and members of the local Jewish community joined them.

The first German-speaking anti-Fascist association to achieve prominence in the public sphere was the Liga pro Cultura Alemana (League for German Culture), created in 1937 by exiles from Germany—Social Democrats, Republican Democrats, Trotskyists, and some Communists. In contrast to other organizations dedicated to cultural activities and propaganda, the League made the rescue of refugees a priority, which led it to work closely with the CCIM. The league's close links with the Cárdenas administration guaranteed that refugees would support the democratic government (thereby allaying the administration's concern to block fifth columnists from entering the country), and the CCIM covered the cost of disembarkment for all refugees, Jews and non-Jews alike.

In spite of its alliance with the German Communist party in Paris, the Liga pro Cultura Alemana tried to bring together all anti-Fascist Germans and opponents of Hitler. To achieve this end it committed itself to educating the public; in 1938, for instance, it organized a series of anti-Nazi conferences, supported by the Ministry of Public Education. The organization also tried to demonstrate to the Mexican people that not every German was a Nazi (Von Mentz, Pérez Montfort & Radkau, 1984, p. 46).

Eventually, however, the Liga pro Cultura Alemana split apart when its main figure, Alfons Goldschmidt, died, and when some Trotsky sympathizers began to share anti-Soviet propaganda with their fellow members. Consequently, the German-speaking Communists withdrew from the league in 1941 (Von Mentz et al., 1984, pp. 46–47) and in the following year formed the Alemania Libre (Free Germany) movement. The new organization attracted a number of important exiles who arrived in 1941 and 1942, such as Ludwig Renn, Bodo Uhse, Egon Erwin Kisch, Theodor Balk, André Simone, Leo Katz, Paul Merker, Alexander Abusch, and Erich Jungmann. Many of the newcomers had served in the German-speaking brigades in the Spanish Civil War.

Alemania Libre and the Heinrich Heine Club (which included German intellectuals and artists) became the key source for news on events in Hitler's Germany. In 1941 the movement founded the journal *Freies Deutschland* (Free Germany) as a tool in the fight against Nazism abroad, as well as the “Nazi fifth column” in Mexico (Von Mentz et al., 1984, p. 51). To reach the Mexican public, Alemania Libre began to issue a leaflet in Spanish—also called *Alemania Libre*—in January 1942, and in the following year it introduced another journal, *Demokratische Post* (Democratic Post), to attract members of the older German colony in Mexico.

In 1943 Alemania Libre organized the First Anti-Fascist Congress in Mexico, in which Latin American representatives participated, and coordinated the publication of *The Black Book of the Nazi Terror in Europe: Testimony of Writers and Artists of 16 Nations*, which offered graphic proof of Nazi atrocities, including the extermination of European Jews. This publication, with a prologue written by President Ávila Camacho himself, helped generate local sympathy for the Allied forces.

Within the anti-Fascist movement in Mexico we find another important group: Acción Republicana Austriaca (Austrian Republican Movement of Mexico), which consisted mainly of Social Democrats born in Austria but also included persons of other political affiliations who formed a unified front against Nazism. After the end of the War, the Austrian Communists returned to Europe, while the rest stayed in Mexico.

These exiles and others who belonged to organizations such as Francia Libre (Free France) or Hungría Libre (Free Hungary) had contacts with Mexican intellectuals and the local Jewish community. Collaboration between the Jewish community and intellectual exiles was essential to the diffusion of news on the war in Europe and the plight of the Jews.

It is important to point out that about half of the German-speaking exiles in Mexico (estimates range between 100 and 300) were Jewish. For the most part, their Jewish origin did not determine their attitude toward the Jewish question before they left Europe; rather, their views tended to reflect the Communist position, which challenged the Jewish specificity of Zionism while ignoring the specificity of anti-Semitism (Bankier, 1988, p. 84; Bokser Liwerant, 1995). However, in contrast to German Communists who emigrated to the Soviet Union, the Communist core that lived in Mexico radically changed its position on the “Jewish question”: rather than considering Jews as one of the many groups victimized by Nazism, they stressed in their writings the specific nature of the persecution of Jews. The German Communists considered Jews to be a national minority—and persecuted as such—and recognized the collective responsibility of the German people (not only the bourgeoisie) for their annihilation. This changed their position on Zionism: if Jews were an oppressed national minority, they had the right to fight for their own state. It is worth noting that this national claim had already been recognized in 1937 by Leon Trotsky in his unique encounter with a group of Mexican Jewish journalists at Diego Rivera’s home.

The collaboration between Communists and members of the Jewish community fostered by Alemania Libre had no parallel outside Mexico. Paul Merker, the general secretary of the Latin American Committee of Alemania Libre and the ideological and political leader of the movement since 1942, was instrumental in developing dialogue with the local Jewish community. This dialogue was a result of the freedom of action granted by the governments of Lázaro Cárdenas and Manuel Ávila Camacho to Communist exiles, whose intellectual heft attracted leaders of the Jewish community (Bankier, 1988, p. 84), and it was facilitated by the crisis faced by the Mexican Communist party itself (Bokser, 1991, p. 228). The strategy of the Frente Popular (Popular Front), which was willing to make concessions to Jewish nationalism, also helped to encourage this dialogue.

The Left intellectuals: Mexican intellectuals formed several associations to support the fight against Fascism, although they generally built them on existing platforms. Vicente Lombardo Toledano, the leader of the Mexican Left, spearheaded protests against Francoism, Fascism, and Nazism, and mobilized both the Confederación de Trabajadores de México (CTM; Confederation of Workers of Mexico) and the Confederación de Trabajadores de América Latina (CTAL; Latin American Confederation of Workers). The Left position attracted the support of the organized workers’ movement in Mexico, thus leading different unions to collaborate on matters that included the design of an immigration policy that would be more flexible toward refugees, and to engage in massive demonstrations against the Third Reich in combination with peasant organizations.

