

**On Friedrich Katz
(1927-2010)**

by

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Friedrich Katz was born on June 13, 1927, the only son of Austrian Communists. Katz's father, the well-known writer Leo Katz, published numerous denunciations of Adolf Hitler and Nazism. In 1933, warned by a discrete but sympathetic policeman who appeared at their apartment door shortly after Hitler became Chancellor, the Katz's fled the country just in time to avoid arrest. Friedrich Katz was only six years old when his world turned upside down for the first time.

The family's refuge in France, long enough for young Friedrich to learn another language, ended abruptly in 1938. The letter from the Interior Minister to his father, who by his time was working to support the Spanish Republic, could not have been more elegant. "Mon cher Monsieur," it began, "J'ai l'honneur de vous informer que vous êtes expulsé de la France." It concluded with a request that Leo Katz accept "mes sentiments les plus distingués."

The Katz's left quickly for New York with only tourist visas, hoping to secure permission to stay longer. They stayed long enough for Friedrich to learn English, but the United States government at that time routinely rejected requests for permanent visas for European refugees from fascism, particularly Jewish refugees. This policy reflected both

the influence of southern racists in the U.S. Congress and the traditional anti-Semitism of the U.S. consular service.

Meanwhile, Katz's father had learned that the Mexican government of President Lázaro Cárdenas was accepting European refugees, including Spanish republicans as well as anti-fascists of all kinds. To avoid possible deportation back Germany, the Katz's left the United States for Mexico. And so it was, that in 1940, at the age of 13, Friedrich Katz arrived in Mexico -- the first country from which he would never have to flee.

In Mexico, Katz attended the Liceo Franco-Mexicano. The family chose the Liceo because Friedrich was already fluent in French but had only begun to learn Spanish. The German language schools were still pro-Nazi and anti-Semitic and thus closed to him. Friedrich Katz's love of Mexico and his fascination with Mexican history and culture first developed while he was still speaking German at home and French in school and while living among European refugees preoccupied with a world war that never touched Mexico directly.

Katz graduated from the Liceo in 1945. Friends of the family in New York City helped him apply to Wagner College on Staten Island from which he graduated in only three years. He then returned to Mexico for a year of post graduate courses at the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, thus beginning his professional training as an historian. The following year, he returned to Austria -- a country he could scarcely remember -- to begin doctoral studies at the University of Vienna.

Katz received his doctorate in 1954 for a thesis, published in German in 1956 and in Spanish translation in 1967, entitled *Socio-economic relations of the Aztecs in the 15th and 16th centuries* [*Las relaciones socio-económicas de los Aztecas en los siglos XV y XVI*]. This work broke new ground by placing the available anthropological and

archeological evidence on Aztec society in an historical context. Katz asked fundamental questions about the evolution of Aztec society, questions that invited comparisons to the history of other ancient or pre-modern societies. This highly original *tour de force*, recently reissued in Mexico, was the first real history of Aztec society and is still required reading for students of pre-Colombian Mexico. Eventually, Katz's interest in comparative history led him to research the social structure and evolution of the Mayan and Incan cultures of pre-Colombian America as well. The result was Katz's monumental 1969 work entitled *Pre-Colombian Cultures*, with its provocative conclusion (among many others) that Aztec society, more than any other in the Americas, was evolving along lines comparable to the those of western Europe at the time of the Spanish conquest -- highly militarized and warlike, with a precocious development of private property in land and long distance trade, linked to conquest and subjugation of foreign lands.

In 1956, the young Dr. Katz accepted a position in the history department of the Humboldt University in East Berlin. For the next twelve years, he taught Latin American history to students whose curiosity far exceeded their knowledge of this far away region of the world. He also worked closely with a number of outstanding Latin American specialists, such as the late Manfred Kossok at Leipzig, whose work continued a long tradition scholarship on Latin America that had its roots in the nineteenth century.

For his Habilitationschrift, which he completed under the direction of the outstanding comparative historian Walter Markov, Katz began research on the Mexican Revolution, the topic that would occupy most of his time for the next five decades. Completed in 1962 and published in a small edition in the GDR in 1964, *Mexiko, Díaz und die Mexikanische Revolution* became a classic in its field. It represented the first work of historical scholarship to place the Mexican Revolution in an international

context and to document the complex struggles among the Great Powers, each of which sought to exploit Mexico's turmoil to pursue its own strategic and economic interests. Katz also worked in the German archives on the broader history of German foreign relations. In 1956, he edited an important volume of essays on *German Fascism in Latin America*, in which his own contribution, a review of the "main characteristics" of German foreign policy in Latin America from 1898 to 1941, stands today as an important and insightful synthesis.

