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CHAPTER SEVEN

ANITA BRENNER AND THE JEWISH ROOTS OF MEXICO'S POSTREVOLUTIONARY NATIONAL IDENTITY

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In the United States and Mexico the public has a confident sense of how “authentic Mexico” sounds, looks, and tastes. It is women dancing *ballet folklórico* in colorful dresses; roving *mariachi* musicians dressed in *charro* pants and wide brimmed hats; indigenous vendors offering gaily-colored handicrafts; and a cuisine borne of peasant food, with emphasis on such native ingredients as corn, *chile*, and tomato. I have shown elsewhere that this definition of *mexicanidad* did not emerge organically out of Mexico’s past, as is often presumed.¹ Instead, it took form after the Revolution as part of a transnational push to culturally integrate the nation around an ethnicized, or Indianized, collective identity. In this essay, I address how the Jewish experience became one of the prisms through which this transnational search for a Mexican national identity was refracted.

Anita Brenner, in the late 1920s, coined the term “Mexican Renaissance” to describe the cultural florescence that emerged from the revolution. Participants in this renaissance claimed that “Indian Mexico” had survived despite hundreds of years of efforts to extirpate it. Brenner likened it to “idols behind altars,” arguing that, behind a veneer of acculturation, an authentic, hidden, indigenous soul endured, and stood ready to be taken up as the basis for Mexico’s regeneration. The renaissance that Brenner described was already underway when she arrived in 1923. It was spearheaded by the likes of the nationalist anthropologist Manuel Gamio, the educator Moisés Sáenz, the intellectuals José Vasconcelos and Rafael Pérez Taylor, and the artists Diego Rivera and Gerardo Murillo. Shortly after her 1923 arrival, Brenner became a central contributor to this renaissance as she moderated how it was perceived domestically and internationally.

In 1928, Brenner summarized in her personal journal what she saw as the impetus behind this renaissance: “Revolution takes on a new meaning, for as in all times, great tragedy here gives birth to great art. The tragedy is four hundred years old, for since the conquest of Mexico by the Spaniards, it has been a land divided against itself, endlessly struggling to unite. The Indian layer, majority of the population, passively resisting European culture,

imperceptibly proving it [European culture] out of place, and surging, slowly, upward to assert itself, physically in revolution, spiritually in arts."² For Brenner and others, this repressed indigenous culture comprised the heart and soul of the real Mexico that needed to be recovered.

Scholars have noted in passing that Anita Brenner was Jewish, but they have not recognized that it was her complex relationship to her own Jewish heritage that attuned her to Mexico's denigrated indigenous traditions (what she would term "idols behind altars") and inspired her to elevate even the Indian's lowly *petate* (woven reed sleeping mat) to national prominence.³ Anita Brenner's diaries, correspondence, and publications reveal a woman who feels herself the outsider desperate to become an insider. She was born in 1905 in Aguascalientes to European Jews who had arrived in the United States in the 1880s, married in Chicago, and moved to Mexico where they became wealthy landowners. In 1916, after fleeing the violence of the revolution, the family resettled in San Antonio, Texas. She would spend most of the early part of her life caught between her dueling identities as a Mexican Bohemian, a Jewish woman, and a privileged *estadounidense* (someone of the United States).

Raised and educated in the Lone Star State after the family's flight from Aguascalientes, Anita Brenner always felt out of place in both the Jewish and the non-Jewish communities. She completed a semester of university education at Our Lady of the Lake College in San Antonio and then transferred to the University of Texas (UT) at Austin, where, she explained, she suffered the sting of anti-Semitism, yet felt alienated from the small Jewish community. After two semesters, she quit UT Austin, moved to Mexico City in 1923, and enrolled in the National University. Her protective father allowed her to go only after Joseph Weinberger of the Mexico City branch of the Jewish service organization B'nai B'rith promised to keep an eye on her. Upon Brenner's arrival, Weinberger's wife Frances Toor introduced her into the capital's Jewish community and then into Mexico's international circle of Bohemian artists, intellectuals, and political refugees.