Toledano was the main speaker at numerous protests, such as the one organized by the Liga Pro Cultura Alemana following *Kristallnacht* (1938). He also used the newspaper *El Popular*, which he edited, as a space to condemn Nazi and Fascist atrocities as well as anti-Semitism. In his article “*Jews and Mexicans, Inferior Races?*” he drew a historical parallel between the

oppression of the two peoples—both were subjected to humiliation and persecution and treated as inferior races—and also between the Jewish people’s fight for freedom and the Mexican people’s struggle for independence and national dignity:

Perhaps we Mexicans are, among all the peoples of the world, the one that best understands the feelings of the Israelite race. We Mexicans, because we are a people of Indians, Mestizos, and Creoles, descendants of three racial groups considered inferior races by the races that were then judged to be superior to others (Toledano, 1942).¹⁰

Given Toledano’s use of ethnicity to establish similarities between the Mexican people and the Jews, and to express solidarity with the latter, it is important to mention the condemnation of anti-Semitism and racist nationalism in Mexico by the well-known muralist and painter Diego Rivera. After asserting that the anti-foreign motto “Mexico for Mexicans” was clearly Fascist, he declared that “we [Mexicans] are really half Indian and half Jews.” Rivera’s bold but erroneous claim was based on his belief that 80 per cent of the Spaniards who came to Mexico with Cortés were Jewish (*The New York Times*, 1938).

While the Mexican Left was in general anti-Fascist, its corporatist and class interests prevailed in relation to the persecution of Jews. In this sense, the Left combined syndicalism with dogmatic positions that expressed an orthodox view of social classes. As Luis González has shown, anti-Semitism was not limited to right-wing sectors but also influenced the Center and Left (González, 1981). Thus we also find, although to a lesser degree, some Left-wing initiatives against Jews, such as the petition sent in March 1937 by the Confederación Nacional de las Izquierdas (an association of left-wing groups) requesting the President to declare a “Jewish neighborhood” in downtown Mexico City to stimulate economic competition, as well as for “patriotic considerations” (*Excelsior*, 1937). A document from 1938 attests to Left-wing fears about granting asylum to Jews, on the grounds that it would harm the working classes (AGN, PLC, file 546.6/16).

Even though important Mexican intellectuals were vociferous in their condemnation of Nazism and Fascism, they were less sanguine about one of its logical consequences: allowing Jewish refugees to enter Mexico. Under Cárdenas, local intellectuals channeled most of their support to Spanish exiles or those seeking political asylum. The latter included Jews who were members of Communist and Social Democratic parties, both Austrian and German, but excluded “racial refugees,” as they were called at that time (Avni, 1986; Liwerant, 1996; Gleizer, 2010).

Thus, when assessing whether Mexican and Jewish histories during the Holocaust were separate or interconnected, it is necessary to remember that the fight against Fascism incorporated, and yet in many cases subsumed, the specificity of the Jewish question. This posed dilemmas for social actors as to the alliances to be build. In some cases, but not always, strategic motivations informed decisions.

The Right Intellectuals: The radical secular Right attracted supporters of Fascism, including well-known intellectuals and writers such as José Vasconcelos, the minister of education in the government of Álvaro Obregón. Vasconcelos was the editor of *Timón* (Helm) (March–July 1940), a weekly continental journal that was banned by the government after a few months. He and various collaborators published editorials, essays, and articles and maintained a sympathetic position toward the Axis countries. Vasconcelos was a complex figure, professing anti-Semitic views while serving as a post-revolutionary leader in national education. He promoted

universalizing conception of a cosmic race that excluded Jews and indigenous people. Another outspoken personality, Rubén Salazar Mallén, held that unlike historic materialism, Fascism was a political system that adapted to reality, and he denounced the “slander and lies” poured upon it. In his view, Fascism meant the disciplined conduct of society and economy by a strong and energetic state (*El Universal*, 1934).

Another well-known figure was Gerardo Murillo, a former revolutionary also known as Dr. Atl. Maintaining the authenticity of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, he endeavored to fight against Jewish domination which, in his view, had extended its tentacles around the globe. In the Jewish mentality he saw the origin of all the social doctrines or “isms”—such as *obrerismo* (the union and political movement of the working class), socialism, and communism—that signified the deterioration of contemporary civilization (Murillo, 1942, p. 135).¹¹ In addition to espousing the oxymoronic proposition that Jews controlled both global finance and revolutionary movements, he proposed to identify world leaders such as Woodrow Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt as Jews on the basis of their alleged “Hebrew physiognomy.” The combination of an extreme anti-Communism and a virulent anti-Semitism led Dr. Atl to view Nazism as a solution to both problems. Thus, he opposed the anti-Fascist character of Cardenism, and later Avilacamachism.¹²

Other voices: While the strongest denunciations of Fascism during the 1930s and 1940s came from the Left, other representative anti-Fascist voices should be noted as well. Of particular relevance are the public declarations against Nazi measures of “terror, injustice, and violence” toward German Jews by Martín Luis Guzmán, Octavio Paz, Carlos Pellicer, Julio Bracho, Rafael Solana, and several others (*El Universal*, 1938). Such personalities condemned the Reich’s policies as “a terrible threat to man and his spirit” while advocating values such as peace and liberty.

Octavio Paz, a world-renowned Mexican intellectual and writer, combined leftist and progressive liberal positions. In 1937, Paz participated in the International Congress of Writers for the Defense of Culture in Valencia, Spain, where he met prominent international authors. Paz asserted his solidarity with Republicans while noting signs of intolerance toward any expression of dissent (for example, the condemnation of André Gide for his disenchanted narrative of his trip to the former Soviet Union, and the bloody internal disputes within the Left) (González Torres, 2016, pp. 136–37). After Paz returned to Mexico he founded the literary journal *Taller* (Workshop) with Rafael Solana and Efraín Huerta, which aimed to promote literature committed to history but not subordinated to it and he gradually affirmed his independence of thought and his engagement with liberalism. Like Paz, other progressive intellectuals focused on the condemnation of the Spanish Civil War, Fascism, and every form of totalitarianism, and they were probably more inclined to favor opening Mexico’s doors to the Spanish exiles.