Some years later, Katz returned to the theme of Mexico's external relations during the revolutionary era in his magisterial work, *The Secret War in Mexico: Europe, the United States, and the Mexican Revolution*, published in 1981. The chapters in *The Secret War* on German relations with Mexico are based on Katz's earlier work, but *The Secret War* broke entirely new ground. Indeed, it succeeded in transforming historical scholarship on the Mexican Revolution in three fundamental ways. First, it situated the Mexican Revolution on the world stage and showed its relation to the broad sweep (as well as the narrow intrigues) of world history in the early twentieth century. Second and no less remarkable, it showed how the internal dynamics of the Mexican Revolution affected, and were affected by external actors and the international environment. Third, Katz's work, more than that of any other historian, made the Mexican Revolution intelligible to historians of the other great social upheavals of the modern world and, in doing so, succeeded for the first time in inserting Mexico's Revolution into the global historiography of great revolutions and upheavals. Not long after publication of *The Secret War*, Katz received the Order of the Aztec Eagle, the highest honor that Mexico can bestow on a citizen of another country.

Between Katz's two works on the international dimensions of the Mexican Revolution came his second unhappy departure from Berlin. Katz accepted an invitation to return to Mexico for the academic year 1968-69 as a visiting professor of history in the Facultad de Filosofía e Letras at the National Autonomous University of Mexico. His teaching obligations turned out to be less than he had anticipated, as the student movement of 1968 kept the university on strike and closed for most of the autumn semester. Katz sympathized with the students and their allies who were demanding democratic reforms; he had already taken a similar position in support of the democratic opening in Czechoslovakia. After the suppression of the democratic movements in both places, Katz left Mexico and a year later in 1970 resigned from his position at the Humboldt University. He left East Germany for the United States, where the noted historian of Mexico Stanley Ross had arranged for him to spend a year as visiting professor at the University of Texas. While at Texas, he received and accepted an offer to join the History faculty at the University of Chicago. In 1971, Friedrich Katz moved to Chicago with his wonderful and talented wife, pediatrician Dr. Jana Katz, and their two gifted children, Leo and Jacqueline. Jana and Friedrich lived in Chicago until shortly before Friedrich's death -- longer than anywhere else.

Katz's years at the University of Chicago were extraordinarily productive. His presence was largely responsible for making Chicago the leading center for Mexican historical studies in the United States. Graduate students from all over the United States and Europe as well as Mexico and Latin America flocked to Chicago to work on their doctoral degrees under his supervision. Many have themselves become major contributors to the history and historiography of Latin America. For nearly two decades,

in fact, Chicago awarded nearly one in every ten doctorates in Latin American history earned in the United States.

Katz meanwhile continued and deepened his work on Mexico and the Mexican Revolution, though he also wrote extensively on the social and political history of the Porfirian era that preceded and the Cardenista era that followed. Katz's interest in rural social movements of all kinds surely stems in part from his discovery of Mexico in the 1940s. Arriving in the wake of the Cardenista agrarian reform, Katz found a revolution in which peasant voices persisted, almost miraculously, long after the great battles had ended. They persisted not only because Mexico's peasants refused to be silent, but because their needs had acquired, as a result of the revolution of 1910-17 (in which the peasants and popular movements themselves suffered great defeats) an extraordinary moral legitimacy throughout Mexican society. Katz's intense interest in peasant movements in Mexican history, from the pre-hispanic era to the twentieth century, is well represented in many of his writings but best summed up in three brilliantly synthetic essays he wrote for an anthology he edited of works on *Riot, Rebellion, and Revolution: Rural Social Conflict in Mexico*, published in 1988.

Though he had already developed an interest in Pancho Villa and the Villista movement before moving to Chicago, this topic became a major focus of his work after *The Secret War*. In 1998, Katz published what may be his most important and significant historical work to date: *The Life and Times of Pancho Villa*, an astonishing work that places an exhaustive research effort at the service of an extraordinarily rich and synthetic historical narrative.