After years of alienation, Anita Brenner was beside herself about suddenly finding herself at the center of these circles. She wrote to her childhood friend Jerry Aron about what it was like after Toor started taking her to breakfasts at Sanborn's in the Casa de los Azulejos:

[Sanborn's] is quite fashionable, particularly [at] tea-time. But at breakfast it is different. You lounge through your meal, and interesting people whom you know—or ought to know, drop along and talk—oh, books and politics and the theater and gossip—over the cigarettes and the coffee. There is Goopta, Hindu revolutionist, who teaches Sanskrit in the University and also teaches in the public schools, who is famous and intriguing and delightful. There are the Wolfs, communists, avid readers, satisfying and quite charming, particularly the lady. There are lots of others—everybody who has any sort of claim to intellectual-ism(?) is sort of loosely bound into it. Artist[s], sculptors, writers, socialists, musicians, poets—intelligenzia[sic], but not the imitation of it that we have, Jerry. They are not a bit startling. That love is free is a matter so accepted that no one ever thinks to bother

to state so. They all speak the same language, that is, all understand each other, whether they all approve or not. But not literally, for French, German, It[a]lian, English, and of course, Spanish, play around quite congenially. Of course I bask in it. And everybody nearly gives me advice, and Panchita, even if she is Mrs. Weinberg. Of course I appreciate it, all of it, and I can't help wondering why they bother about anything so un-achieved as me. But that is just it. We are quite on a level, here. No snobbishness, prejudice, of any sort—racial, monetary, apparent—As to racial, there couldn't be. There are too many of skin and flag represented.⁴

Soon Brenner was typing essays for Diego Rivera, who converted her to his pro-indigenous vision of Mexican culture, while Carleton Beals helped her enter the publishing world. In 1925, she got a job as Ernest Gruening's research assistant. She helped with his upcoming book, introduced him into Mexico's intellectual circles, and set up his interviews. By 1926, thanks in large part to the French expatriate Jean Charlot, who had become a Mexican citizen, an assistant to Rivera, and a master artist in his own right, Brenner had established herself as a major figure in the cultural scene, hosting large dinner parties whose attendees read like a who's who list. Within the cosmopolitan circle of foreign and Mexican artists and intellectuals in the capital city, Brenner for the first time felt comfortable in her own skin as a transnational Jewish intellectual woman.

Brenner was thrilled when her bohemian friends took an interest in her Jewish heritage. Embarrassed by her inability to answer their questions about Judaism, she set out to learn more about her religion and history, to study Hebrew, and to consider what it meant to her, personally, to be a Jew. After a job at a Protestant girls' school did not work out, she went to work for the B'nai B'rith, meeting Jewish refugees at the port of Veracruz, helping them with their paper work and transportation to Mexico City, settling them in Mexico City, and prolifically publishing in Jewish newspapers and news services about the plight of these refugees. This was the birth of her lifelong career as a researcher and reporter. Her accounts touted Mexico as a land open to settlement and as an ideal location for Jewish newcomers. Her own past experience of alienation from the Jewish community in the United States prompted her to take offense when Mexico's old Jewish families' rejected the flood of newcomers. She responded by trying to facilitate communication and cooperation between the established community and newcomers.⁵

Brenner also delved into the history of Jews in Mexico, passing many hours in the archives following leads about crypto-Jews persecuted in colonial New Spain. One of the first cases to catch her attention was the execution of Tomás Treviño de Sobremonte in 1649 by the Office of the Inquisition. As someone fleeing Texas anti-Semitism, she identified with the stories of these persecuted refugees. As she pieced together their stories, she also patched together an understanding of herself as a transnational Jew and relished discovering how, even in the face of persecution, the people she studied established themselves as a permanent fixture of Mexican society.