National public opinion was shaped by editorialists, journalists, and their readers, but also by other social and political actors and specifically by intellectuals who communicated their views on the world crisis, refugee problem, and the Jewish question in and beyond Europe through their literary works and political activism. Such individuals were “culture makers” as well as leading political and ethical figures (Aizenberg, 2016). Networks for the circulation of ideas were also developed by intellectuals, nationally and transnational. Through their travels, their participation in diverse forums, and their mutual reading of their literary and political writings,

Jewish and non-Jewish Mexican intellectuals alike made new contacts and exchanged ideas based on convergent interests and values. Progressive thought, the broad spectrum of leftist positions, and liberalism exemplify the circulation of ideas that took place in the 1930s and 1940s. Exponents of these views sustained the fight against Fascism and condemned Nazism and they did not place anti-Semitism at or near the center of that struggle.

The government: The Mexican government also supported the anti-Fascist movement by creating various organizations, such as the Liga no Sectaria Antinazi (Non-sectarian Anti-Nazi League, 1938), which included distinguished members of the political elite like Luis I. Rodríguez, Alejandro Carrillo, Heriberto Jara, and Lombardo Toledano. Furthermore, the Anti-Fascist party (1939) was founded to prevent the spread of Fascism and Nazism in the country (Pérez Montfort, 1993, p. 67). In 1942, the Mexican branch of the International Free World Association, *Mundo Libre* (Free World), was established, and it closely collaborated with its North American counterpart (founded in 1941).¹³ The organization also published an eponymous journal, *Mundo Libre* and both were headed by Isidro Fabela, who as Mexico's representative in the League of Nations, had condemned the annexation of Austria and now expressed his support of Jewish national demands. Several personalities were appointed to the Honor Committee of Free World in Mexico like Luis Cabrera, Antonio Caso, and Alfonso Reyes. Many renowned intellectuals collaborated or sympathized with both the association and its journal. President Lázaro Cárdenas and Eduardo Villaseñor (Mexican writer, editor and public official) were members of the American Honor Committee of Free World, headquartered in New York.

From its inception, *Mundo Libre* became a forum for discussing developments in the War as well as the role of democracies in the fight for an institutional order based on liberty. In addition to protesting against Nazism as a threat and real danger in Europe and America, and in tandem with its defense of the Spanish Republic and the countries occupied by Hitler's forces, *Mundo Libre* denounced anti-Semitism and the persecution of Jews as the alleged detonators of an international conflict. Its journal featured column called "The Israelite Problem" ("Problema Israelita" that continuously condemned Nazism and anti-Semitism in Europe; in 1945 it was re-titled "Pro-Palestine").

Noteworthy interconnections between Jewish organizations and the Mexican government include links created by the Zionist movement with the government to mobilize its support for the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine. The Comité Mexicano Pro-Palestina (Mexican Pro-Palestine Committee, 1944) was headed by I. Fabela, who saw Zionism as a movement fighting for justice and liberty. The Committee included scientific, political, and literary figures committed to the establishment of a Jewish state. Nathan Bistrizky first, member of the senior staff of the Jewish National Fund, and Moshe Toff later, coordinated this regional initiative with Dr. Nahum Goldmann, who headed the Political Department of the Jewish Agency; they explored ways to gather national support and coordinate transnational efforts on this matter. Such ties exemplify the strong organizational and dense institutional interconnectedness of the Jewish Diaspora (ZCA, file Z4/10224, 1944; *Mundo Libre*, 1944).

The Mexican Press: During the Holocaust, the press was both a channel for detailed information on the destruction of European Jewry and an organ that shaped and reflected

attitudes and responses toward this dramatic event. If the press did not determine what the public thought, it certainly influenced what it thought about (Lipstadt, 1986). As a provider of news, the press was supposed to maintain objectivity, rigor, veracity, and credibility. However, it was neither a neutral space nor a passive recorder of events but rather was the agency that influenced readers. In fact, in Mexico it became a very important venue for debates between supporters of the Allied countries and German sympathizers; between those who identified with Republican Spaniards and loyal followers of Franco; and between individuals who favored opening the nation's doors to Jewish refugees and those who supported protectionist and nationalist positions.

In the period studied here, the Mexican press included a diverse array of newspapers and journals like *Excelsior*, *Últimas Noticias de Excelsior*, *El Universal*, *El Universal Gráfico*, *El Nacional* (connected to the government), *El Diario Oficial* (the official newspaper of the government), *La Prensa*, *Novedades*, *El Popular*, *Mundo Libre*, and *Timón*, among others. The press was influenced and defined—in its priorities, content, and interpretations—by the government, worker's unions, foreign news agencies and investors, local and international journalists, editors and directors, opinion makers, or private entrepreneurs, who collectively represented an array of convergent and divergent interests, values, perspectives, and understandings of events.

During the post-revolutionary period, educational reforms resulted in a gradual increase in the literacy rate; from 47 per cent in 1900 to 58 per cent by 1930. During the Nazi period in Europe, only a minority of Mexicans read newspaper. Over time, however, the needs, expectations, and critiques of different popular sectors and the middle class were increasingly communicated through the press. However, the distribution of newspapers was limited, both quantitatively and geographically (Serna Rodríguez, 2014).

News reports and editorials on Nazism, the war, and the destruction of European Jewry should be placed within the broader context of transnational exchanges of information through particular circuits and networks. The main information agencies were foreign (such as the Associated Press or United Press), although some journalists from Mexico worked abroad. News originated in Berlin, Munich, Paris, Rome, Vatican City, London, Geneva, and Warsaw. Newspapers such as *El Universal* received news mainly from the United Press and the *New York Times*, but also from the Transocean Service via Radiomex, or through cables from the North American Newspaper Alliance, Universal Service, and Agencia Noticiosa Telegráfica Americana. The Associated Press was *Excelsior*'s main source for news from Germany and occupied Europe. Other sources include the Mexican diplomatic representations in Europe and a number of similarly well-placed individuals. Journalists such as Raúl Villa and Luis Lara Pardo collaborated with *Excelsior* from Europe.

