

Friedrich Katz, by Enrique Semo

Many thanks to the Katz Center at the University of Chicago and to the Seminar on Latin America at Columbia University for the organization of this homage, and the invitation to participate in it.

Dear family and friends of our admired colleague Friedrich Katz,

Let my first words go to the Katz family with whom my kin and I had wonderful moments at different periods of our lives. Jana, this gentle and strong, bright and sensible woman, a successful pediatrician, was his long life partner. In a recent conversation she told me that she has no bad memories of Friedl, and that is a lot to say of a husband with whom she shared more than half a century. She also said that during the months of his illness he never complained or expressed any sign of fear or anxiety, which very often overwhelms many when faced with the adamant presence of death. I had the same feeling during those days we spent together in Philadelphia. We solved the problems of the world, talked about history, of our families, we even made jokes, but he never mentioned death.

To Leo, his oldest son, bearer of his grandfather's name, distinguished university professor and author, who had various relationships with his father: as a child, as a teen-ager and as a grown up man; relationships which are never simple; and showed great love and a nobility of character.

To Jackie, who had the appearance of a gentle Viennese princess since childhood, but chose to be a tough prosecutor for some years and is now a distinguished professor. Jackie always gave the love and tenderness one awaits from a daughter, and whose most recent commentary qualified him as the best of fathers.

And to his grandchildren who will miss him dearly.

To their grief I add my own and that of Margarita, my wife. I feel the sorrow that an old comrade has for the death of his best friend with whom he had shared dangers, ideas, works, and days filled with intimacy, gratefulness, agreements and disagreements, ever since our teenage years.

I will not repeat the authorized information and appraisal of the life and works of Friedrich Katz that John Coatsworth, John Womack Jr., Enrique Florescano, Cuauhtemoc Cárdenas, Peter Guardino, Brígida Von Mentz, Carlos Martínez Assad, and Mauricio Tenorio, give us in the first chapter of *Revolución y exilio en la Historia de México*, many of them new and original for me. They all contribute to complete the picture we have of Friedrich Katz.

It is not until now that I fully realize what bonded us so tightly, and now leaves such a great emptiness inside me. Katz and I were twice from that same generation of survivors that Amos Oz describes so well in his novel *A tale of love and darkness*. Ours is a friendship based on shared dramatic experiences, of the confrontation with them, and the will to mentally and physically overcome, never losing hope of a better world.

My first encounter with him was that of two refugee teenagers. He had already twice escaped death and came to Mexico having been expelled from France and the United States in 1940. I had arrived in the Santomé ship from Lisbon after being expelled from Bulgaria, and a two-year precarious stay in France. My father, my mother, and I had left Marseilles on June 1942, four months before the Germans invaded the non-occupied France, including this city. That is to say, we came out of there four months before certain death. The exiled child has a special sensitivity that constructs itself on traumatic memories of various countries and a distressing sense of insecurity that comes from the constant instability and the danger that floats in the air. We weren't like all other children. Friedrich and myself marveled at the serenity, the capability to enjoy the present day without asking questions about the future, about what may happen tomorrow of Mexican middle class kids with whom we were in contact.

How did the encounter come to be? I was a member of a Zionist-Socialist organization that exists even today; its name: the Hashomer Hatzair, "the young guard." Its purpose was to create in Israel equalitarian agricultural communes where everybody engaged in physical work and struggle for a socialist country. The young Friedl was the son of communist militants, but his mother—as Womack reminds us—in her early youth, had been a member of this organization in Austria.

Due to the fact that amongst the German refugees there were not many youngsters, his parents decided that for the time being he could participate in the Mexican Hashomer Hatzair. And that was how my friend came to a summer camp in the year of 1948, with his accordion, on which he would mainly play revolutionary songs of the Spanish civil war, *Los Cuatro Generales*, *La Quinta Brigada*, and so on, and so on. We rapidly became very close even though I was three years younger. As it frequently happens at that age, a great friendship flourished between the two of us. We shared the same passion for reading and we were both inclined to controversy. The themes were Marxism, socialism, and the destiny of the Jewish people who had recently been through the Holocaust from which both of us were survivors.