I have never quite understood Friedrich Katz's pursuit of Pancho Villa. In personality and life style, Katz does not resemble either Villa or his many other pursuers

(like the fiercely ambitious U.S. General John J. “Fighting Jack” Pershing or Villa’s rivals for power in Mexico). Indeed, for every legendary exploit of Villa’s on the battlefield, Katz’s colleagues and students can cite a corresponding story of Katz’s legendary gentleness and generosity. His only resemblance to Villa, as far as I can tell, lay in the affection and loyalty he inspired in so many of his colleagues and disciples, including this one.

Perhaps Katz’s interest in this topic was sparked not only by his own experience of Mexico in the 1940s, but also, as John Womack has suggested, by Katz’s father, whose two novels were based on his own youthful observation of the suppression of peasant uprisings in Romania, an experience that propelled him into the socialist movement in Austria in 1907.

Pancho Villa was not exactly a peasant, of course, but his first and most loyal followers, Katz discovered, were proud descendants of military colonists -- free peasants with an extraordinary will to resist assaults on their lands and their traditions of self-government. Villa depended on them as much for moral reference as for their military skills. The tension in Villa between the moral necessity of agrarian and other popular reforms and the practical imperatives of military campaigns and stable government make him emblematic of contradictions in the Mexican Revolution as well as post-revolutionary Mexican society. Perhaps the most important discovery documented in *The Life and Times of Pancho Villa* is precisely this complexity in the character of Villa and his movement, in contrast to the legends and myths that had previously reduced Villa and his followers to mere caricatures.

Katz’s monumental work on Villa thus contained more than a biography of the man and the movement he led. It offered a new history of the Revolution itself, with a

new emphasis on the crucial roles of the North, of the transformation of the northern frontier into a border, and of the Villista forces in propelling the revolution to its victories against the ancien régime. It also offered an assessment of the historical options foreclosed by the defeat of Villa and his agrarista ally Emiliano Zapata. In the end, the triumphant Constitutionalists did back into a radical agrarian reform in the 1930s, but did so at the cost of consolidating a highly centralized single-party state. A victory by Villa and his allies, Katz suggests, would have included equally sweeping reforms in the countryside, but from the bottom up and would thus have been more likely to result in a more democratic trajectory than Mexico actually followed for the rest of the 20th century.

What links Katz's monumental work on Villa to all his other work is a vision of history that we do well to celebrate today. The Katzean vision has at least three dimensions. The first is Katz's profound commitment to democratic values in the broadest sense. Throughout his work, he champions the underdog – especially the weak, dispossessed, and abused of the countryside, not to mention the most vilified of all of Mexico's revolutionary leaders, Pancho Villa. He never insults them by trying to idealize them or their movements. Instead, he simply takes them seriously, accumulates evidence on their lives and struggles, and listens carefully when they speak through the dust of old documents. As though they have as much right to be heard, and as much to tell us, as anyone else.

The second dimension is his commitment to comparative history. It begins with his path breaking work on the Aztecs, whom he compared not only to Mayan and Inca cultures, but also to pre-modern European and Asian societies. It includes his insightful comparisons of the Mexican Revolution to the other great social revolutions of the modern era and to such earlier upheavals in Mexico as the independence wars and the

liberal revolution of the 1850s. Katz searches constantly not only to explain Mexican developments, but also to discover what made them unique, or similar, to developments in other times and places. Comparison, for Katz, is a mode of understanding history. It is what enables the historian to refine his perceptions of the causal linkages as well as the contingent possibilities that shape historical processes.

Finally, the third dimension of Katz's vision is its internationalism. Throughout Katz's work on post-conquest Mexico, and particularly his work on the twentieth century, he insisted on the importance of external forces in shaping Mexican history and on Mexico's significance in world history. Katz's work is thus constantly moving from analytical narratives of events and people to interpretive discussions of historical context and broad patterns of historical change and development. This, of course, is the mark of every truly great historian.

The creation of the Friedrich Katz Center for Mexican Studies at the University of Chicago, inaugurated by the president of Mexico in June of 2004, recognized the extraordinary influence that Katz's work has had both in Mexico and throughout the world. I was privileged to spend two happy decades there as his colleague, learning from him and from the incredibly talented students who came to study with him.

Friedrich Katz died at the age of 83 on October 16, 2010 in Philadelphia where he was being treated for cancer. He is survived by his wife, Jana, by their two children Leo Katz, a professor of law at the University of Pennsylvania, and Jacqueline Ross, a professor of law at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, and four grandchildren. The Katz family has suggested that donations in his memory be made to the Katz Center for Mexican Studies, The University of Chicago, 5848 S. University Avenue Chicago, IL 60637.