News about massacres of Jews and other victims frequently came from clandestine sources (radio, press, and telegraphic agencies) as well as from Jewish organizations, exiled governments, and networks of resistance, all of which were directly affected by the conflict (for example, reports sent by the Jewish National Committee of Poland to the World Jewish Congress). Wide World (a news agency with offices in Bern, Switzerland, and London) frequently reported on measures taken by the Nazis to Germanize Poland. Some of the detailed reports that reached Mexican readers included towns and cities, names of concentration camps and ghettos, dates and numbers of victims, and the processes and mechanisms of extermination.

Studies on worldwide press coverage during the Holocaust have examined how much the public knew about events in Europe, and specifically about the destruction of Jews; how detailed the information was; and how it was presented and interpreted. As will be shown, beginning with the rise of Nazism the press in Mexico reported—sometimes in graphic detail—the horrors faced by Jews. Both *Excelsior* and *El Universal* covered the first Nazi attacks on the Weimar democracy, such as the Nazi book burning (*El Universal*, 10 May, 1933, p. 12). Other early events were reported critically and with irony, especially by *El Universal*. For example, when the city of Munich ordered the removal of the ashes of Kurt Eisner and Gustav Landauer—two important Jewish figures of the German Left at the end of the nineteenth century—*El Universal*'s headline stated: “Soon in Germany there will only be Nazis. Not even the dead can escape the Nazi purifying action” (*El Universal*, 22 June, 1933, p. 18.).

The Jewish question received broad coverage in Mexican newspapers and journals. A large number of news reports were published, frequently on the front page (Cohen, 1994). Both *Excelsior* and *El Universal* reported on the economic boycott, Nuremberg Laws, and *Kristallnacht*. With respect to the latter, it is worth noting the detailed and precise information that reached Mexican readers; the degree of violence against Jewish population and property, its massive scope, involvement of the government, and the behavior of firefighters, who stood aside as the synagogues burned; “their work was reduced to preventing the fire from spreading to nearby buildings” (*El Universal*, 10 November 1938, pp. 160-162; *Excelsior*, 11 November 1938, p. 4).¹⁴

Whereas news on developments in Europe did not elicit polemic reactions (perhaps because they were seen as distant from local events), Mexican newspapers were rife with heated debates on the immigration question, which directly affected the country. The migration issue became “an outstanding sphere in which different conceptions of the nation and of the desired society were expressed” (Bokser, 2006, p. 380). *Excelsior* and *El Nacional*, two newspapers of widespread circulation, asked whether Mexico should open its doors to Jewish refugees. The discussion was joined by great number of individuals and groups, and it provoked intense exchanges that spread from the pages of newspapers into the urban landscape, as posters and fliers appeared on walls and streets filled with demonstrators for or against the arrival of foreigners.

Excelsior—in its highly conservative editorial column “Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow” and several anonymous articles—presented the strongest opposition to the admission of Jewish refugees, followed by *Novedades* and *La Prensa*. For example, *Excelsior* warned in October 1937 that the ship *Mexique*, approaching the Mexican coast, was “loaded with Jews” who had received “improper” authorization for entry from the Ministry of Interior. In response, the Ministry of the Interior (which had no sympathy for the refugees) made it clear that only 25 Polish immigrants were aboard, most of whom were relatives of legal residents and thus entitled to immigrate (*Excelsior*, 30 October 1937, quoted in Gleizer, 2014, p. 78).

Focusing on immigration, these newspapers reported with indifference on the situation of Jews under Nazism. In *Excelsior*, for example, anti-Semitism in Germany was described as something that “Jews say exists.” The newspaper referred to “real or imaginary” attacks against Jews and treated news of persecution as mere rumors; for instance, it suggested that reports pertaining to the Jewish question were probably fabricated by Jewish groups in New York. This skepticism

contrasted with *Excelsior*'s earnest coverage of the repression of Communists and other political left-wing groups.

News reports frequently buried details exposing the magnitude of Nazi crimes against Jews under a less alarming headline, which was all that most readers noticed. A note by *El Universal* (19 January 1941) described the terrible conditions of Jews in the Warsaw ghetto, where 400 Jews died every month, under a headline that mitigated the tragedy: "*Hundreds of thousands of Jews are in a bad situation.*"

The anti-Jewish broadsides in the press were produced by conservative sectors, mainly the secular radical Right and anti-Semitic or anti-foreign groups, with financial support from the German diplomatic representation in Mexico. Outright rejection of Jewish immigration was expressed for the most part in newspapers that embraced Fascist, Nazi, and anti-Semitic tendencies, such as *Omega*, *El Hombre Libre*, and *Timón*. They promoted the idea that it was necessary "to be alert to what the presence of Jews in Mexico represented: the imminence of a true 'Jewish-Communist conspiracy,' whose objectives were the destabilization of the country and, therefore, its loss of control" (Pérez Rosales, 1994). *Hispanidad*, another journal that focused on the racial question, attempted to define the Hispanic Mexican identity in terms of unity of race, culture, language, and religion. Thus, Jews and Judaism was the object of permanent aggression.

On the other hand, several newspapers took a firm stand against Nazism and Fascism, such as *El Nacional*, *La Voz de México*, and *El Popular*, while others proceeded more cautiously, publishing anti-Fascist writings by persons who were not members of the paper's staff. *El Popular*, the organ of the CTM (Confederation of Workers of Mexico), was the most vociferous anti-fascist newspaper; it accused *Excelsior* and its evening edition, *Últimas Noticias*, of defending the interests of totalitarian countries.