Even as she reveled in her reclaimed Jewish identity, she was pleased to no longer be stigmatized as a Jew everywhere she went, as she felt she had been in the United States. She

claimed that she felt liberated by what she described as Mexicans' "splendidly indifferent to 'Jewishness' as a class distinction." A heritage that had always seemed to her a burden now struck her as romantic: "I recovered some of the feeling of romance and glamour from them [the recent Jewish immigrants], and when genial little clumps of peddlers began filtering through Mexican streets, I became vastly and actively interested in them, and through them, in other things openly and interestingly Jewish."⁶ This newfound pride gave her a different perspective from which to view her previous experiences. She began an autobiographic manuscript titled "A Race of Princes," an excerpt from which won a prize and was published in the *The Jewish Daily Forward* in 1925. She confessed in her manuscript that, having grown up as an outsider to both Jewish and non-Jewish communities, "I had no friends. I was too proud to seek much intimacy where I felt undesired, and too queer for my own people. I got a good deal of rather dolorous ironic joy out of that phrase [my own people]."⁷ In Mexico, she at last had learned to embrace her Jewishness, even peppering her letters to Jewish friends with her recently acquired Yiddish terms.⁸

As she came to terms with herself as a Jew, she found herself drawn even more deeply into the historical archives. She became convinced that "there were many more Jews than is generally admitted in the story of the conquest and colonization of Spain's empire." Her previous interest in the narratives of persecution gave way to a fascination with how these Jews of the past struggled over whether to be or not to be Jewish in this new context, and the range of things that meant for them. She particularly delighted in the seditious idea that all "the Jews of the period were of course apparently Catholic as to their religious ideas."⁹ This, perhaps, was her first formulation of the tantalizing notion that, behind Christian altars, a group might have preserved their non-Christian faith and practices.

A historical figure with whom she developed a particular bond was the sister of Luis Carvajal. In the sixteenth century, Luis Carvajal had settled part of northern Mexico with a colony of Iberian Jews. He enjoyed great economic and political power until his enemies deposed him by exposing him to the Office of the Inquisition as a Jew. His sister Doña Guiomar, according to Brenner, was

one of the great heroines of all time, and one of the most attractive figures, humanly speaking. She is torn between two loyalties: her brother, whose views she respects, and her son (Carvajal's heir), who has become a Jewish crusader so eloquent and zealous that, as an Inquisition prisoner, he converted to Judaism a friar who had been put in his cell for the purpose of converting him. But Doña Guiomar's situation is even more complicated. She has one sone[sic] who became a monk (and his conflict is difficult indeed!). She has younger children whom she can save from physical and social suffering by the simple expedient of being a good Catholic. She has on the other hand, her own conscience, and it can be inferred, from bits and pieces of her story as it comes out in the questioning, that she has slowly and painfully been arriving at a faith (adonoi Israel, adonoi echod) on which rock she must stand, at whatever cost, and this is the teaching

she transmits to her children, who like her, behave with almost incredible courage under torture.¹⁰

Brenner felt that her own struggles over her identity paralleled that of Doña Guiomar, and she drew strength from the latter's resilient adherence to her Jewish faith despite the costs.

Brenner was fascinated also by the accusation that revolutionary leader Francisco Madero was a closet Jew. She drew strength from the thought that Madero, whom she considered "the first wedge in the heartbreaking revolution that tore Mexico from feudalism into socialism," might have struggled over how to balance his Jewishness with his Mexicanness. With her newfound sense of Jews as deeply rooted in Mexican history, and her suspicion that perhaps even the revolution itself had emerged from the ideals of a Jew, she felt that she at last could shed her sense of shame and insecurity until "after a time I strutted my hooked nose again."¹¹ Along the same vein, Brenner loved to quote Diego Rivera's claim that "Every native Mexican has Jewish blood in his veins."¹² Perhaps it was Rivera, during those early months she spent listening to his lessons on Mexican culture, that first inspired her with the notion of "idols behind altars." Her attempt to understand her Jewish heritage informed her understanding of the Mexican revolution as a rupture that lifted the mask of Spanish Catholicism to reveal Mexico's authentic indigenous face. "Idols behind altars" therefore invoked for Brenner the idea of Judaism secretly preserved despite public conversion, as well as indigenous culture hiding behind a façade of Catholicism and Spanish civilization.

