

Historian found a home in Mexico and U. of C.

Scholar of Mexico is beloved there for award-winning biography of Pancho Villa

By Kristen Schorsch, Tribune reporter

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Friedrich Katz, a leading scholar of Mexican history who taught at the University of Chicago for nearly 40 years, had fans in unexpected places.

Even the mention of his name draws excitement from taxi drivers throughout Mexico, and many in Mexico consider Mr. Katz a national figure for his detailed books about the Mexican Revolution, including an award-winning biography of revolutionary leader Pancho Villa, said Mr. Katz's daughter, Jacqueline Ross.

One friend, who once left a biography inscribed by Mr. Katz sitting in his car, left beside it a new stereo system and fishing tackle. When he came back from lunch, he found his car burglarized. "The only thing missing was the inscribed copy of the Pancho Villa biography," Ross said.

Mexicans called Mr. Katz "goodness on two feet," relatives said.



Mr. Katz, 83, died Saturday, Oct. 16, at a hospital in Philadelphia after a 7-month battle with cancer, Ross said.

He was an only child born in Vienna, Austria. He and his parents moved to Berlin in 1930, then traveled the globe in search of a new home after fleeing Nazi Germany in 1933. Mr. Katz's

father, Leo, was a writer who had joined the resistance and published leaflets against Adolf Hitler, forcing the family to leave for Paris, relatives said.

They left Paris five years later for the United States because Mr. Katz's father was buying arms for the Republican forces in the Spanish civil war. But their stay in America was temporary, and they found refuge in Mexico City when Mr. Katz was about 13 years old, Ross said.

"He always felt that (Mexico) saved his life," Ross said. "He also loved the country — the beauty, the generosity of the people. He was fascinated by the history. He always referred to it as his adoptive homeland."

Mr. Katz's passions were anthropology and history. He received a bachelor's degree from Wagner College in N.Y. and a Ph.D. degree from the University in Vienna. Katz taught in Berlin and at the University of Texas before joining the U. of C. faculty in 1971, relatives said. He retired a few years ago but still taught classes, Ross said.

Mr. Katz and John Coatsworth, now dean of the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University, expanded a small committee on Latin American Studies at the U. of C. into a center, in partnership with the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, in 1976. The program is now one of the largest Latin American centers nationwide, Coatsworth said.

"Friedrich had a way of reading people's work — his graduate students, his colleagues — and offering the most penetrating and interesting comments," Coatsworth said. "He did so with a kind of sensitivity that's rare in any field. It made him an enormously popular teacher."

Mr. Katz's nearly 1,000-page 1998 book, "The Life and Times of Pancho Villa," won the Beveridge and Bolton book awards in Latin American history. It was hailed as a "masterpiece of contemporary historiography" by the Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes, according to the U. of C.

Mr. Katz has received several other honors for his work, including the Order of the Aztec Eagle, the highest honor Mexico bestows on foreigners. In 2004, the U. of C. founded the Katz Center for Mexican Studies. He also was made an honorary citizen of Mexico's Chihuahua state, where Pancho Villa once was governor.

The Mexican government is establishing a program in Mr. Katz's name to bring prominent visiting Mexican scholars and creative artists to lecture and teach at the U. of C., said Emilio Kouri, director of the Katz Center.

Mr. Katz also is survived by his wife, Jana; his son, Leo; and four grandchildren.

A service will be held Tuesday in Trevoise, Pa. Mr. Katz will be buried in Vienna alongside his parents.

klschorsch@tribune.com

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