Publications such as *Alemania Libre* and *Mundo Libre* looked beyond the local debate on Jewish refugees and distributed information on the Nazi massacres. Their readers learned about the inhuman conditions of the camps where Jews and other victims died. Several reports by *Alemania Libre* in 1942 described the execution of prisoners and Jews in the East (that is, the Soviet area occupied by the Germans since the summer of 1941). One report from Bern stated that on the same day that Germany attacked Russia (22 June 1941), 800 anti-Nazi prisoners were killed in the "sadly famous concentration camp of Buchenwald." Another report described the execution by firearms in Minsk (Belorussia) of 8,600 men, women, and children. Their bodies were thrown into a pit (*Alemania Libre*, 1942a; *Alemania Libre*, 1942b). Although it was not known at the time, this was the beginning of the "Final Solution."

Transnational circuits and networks also impacted what was known about other victims in other regions. Mexico's involvement in the Spanish Civil War and its warm reception of defeated Spanish Republicans seeking to immigrate yielded a particularly high number of news reports, far surpassing the attention given to the Holocaust or the Jewish world. Mexican readers also received large amounts of detailed information regarding attacks on Communists, Social Democrats, and other political opponents; measures directed against people with disabilities (for example, laws to prevent the transmission of hereditary illnesses and sterilization measures); and the persecution and repression of Catholic Poles, Soviet civilians, and prisoners of war, as well

as other hostile actions (*El Universal*, 2 February 1933, p. 4; *El Universal*, 20 December, 1933, p. 32).

The Mexican press not only provided a venue for public opinion on Jewish immigration but also conveyed the government's position. Thus, the press reported extensively on the Evian Conference, reproducing the official statement of the Mexican representative, Primo Villa Michel, and calling attention to both the need to resolve the "acute problem" of thousands of "Hebrew fugitives" as well as the few practical solutions available, given the unwillingness of countries to offer asylum. Newspapers also reported the Ministry of the Interior's position on the first Jews to arrive with tourist visas in 1938, who ran the risk of being deported and reproduced interviews with President Lázaro Cárdenas on the question of German and Austrian refugees who were on their way to Mexico. Likewise, the press also made public the views of various politicians who called the government to block the establishment of a colony for Jewish refugees in Baja California, on the grounds that it was promoted by American Jews seeking to buy "our peninsular territory" (*El Universal*, 14 November 1938).

The press closely tracked the ships that brought Jews to Mexico. In some cases, notably the *Orinoco* in 1938 and the *Quanza* in 1940, Jewish passengers were not permitted to land, while in other instances previous arrangements (which presumably entailed the exchange of large amounts of money) allowed refugees to disembark along the country's coast (for example, those who traveled on the *Serpa Pinto* in 1941 and 1942). Given that in some cases the prohibition on disembarking was imposed on one handful of refugees (such as the 21 people who arrived on the *Orinoco*), the Mexico's government's stance attracted the attention of the global press and drew critiques from journalists in the US and France.¹⁵

The press also reported on activities supporting or opposing Fascism and Nazism. Newspapers carried announcements of upcoming nationalist and anti-Semitic reunions, as well as conferences on Nazi atrocities, and covered these events as well. Indeed, the "Final Solution" was no longer a secret in Mexico by the end of 1942. Participating in transnational networks of information, the local press conveyed the radicalization of anti-Semitism and Nazi genocidal policy. At the same time, newspapers and journals reflected the intense and frequent contacts and exchanges that connected Europe and Latin America; news, ideas, and projects that were discussed between governments, non-governmental agencies, and social and political actors, both Jewish and non-Jewish.

Journalists recorded transnational cultural links and acts of solidarity. For example, the press ran notices about the popular anti-Fascist screening of foreign films in Mexico organized by a governmental agency. The 15-minute workers' strike in December 1942 organized by Lombardo Toledano was also announced in the press, as were demonstrations of solidarity with the Jewish people when reports on the "Final Solution" were confirmed in that same month. The Mexican press took note as well of encounters between Jewish world leaders (such as Dr. Stephen Wise, representing the American Jewish Congress and Nahum Goldmann, President of the World Jewish Congress) and the local Jewish community. Among the issues discussed in such encounters were the War; deportation; concentration in ghettos; "physical" and "massive extermination" of Jews; aid for oppressed Jews; proposal to organize an Inter-American Jewish Conference in Mexico City; and the possibility of immigration to the region. The press also reported on links between the Jewish Inter-American Council, which represented 18 Latin

American Jewish communities, and the US Department of State. Statements by council members on local anti-Semitism and the need for patience during the integration of Jews were included. Press coverage of such forums also disseminated positive values, namely democracy and cultural pluralism.¹⁶

It is important to mention that both Presidents Lázaro Cárdenas and Manuel Ávila Camacho took measures to halt the distribution of Nazi propaganda in Mexico. Responding to repeated demands from the US embassy in Mexico, in June 1940 Cárdenas declared the press attaché of the German representation, Arthur Dietrich, to be a *persona non grata*, forcing him to leave the country. In the following year, Ávila Camacho prohibited the circulation of the Nazi newspaper *Diario de la Guerra* (Diary of the War).

Interconnections on the Individual Level: The Refugee-Victim-Survivor

To understand the particular interconnections that developed between Mexico and the Holocaust during the years of Nazism and its aftermath, it is necessary to focus on individuals. The emigrant himself/herself is a vehicle who connects geographic spaces and bridges cultures and societies. Additionally, in a context of war and destruction characterized by rumors, uncertainty, and incredulity, emigrants were reliable witnesses who communicated essential information on developments in Europe. In the face of the largely unprecedented mass violence orchestrated by the Nazis, such information provided invaluable corroboration of rumors regarding the annihilation of Jews and suggested strategies for rescue.

People who suffered through discrimination, exclusion, hunger, and illness bore within their bodies, minds, and emotions the consequences of those experiences years or even decades later. Refugees and survivors led a “normal” daily life in their new countries, but as a vast literature has shown, they carried with them trauma, loss, and pain (Segev, 2015; Cohen, 2015). Jews who immigrated to Mexico had endured very different experiences in Europe; some were sent to forced labor while others were concentrated in ghettos or deported to camps of different types; some were able to escape and find refuge in the woods, towns, and cities, while others were sometimes rescued by non-Jews. While in hiding, some had to repress or change their Jewish identity or surrender their children to other families.