Katz was then 20 years old, and he had been brought up in the atmosphere of Mitteleuropa-Jewish Libertarian tradition to which George Lukács, Erich From, Walter Benjamin, Franz Kafka, Martin Buber and later Erick Hobsbawm, among others, belong. I was the son of a middle-class Bulgarian family in which there was some knowledge and admiration for that culture. Friedrich had been educated within a family that spoke Yiddish, and I was from a Sephardic family that spoke Judesmo (old Spanish). His father was originally from Romania and my father was from Ruse or Rustschuk (as it was called under the Ottoman Empire), a city on the Danube which looked over to Romania. On the same street a few blocks from where the Semos lived there was a Jewish family whose last name was Canetti, who did not know at the beginning of the 20th century, when my father was born, that it was sheltering a little boy who would become later a Nobel Prize in literature, Elias Canetti.

The coincidences were many and they would follow us throughout our lives. My friend was a Marxist and I was an apprentice of Marxism, mesmerized by his rich background. He was a socialist and so was I. Although different from my micro socialism, it did not exclude it, possibly because of his mother's past and perhaps because the Hashomer Hatzair was born in Vienna too. For both of us Mexico meant life and freedom after a hazardous and dangerous past. We still

hadn't recognized our particular callings, but the *Weltanschauung* that served us both as a starting point, was brewed in our similar experiences.

Each one followed his own path. I stayed in Mexico, became a citizen at the age of 21, and had my first academic and political experiences in the country. On the other hand, Friedrich's family went back to Europe and had quite a different itinerary, but destiny would reunite us again. Attracted by socialism and a strong posture against anti-Semitism, he went to the German Democratic Republic in 1956 to finish his studies and begin an academic career which he could not accomplish in his native Austria, where there was still a very strong anti-Semitic mind-set. He would remain there for 14 years.

In 1967 President Diaz Ordaz initiated a preventive witch hunt against some intellectuals of which I became a victim. It was designed to assure a peaceful environment for the Olympic Games that were to take place in 1968. After a series of hostile attacks from the police, I was confronted with the impossibility of normally continuing my academic work, and ended up leaving the country with a scholarship from the German Democratic Republic to work on my PhD.

Studying German in Leipzig I was told by Manfred Kossok that my friend from those teenage years was already a Herr Professor at the Humboldt University. I met Katz in Berlin and once again that same click from years past produced itself, but now he was married to a beautiful Viennese and had two children, with whom my family soon bonded with and started a friendship.

I have no words to express the way in which Friedl and Jana received the political exile that had arrived to an unknown country. With the passing of the days, I felt taken care of, oriented, and supported by them with unbound generosity. In my case, Katz greatly shaped my future. Initially, I planned to study at the Superior School of Political Economy. Friederich convinced me to go to the Department of History at the Humboldt University, in which he himself worked as a professor. He persuaded me that given the fact that I had been teaching for six years at the UNAM, I could lecture on Mexican and Latin American History at the same time that I did my PhD. Looking back, I now see how Katz influenced my development, for at the School of Political Economy reigned an absolute dogmatism, whereas in the group to which Katz introduced me to and which was mainly made up of Manfred Kossok and some other intellectuals, there was an ambience of openness to free thinking despite official censorship.

Once again we began an active exchange of ideas. Now the theme was the GDR and the "real existence" or the "real non-existence" of socialism. We both discovered that our train of thought had evolved according to the paradigm that in a change of times there is a calling for a vigorous change in ideas. It was a frenetic voyage of comings and goings between hard reality and the possibility of a better future. There was in the so-called socialist countries exhaustion, incapacity to change. While being confronted with the frantic rhythm of innovation in the post-war West, obviously there was a mummification of the political system.