Even as Anita Brenner reveled in at last uniting her dual identities as a Mexican and a Jew, she could escape neither the sting of anti-Semitism nor the presumption that her Jewishness marked her as an outsider to the Mexican nation. We see this, for example, in her relationship to the artist José Clemente Orozco. Though he would become one of Mexico's great masters, at that time, Orozco still was a relative unknown, bitterly laboring in Rivera's shadow. Brenner made it her mission to win him recognition by promoting his work in the United States. When she organized an exhibition to promote Orozco's work in New York City, her efforts received a scathing critique by W. Salisbury, published in *Art Digest*, in early 1928. His review went beyond the art to attack her directly, stating: "It is not enough to say that you do not understand art or art criticism—you do not understand the English language. Perhaps this is partly explained by the fact that the Semitic race has never done anything in art except as a result for contact with the Aryan race."¹³ As upsetting as this was to her, she felt shielded by her inclusion within Mexican circles. But Orozco knew her weakness and exploited it. Angered by her refusal to denounce Rivera, Orozco hurt her by telling anti-Semitic jokes and drawing anti-Semitic cartoons.¹⁴ Anita Brenner's response to Salisbury made clear that she knew to harden herself against people like him, but she perhaps was at a loss when humiliated from within what she treasured as her safe space, her own intimate community. She tried to make light of Orozco's insults by playing along. On one occasion she even hung one of his anti-Semitic cartoons on her apartment wall in an effort to make light of it. But, as much as she tried to play it off, it no doubt stung.

At times she sank into fits of depression over slights of this kind. On one occasion she asked her diary: "1. Why am I so often fool enough to believe that I matter to anybody?"

2. Why are we obliged to count with all the traditional 'Jew-faults.' If I like the color yellow it is avarice—if I lose a dear painted scarf it is the price I weep for—if the material a friend needed hinders my work and I am thoroughly molested it's the value of it that angers—and so forth. ¿What?"¹⁵ Anti-Semitism and the separation she felt as a Jew at times tested her relationships. One of her closest friendships, with Nahui Olin, for instance, was strained by the fact that Olin's lover was Gerardo Murillo, a father of the Mexican Renaissance, a vocal anti-Semite and a fascist.¹⁶ And Anita Brenner's desire to marry her lover Jean Charlot was thwarted by their religious difference. So frustrated was she, that she almost converted to Catholicism so as to marry him. She pondered the benefits: marriage to her lover and a sense of no longer feeling the outsider. In the end, she concluded that she could not convert because "I don't know enough about Judaism to continue into Catholicism"; that is, she was not confident that she could preserve her Jewish identity behind a façade a Catholic façade.¹⁷

A few years later, in 1929, she published her book *Idols behind Altars* as the first major account of what she coined the "Mexican Renaissance" and the clearest statement of her thinking about what she saw as Mexico's repressed authentic self. In the book, Brenner wrote that "in the span of one generation Mexico has come to herself" and has "discovered the suffering and hopes of its own people."¹⁸ Behind a Hispanic veneer, she argued, lay the uncontaminated indigenous culture that was the real Mexico. She recounts how, on the heels of the Spaniards' conquest of the Aztec empire, the monks who were zealously working to convert the indigenous population to Christianity tried to transfer natives' religious loyalties from idols to Jesus, Mary and the saints by burying native idols and planting "crosses on their graves." But instead of abandoning their idolatry, the Indians, she argued, pretended to worship the cross when, in fact, they were worshipping the idols buried beneath the foot of the cross, hidden behind it, or incorporated directly into the altar's foundation stones.¹⁹

The revolution, she argued, at last demolished the façade of Hispanic and Catholic culture. Following the lead of Manuel Gamio and other nationalist intellectuals, she contended that indigenous peoples' vernacular art offered the most sincere expression of this secreted worldview. She insisted that this repressed worldview was the true soul of nation and that it needed to serve as the foundation for the Mexico's own brand of modernity. Brenner had arrived at this interpretation by way of her recovery of her own Jewish roots. It was a declaration that both the Jewish and the indigenous experience, despite centuries of repression, were integral parts of the modern Mexican nation.