Refugees and survivors brought with them to Latin America objects that represented a place of origin, original identity, or a lived experience, thus connecting two worlds. They also brought their culture, knowledge, theories, and worldviews, which affected host countries in particularly important ways. Interconnections that developed on the individual level had communal and societal impact, transcending the War, geographies of the old continent, and the attempt to destroy European Jewry.

Examining such interconnections at the individual level requires taking into consideration such qualities as agency, self-awareness, and autonomy, as well as the constraints imposed on the decision-making process of people living under a totalitarian state. Freedom of action by Jews—and many other groups of victims—was gradually curtailed under Nazism, but individuals still had choices to make about their future; whether to emigrate or wait for the improvement of conditions; whether to leave as a family or send the children abroad first, and whether to take time to amass funds for the journey by selling one’s house or business, or to leave quickly and

without resources. There was also the matter of choosing a destination, although ultimately this was determined by the availability of visas.

Those who were able to leave as well as those who failed in their attempts to emigrate had to develop strategies to deal with bureaucratic requirements in order to secure a visa (exit, transit, entry) or a ticket for a ship, among other necessary documents. They interacted with families and friends (for advice and support), governmental authorities, people who provided information and services, rescue agencies, consuls, diplomatic representatives, and frequently members of the resistance or “coyotes” (fixers) who, for example, led refugees through the Pyrenees from France into Spain. Thus, they faced many dilemmas in their country of origin. Holocaust refugees and survivors in Mexico came from numerous European countries, namely, Poland (in larger numbers), Lithuania, Romania, Hungary, Greece, Germany, Austria, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Italy, Slovakia, Austro-Hungary, Belgium, and Belorussia. Some of them did not want to shed their original national identity, while for others it became important to repress their past and their group identity.

Recovering the subjective experience of refugees and survivors is a complex task. A central research tool for learning about their past is the oral testimony, which is mediated by time and affected by the changing character of memory and by later constructions of the Holocaust in the collective imaginary. The subject’s testimony is also affected by the situation in which the interview is conducted, as well as its structure. Nevertheless, it is still an essential methodological tool for accessing individual stories, which may provide a bridge between micro- and macro-historical processes of rescue, survival, and integration. Individual narratives also provide a double interconnection: spatial (between Europe and Latin America) and temporal (between the remembered past and the moment when testimony is given). The testimonies of refugees and victims/survivors reveal the types of interconnections that they experienced and remember and the significance of those interconnections for their survival not only during the Holocaust but also in its aftermath.

Oral testimonies of Holocaust survivors who came to Mexico identify various actors who contributed to their rescue, including consuls and family members. It is interesting to point out that although recent historical studies demonstrate the involvement of aid organizations in the rescue of refugees and survivors (such as the Emergency Rescue Committee, Jewish Labor Committee, and local committees like the Sociedad pro Cultura y Ayuda (Society for Culture and Aid) and the Liga pro Cultura Alemana (League for German Culture), the testimonies of survivors do not describe in depth, and sometimes even omit the complex web of interactions involved in their individual survival (Gleizer, 2015). This may be explained in part by the fact that those interviewed were children or adolescents during the rise of the Nazis and the outbreak of the War.

Arriving in Latin America, refugees and survivors faced a two-fold process of integration. On the one hand, they quickly found ways to connect with the local Jewish community to find a place to live and support themselves, make new friends, marry and form a new family, and find communal and religious institutions of belonging. In other instances, immigrants chose to distance themselves from the Jewish community to fully integrate into the larger society. For some, national integration was a priority and implied learning the local language, going to school, finding a job, and participating in professional activities. While many survivors led a

successful life in Mexico, others remained in poverty or faced difficulties in their daily interactions with others.

In the aftermath of the Holocaust, some survivors felt the need to talk about their experiences while others chose to repress their memories. Refugees arrived in new Latin American settings not only as immigrants but also as victims and survivors. As in other places, however, a “conspiracy of silence”—self-imposed or established by the surrounding community—prevailed, leading to numbness, isolation, or depression (Hayes, 2015; Segev, 2015; Judd, 2015).¹⁷ In Mexico only a tiny number of survivors told their story early on¹⁸ and their collective silence broke down in the 1990s when survivors were increasingly seen by the Jewish community and some sectors of Mexican society with empathy and recognized not only as victims but also as bearers of courage, resilience, and hope (Shabot, 2002).¹⁹ As part of the “musealization” of memory, their stories transcended their private lives and were placed in the public sphere.

In narratives of their arrival in Mexico, some survivors refer to very positive encounters with relatives and fellow Jews while others describe conflict. In Mexico, as in many other places, there was great solidarity between the local Jewish community and the survivors, but also tensions and not all who approached the survivors intended to help them. Some took advantage of their situation, as in the case of landowners who sought to sell worthless property to refugees whose migratory status only allowed them to settle in rural areas.

In general, however, the assistance given by local Jews to refugees and survivors was indispensable. Several refugees describe how the local Jewish community (either through a synagogue or a Jewish institution, school or organization) was an entry point into the new society and a path toward “normalization,” rebuilding, and continuity. In fact, the Jewish community established a committee to “Mexicanize” refugees (*Comité de mexicanización*) by helping them learn the Spanish language and Mexican history and traditions. But, on the other hand, some refugees and survivors recalled their difficult encounters with the local Jewish community as a result of, among other things, cultural differences and their own sense of uneasiness when trying to integrate. Thus, they decided to remain apart from or unconnected to the local community. While connections between individuals in Mexico and their birthplaces were diverse, some narratives of survivors incorporate nostalgia or idealizations of their country or community of origin.²⁰

With respect to Mexican society, we also find romanticized depictions of a welcoming, democratic, and free country in both historiographic and oral narratives (Shabot, 2002; Mam, 2003). Holocaust survivors may possess idealized memories of their arrival in Mexico because of its stark contrast with the place from which they fled, or because they feel the need to express gratitude. However, oral testimonies and memoirs also point to a series of difficulties in the new land, including differences with family members who hosted them, challenges in finding a job, or struggling to learn the language or to master a new way of life (from local cuisine to local customs). What initially appeared dissonant was gradually learned and internalized by most individuals. With the passing of time, refugees or survivors and their children went to schools, found jobs, created new friendships, and inserted themselves in professional, business, political, social, and cultural realms.

