

## Scholar illuminated history of Mexico

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Renowned Mexican scholar Friedrich Katz used to say that he loved Mexico because the country saved his life.

In a Spanish accent that delightfully blended English and German, Katz occasionally appeared on local Spanish-language television, commenting on the big news stories in Mexico.

Katz, a distinguished professor at the University of Chicago, tried his best to deal with the pressures of the sound bite but his answers were often too long for the hurried TV anchors. His profound knowledge of Mexico and his soft-spoken delivery seemed at odds with the to-the-point speed of TV news.

If only they had given him more time. This man knew Mexico as few others do.

Professor Katz died Saturday in Philadelphia after battling cancer for several months. He will be buried in Vienna, Austria. He was 83.

An Austrian of Jewish ancestry, Professor Katz was widely regarded as the most authoritative scholar of Mexican history on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. His 1,000-page biography *The Life and Times of Pancho Villa*, published in 1998, became an instant best seller in Mexico, a rare occurrence for a scholarly book anywhere. Celebrated Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes called it "a masterpiece of historiography." Professor Katz became an intellectual superstar in both countries.

I had the privilege of talking to Professor Katz twice. Once, in 2000, after Mexico elected Vicente Fox as president from the opposition for the first time in 71 years. Katz laid out what the election meant to the U.S. generally but also to the millions of Mexicans living in this country. His genius was to put Mexican history in a global perspective.

Professor Katz was born in Vienna and raised in Berlin until he was 6. His family then fled to Paris to escape the Nazis. His father had been involved in the resistance against Adolf Hitler. In 1938, the family fled to New York because his father ran arms to the Republican forces during the Spanish civil war.

After gaining temporary asylum in the U.S., they traveled to Mexico in 1941. The government of President Lazaro Cardenas granted asylum to people who fought for the Republican side in Spain.

Thus began Professor Katz's love affair with Mexico. He credited Mexico with saving his family, calling it his "adoptive homeland."

After completing high school in Mexico, the future scholar moved to the U.S., where he earned a B.A. at Wagner College in New York City.

Then he earned his Ph.D. at the University of Vienna in 1954. His thesis focused on the Aztec civilization.

Professor Katz's career as a teacher and scholar of Mexican history then took off. He began teaching at the University of Chicago in 1971 and went on to publish groundbreaking works of scholarship on Mexico.

At a time when immigrant bashing is once again in vogue, Professor Katz's life sets an example for all of us. He became a U.S. citizen and registered to vote in 2008 because he was compelled by what he described then as an anti-immigrant attitude in this country. He defended undocumented immigrants because, he said, they worked hard and paid taxes.

Professor Katz understood the deep and historical interdependence between Mexico and the U.S. and was able to explain their intertwined histories in a fascinating way -- more as a chronicler than as a dry academic.

Mexico repaid his love with the highest honors. Professor Katz received the Order of the Aztec Eagle in 1988.

In 2004, President Vicente Fox inaugurated the Katz Center for Mexican Studies at the University of Chicago. Perhaps the best honor is that Mexicans of all walks of life enjoy his classic book on Pancho Villa.

This scholar's legacy is his unmatched ability to bring the complex history of Mexico and its people to life, making it accessible not just for Mexicans but for the world.

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