From the late 1920s through the 1940s, foreign researchers and scholars fanned out across Mexico to conduct well-funded field research. Their publications circulated widely within Mexico and internationally, and they enjoyed influence as mediators of what counted as authentically Mexican, unabashedly favoring indigenous and peasant sectors over the Hispanic urban middle class. Though these foreigners borrowed their basic narrative from their Mexican colleagues, their growing influence as promoters of this interpretation of the national culture prompted a nationalist backlash. Mexicans called for better research support from their government, and systematically erased signs of the foreign-Mexican collaboration that over the previous two decades had consecrated an ethnicized identity for the postrevolutionary nation.²⁰ They replaced these signs of collaboration with the illusion

that Mexican culture was the organic culmination of the nation's history, nurtured by nationalist intellectuals and artists as against the despoiling Gringo invader.

In the process of erasing this history of transnational collaboration, nationalists also erased Brenner's attempt to create space for Judaism within the nationalist narrative. Later in her life—after her long career as an anthropologist, art historian, reporter, tourism promoter, and defender of the rights of Jews—the Mexican government offered her the Aztec Eagle award, the highest honor offered to a foreigner. According to her daughter, Susannah Joel Glusker, Anita rejected the award on the grounds that she was a Mexican, not a foreigner.²¹ Though Brenner did not elaborate about her rejection of the award, perhaps she also was concerned that her acceptance of an honor reserved for foreigners might reinforce the presumption that the Jewish experience was separate from authentic *mexicanidad*.

As this essay has argued, Brenner's promotion of indigenous culture as the foundation for Mexico's postrevolutionary culture was born out of her own search for a Mexican Jewish identity. It is ironic therefore that though her Jewish heritage inspired Brenner to formulate her ideas about the role of indigenous culture in Mexico's renaissance, Judaism remains, even today, outside of mainstream views of what comprises authentic *mexicanidad*.

NOTES

1. Rick A. López, *Crafting Mexico: Intellectuals, Artisans, and the State after the Revolution* (Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 2010).
2. Anita Brenner, journal from 1928, quoted in Susannah Joel Glusker, *Anita Brenner: A Mind of Her Own* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 96.
3. Anita Brenner, "The Petate, A National Symbol," *Mexican Folkways* 1(1) (June–July 1925): 26–27.
4. Anita Brenner to Jerry Aron, September 24, 1923, Folder 3, box 52, series III, Anita Brenner Archives, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin.
5. Anita Brenner, "Mexico—Another Promised Land," typescript of an article for *Menorah Journal*, February 1928.
6. Quoted in Glusker, 152.
7. Quoted in Glusker, 152.
8. See, for example, correspondence between Brenner and Frances Toor, folder 4, box 71, series III, Brenner Archives.
9. Brenner, "The Carvajal Story," typescript, folder 2–5, box 1, Series I, Brenner Archives.
10. Brenner, "The Carvajal Story," typescript, folder 2–5, box 1, Series I, Brenner Archives.
11. Quoted in Glusker, 152.
12. Anita Brenner, folder 3, box 4, series I, Brenner Archives.
13. Anita Brenner to W. Salisbury, February 19, 1928, folder 3, box 52, series III; and Anita Brenner, personal diary entry Saturday, February 25, 1928, page 63, folder 3, box 121, series IV, Brenner Archives.
14. Glusker, 49–50.
15. Anita Brenner, personal diary entry, January 16, 1926, page 55, folder 5, box 120, series VI, Brenner Archives.

16. Brenner diaries, August 21, 1927; and Anna Indych-López, *Muralism without Walls: Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros in the United States, 1927–1940* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Pittsburgh Press, 2009), 47.
17. Quoted in Glusker, 126.
18. Brenner, *Idols behind Altars* (New York: Payson & Clark, 1929), 314.
19. Brenner, *Idols behind Altars*, 142–5.
20. This encounter is discussed and analyzed in my book, López, *Crafting Mexico*.
21. Glusker, 11, 17. This claim is repeated often but always by reference to Glusker and never with clarity about what year is said to have occurred. While there is no reason to doubt the claim, I have been unable to verify it with a separate, independent source.

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