Final Reflections

Our analysis offered the image of a map crossed by multiple connections between geographical and cultural spaces, and between very different social and political actors. As a whole, it shows that Mexico, a space that could be seen as totally removed from Europe and the Jews had many and diverse links to events that took place far away from Latin America. The difficulty in systematically tracing such contacts and interactions results from their own complexity, the different levels on which they occurred, and the multiplicity of interests that was at stake.

It is worth underlining that “interconnections” refer to close contacts and frequent exchanges, and not necessarily to fruitful negotiations or positive outcomes. One of the main contributions of this article is its focus not only on the relation between Mexico and the Holocaust in terms of outcomes, but also on the initiatives and efforts launched to assist the refugees. The inclusion of initiatives and efforts allows us to take into account the large amounts of energy invested both within Mexico itself and abroad to engage the Mexican government, as well as other sectors of society, in the rescue of Jews during the Nazi period and it also accounts for a great number of connections that would otherwise be lost.

There were an infinite number of initiatives to help the refugees, including failed colonization projects, unsuccessful attempts to rescue orphaned children, plans to secure Mexican visas at any cost, proposals to import European industries owned by Jews and even the idea of creating a university with talent that had been forced into exile. Huge amounts of effort were displayed by different groups at home and abroad. In Mexico they included the local Jewish community and its diverse groups, the Mexican anti-Fascist movements and left-wing organizations, German-speaking exiles that arrived in the country and intellectuals who sympathized with Jews. Abroad, Jewish transnational organizations were part of a particularly dense institutional network and were joined by other humanitarian groups that shared the goal of rescuing Jewish individuals. All of them attempted to broaden the possibilities for refuge that Mexico offered, especially during the progressive government of Lázaro Cárdenas, which seemed to be sensitive to the victims of totalitarian dictatorships—or at least this was the impression it gave in the international forums.

In relation to our initial question, it is interesting to observe that there were both interconnected as well as separate histories of Mexico and the Holocaust. Many actors—mainly governmental—insisted that Mexico did not have to involve itself in an issue that was primarily European. However, the international scenario forced the country to articulate its policy and take part in an event of global dimensions, even though position of non-engagement prevailed. Those who argued in favor of a “separate history” insisted that the country did not have to become entangled in a European issue of no concern to Mexico and warned of the “dangers” of receiving refugees and mobilized the nationalism of that period to strengthen isolationist positions. In this connection it is important to point out that the Mexican government had a selective policy regarding refugees and included in its laws clauses prohibiting the entry of Jewish refugees into the country, which provided legal justification for separation from the crisis. Right-wing groups drew on a common core of arguments to prove that economic nationalism would be threatened by the entrance of foreign workers, while the Mexican social body would be jeopardized by “racial mixture.” Thus, in the Right’s alleged defense of the national interest, economic and ethnic arguments overlapped. On the other hand, those who advocated Mexican involvement in European events advanced humanitarian as well as pragmatic arguments, claiming that refugees

would enrich the country in many ways through their culture, knowledge, and technologies. They also maintained that immigrants fostered economic development rather than constraining it.

When looking at complex situations involving interactions between different cultures, geographies, and groups, we observe that concerns of central importance to a minority group were of marginal concern to some public officials, social sectors, organizations, intellectuals, and opinion leaders. Thus, when considering the Nazi era and the Holocaust, a distinction between pluralism and relativism is required. As Isaiah Berlin argued over 30 years ago, pluralism entails “many objective ends, ultimate values, some incompatible with others, pursued by different societies at different times, or by different groups in the same society, by entire classes, churches or races, or by a particular individual within them” (Berlin, 1991, p. 79). Nevertheless, we should be careful not to conflate pluralism and relativism, as the latter makes humans captives of history without the capacity to consider, evaluate, and judge. It is precisely this distinction that brings liberal tradition to grapple with the question of diversity (Berlin, 1983).

The Mexican example suggests some strategies for thinking about interconnectedness in other non-European contexts. First, it allows us to examine the global dimension of interconnectedness by considering Mexico’s relationship to the great powers. It is clear that given Mexico’s domestic situation and the importance of maintaining bilateral relations with the US, Mexico would have been willing to open its doors if international pressure—more specifically, pressures from the US—had been strong. Since this was not the case the Mexican government evaluated the refugee issue within the framework of domestic political considerations rather than foreign policy. Other Latin American nations acted like Mexico in this regard.

Second, the case of Mexico shows why international councils that sought to resolve the refugee crisis were paradoxically ineffective. The Latin American governments came to understand that the good intentions motivating these efforts were mainly a response to the demands of American public opinion, and that no real change in policy was expected. Thus, initially willing to shelter refugees, the Mexican government pushed back. It was precisely Mexico’s participation in international forums that allowed it to justify its indeterminate position on the Jewish exiles by arguing that it would act just as soon as an international plan to address the refugee crisis was formulated.

Furthermore, the analysis presented here illustrates how global conflicts find local expression. Such was the case with the diverse assessments within the Jewish world of strategies for rescue and plausible solutions to a critical situation. Bundism, the varieties of Zionism, and Communism converged and diverged in their visions, tactics, and alliances as they confronted the refugee crisis. Methodologically, this article has followed an interdisciplinary approach that stitches societal and communal processes together with individual stories. By using Mexico as a case study, it opens up future lines of research on the interconnectedness between the Holocaust and Latin America—or between the Holocaust and other non-European geographical spaces—that will address key themes such as rescue, survival, and integration. Thus, studies that combine historiography with oral history can be of particular value in this field. It is important to mention that while this article underscored the role of governments and political elites, non-governmental associations and community leaders, intellectuals, activists, and the press (at different levels of agency) in the rescue (or non-rescue) of persecuted Jews, the role of other actors (such as

businessmen or diplomats) and groups that had a central role in the rescue of refugees deserves further research.