Although a young state, the GDR looked like that first scene from the movie *El Gatopardo*, where there is a row of old men and women sitting at the church, covered with the dust of the

Sicilian summer. Even to remain alive, the Eastern countries had to move ahead, but they did not realize it, with their minds stuck in past victories. They did not understand that without democracy, socialism was impossible. 1968 changed everything. Both of us supported the struggle of the Mexican students and rejected the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia. We both came in different ways in conflict with the GDR government. He resigned and left in 1970, I did it a year later. Again we became survivors.

From very early I read and re-read all that my friend and colleague Friedrich Katz wrote, and if I tried to synthesize his personal contributions to the Mexican historiography, I would not hesitate to enumerate as the most important ones the following:

There is in him some of the best legacy of Von Ranke, the knowing of *what* and *how* things really happened. In his *opus magnum*, *The life & times of Pancho Villa*, there is a great battle to distinguish reality from myth. And Villa, before Katz's book, more than any other revolutionary, was an immense tapestry of myths, legends, and wishful thinking, only comparable to the pre-Hispanic gods and their ghastly enemies. Many times his search has to do with this relentless quest for scientific truth, submerged in a sea of myth. Katz, more than anybody else, taught us the importance of rescuing Mexican history from myth and legend, ideology and capricious interpretation. This purpose forced him to a gigantic and well-organized work of documentation. There was no source that did not deserve his attention: from all kinds of archives to art and popular culture. I am not sure he always achieved his goal but certainly he opened new paths.

As he said in one of his last interviews, Villa haunted his dreams. There was this Viennese mind trying to understand the logic and the lack of logic of a Northern Mexican bandit turned shrewd revolutionary.

But that was not enough. His courage to tackle this task included many other actors...slowly the figure of the Mexican revolutionary at the beginning of the 20th Century arises from diversity. To understand Mexico and to describe it beyond myths does not mean to ignore their immense force in Mexican culture. The necessity to demystify the myth is perhaps one of the main contributions of the works of Friedrich Katz.

True to social history, he does not look for the explanation of all of the decisive actions of the characters in the psychology of the characters themselves, but frequently underlines the significance of economical and cultural conditions that are beyond the actors' consciousness. He writes biographies within the social historical frame in all of its complexity, and this method runs throughout all his voluminous work.

In his two earlier books, *Las relaciones socioeconómicas de los aztecas en los siglos XV y XVI* and *Pre-Colombian cultures*, Katz tries and generally succeeds in showing that in spite of the qualitative differences between American Antique cultures and those of the Old World, there are enough universal traits to insert them in fruitful comparative studies. Somehow he is ahead of the new approach to Ancient American cultures and the interaction between universality and specificity of world cultures.

Another contribution to the writing and understanding of Mexican history was to rescue it from its self-imposed nationalist isolation and alienation and to place it in the world perspective by studying and analyzing the foreign interests in the Mexican Revolution or the Lázaro Cárdenas period, with his books on *The secret War in Mexico* and *El fascismo en América Latina*.

It is said that there are two kinds of relationships between an author and his books. In a first case his writings are more valuable than the man himself. This does not diminish the value of the works. In the second case, the man behind the books has a life richer in humanism, in qualities, in generosity and struggle for a better world than what his works reveal. Then there is a great man behind a great work and this is the supreme achievement of a life endeavor. This is without doubt Friedrich Katz's case. He was a man of principles, a patient tutor of hundreds of students in three countries, a tireless promoter of relations between Mexican and North American scholars, and an even better family man.

He was a modest man, with a great heart, and a sharp critical mind; a natural *charmeur* who made infinity of friends wherever he went. Maybe the essence of his personality reveals itself through the attitude of children and young people towards him. A great example is the one of my own children. Ilán, Alejandro, Alberto, and Mariana were deeply afflicted to know of his death. May this great man rest in peace, and may his work inspire new and valiant books, and may they ride through the world on horseback, as did the Centauro del Norte forever.