Our suggested typology of separate and interconnected histories should be seen in the framework of moments of encounter between universal, national, and transnational histories, and between territories and Diaspora peoples in time and space. This article shows that while the encounter between Mexico and Jewish refugees in the 1930s and 1940s was initially conceived in terms of a stream of immigrants who would contribute to the country's development, this historic period led to outcomes that reflected great divergences.

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¹ For more on historical interconnectedness, see Snyder 2015 and Pfeffer 2015.

² Statistics for Latin America fluctuate depending on the years for which this information is available. According to statistics compiled by the US Holocaust Museum, 83,000 Jewish refugees entered Latin America between 1933 and 1940. Haim Avni states that between 1933 and 1945 the region received more than 100,000 Jewish refugees (Avni, 2000, p. 93).

³ Other authors estimate that the number of refugees entering Argentina is close to 45,000 (Avni, 2000). Argentina is followed by Brazil and Bolivia (20,000), Chile (13,000), Uruguay (10,000), Colombia (3,971), Cuba (3,450), Ecuador (3,200), Mexico (1,800), the Dominican Republic (1,150), and Paraguay (1,000) (Gleizer, 2014, pp. 23–24). Panama, Costa Rica, Peru, Haiti, Venezuela, and the other Latin American countries each admitted less than 1,000 refugees.

⁴ In spite of the great powers’ desire to include Latin America in the solution to the problem of Jewish refugees (23 of the 30 participating countries at Evian were Latin American), the invitation extended by the US at the conference already made clear that “none of the countries was expected to, nor would it be asked to, receive a greater number of immigrants than those allowed by its laws currently in force.” AHSRE, file III-1246-9-I, p. 9.

⁵ Within the Ministry of Foreign Relations itself, the vice-minister, Ramón Beteta, supported some projects of Jewish colonization while the minister, Eduardo Hay, opposed them.

⁶ Such as the Liga Anti-China y Anti-Judía (Anti-Chinese and Anti-Jewish League), Las Camisas Doradas (The Golden Shirts), and the Comité Pro Raza (Committee on Race).

⁷ HICEM was the official name of the organization formed in 1927 by merging three Jewish migration associations: HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, which continued to function independently in the US), JCA (Jewish Colonization Association), and Emigdirect (United Jewish Emigration Committee).

⁸ All Jewish sectors and institutions participated in the united campaign. See Bokser Liwerant, 1990.

⁹ Several misunderstandings developed between the communal agencies participating in this campaign (e.g., between Keren Hayesod and Keren Kayemet regarding the distribution of funds). Cf. ZCA, file S5/388, S5/473 and S53/474. See *Unzer Tribune*, Mexico, August and October, 1942.

¹⁰ Toledano was directly involved with developments in Palestine; he headed a commission sponsored by the Federación Sindical Internacional (International Union Federation) that traveled to Palestine and attempted to bring Jewish and Arab workers closer together. As an expression of solidarity with the Zionist cause, on July 15, 1946, he sent a telegram to British Prime Minister Clement Attlee to criticize the Mandate's policy toward Palestine and to request the creation of a Jewish state (Bokser, 1991).

¹¹ Simultaneously, Dr. Atl viewed Jews as exponents of global wealth whose penetration of the economy and foreign policy of the US was directly responsible for the outbreak of the two world wars.

¹² He challenged the anti-fascist stance of Cardenismo and condemned the declaration of war by Mexico, maintaining that the only option for the country and for Latin America as a whole was to remain on the sidelines during the war and wait for Germany's victory.

¹³ The Free World movement brought together political leaders and groups committed to supporting the anti-fascist and anti-Nazi struggle of 33 nations. Its main goals included the political and ideological fight against Nazism; it called on world public opinion to support democratic values.

¹⁴ In the following days, *Excelsior* reported on other anti-Jewish measures such as the elimination of Jewish businesses, the exclusion of Jews from public leisure activities, the imposition of a fine of \$44,000 as a response to the assassination of the German diplomat in Paris by a young Polish-German Jew, and compulsory payment for damages to Jewish properties.

¹⁵ The journalist Frank L. Kluckhohn wrote two articles in the *New York Times* that accused the Mexican press of participating in an anti-Semitic campaign, although these critiques need to be regarded with caution given Kluckhohn's identification with the oil companies that boycotted Mexico. Criticisms also appeared in the French press, for example *Le Populaire*.

¹⁶ This was Wise's first visit to Mexico (*Excelsior*, 8 November 1942).

¹⁷ According to Salomón Schlosser, a survivor of Auschwitz who settled in Mexico, leaders of communal institutions and Jewish schools did not want to listen to Holocaust survivors or bring them to schools because they thought it was inappropriate for children. Fear of learning details of the horrors of the Holocaust might have prevented some from listening to the stories of survivors at the time.

¹⁸ When the war ended, Dunia Wasserstrom (originally Zlata Feldblum, born in Ukraine) settled in France and wrote about her experience in Auschwitz. In Mexico, where she arrived at the end of the 1950s, she discussed her Holocaust experience in several venues. In 1975 she published her book *Never Again* (Fernández Díaz González, 2005).

¹⁹ Holocaust survivors in Mexico were the focus of efforts by the Memory and Tolerance project, which years later led to the construction of a museum in Mexico City. Around the same time, their testimonies were recorded by the Shoah Visual Foundation in collaboration with Yad Vashem Mexico.

²⁰ This may result in part from the methodology of the interviews conducted by the Shoah Visual Foundation, which start by asking survivors to describe their pre-war life as Jews and also as residents of a town, city, and country.