

FAMOUS PEOPLE IN MEXICO THAT JOSE MET PERSONALLY

Looking back on his years in Mexico, José came to realize that he had actually come face to face with many famous people there. Later he would often recollect with nostalgia some of these encounters.

It was in 1929 or 1930, when he was just six or seven, that a presidential campaign was taking place in Mexico. General Alvaro Obregon, recently recovered from having lost his right arm during a battle, was walking, swaying the stump of his arm as he strode along through the main streets of Monterrey and along the Canalon, a small branch of a little river running through the city. It was a festive occasion. Small cannons were shooting packed lumps of varicolored confetti from boats sailing along the stream, so a light coating of colored confetti covered the ground of the various streets he was passing along.

‘Our store on the corner,’ José recalled, ‘displayed for the first time special bananas that we had hooked (in bunches) for the occasion to protrude from the windows.’

‘I was just outside on the pavement. Special armed guards yelled at my father to remove the bananas, because it was improper for the presidential candidate to have to face something so undignified. My father complied.’

‘A few minutes later a stout but tall man, surrounded by bodyguards, appeared on the street. Seeing a small child standing there, he crossed over to the pavement where I stood and patted me on the head. Then he continued on his march. People with banners followed him, and I watched till they all disappeared in the distance.’

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Years later, in 1937 or 38, at the Escuela Nacional de Ciencias Biologicas of the Instituto Politecnico Nacional, a small luncheon was prepared for about ten students (José among them) who had good grades and were recommended by the faculty to eat with none other than President Lazaro Cardenas. The luncheon was to take place in the main building of the school.

The President arrived with a large entourage that included several members of his family, including his now-famous son Cuauhtemoc, then a small child, but later to become head of PRD, Mexico’s center left Democratic Revolutionary Party. In 1997 Cuauhtemoc would become Mayor-Elect of Mexico City in an election that would topple the RPI, the party which by then would have ruled Mexico undefeated for seventy years. Back then, however, when José saw him, Cuauhtemoc was just a small boy.

‘We all sat down and began our lunch,’ José recalled. ‘It was actually a

rather humble meal, unpretentious considering the dignitaries present. We started with posole, a soup made from hominy grits. Then we had slices of queso de puerco (head cheese). Tortillas were passed around. Next came the large drinks of tepache (a mixture of pineapple and pineapple rind, pseudo-fermented). And finally for dessert we got caramelized flan.

‘Minor talks were held praising the Politecnico and the fact that almost twenty professors from Spain who had come over as refugees had enhanced the caliber of the school. Professor Antunes, my old high school chemistry laboratory teacher, was also there. He and his wife would later become deeply involved in the construction and design of the famous Anthropological Museum in Chapultepec Park. That day he introduced us to different groups of dignitaries. Dr. Barela, Head of the School, also made a welcoming speech.

‘Meanwhile all during the proceedings, several small children from the family of the presidential group, Cuauhtémoc included, kept scurrying around the tables in play. It was all really very informal under the circumstances.

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Another prominent figure that José knew was Efreim Kamarofsky, owner of several clinical laboratories in the city, and notable for having developed methods for stool analysis unknown before that time. In 1940, shortly before Leon Trotsky, the Russian Marxist Revolutionary hiding out in Mexico, was assassinated, Kamarofsky, an avid red extremist, was in the Zocolo. Here he ‘fell’ under a trolley car and was killed. He was largely disliked for his heavy foreign accent and the way he flamboyantly walked the streets shouting corny extremist slogans. Rumor had it that a group had pushed him, causing him to fall under the trolley.

Kamarofsky, who owned one of the biggest urine and blood labs in the city, had recently approached José, then almost seventeen and preparing to move with his family to the United States. He suggested that José remain instead in Mexico, offering him a dowry and the laboratory if he would marry his daughter. José, astonished, politely but firmly refused. It would later be his classmate Jorge Niesvizky who ended up acquiring this lab, but without the daughter.

It was around then that José began serving on a small scholarship he had won to work for the artist Diego Rivera. After two weeks Rivera kicked him out for disobeying instructions on which colors to use in a painting he was supposed to copy. It was just a few days after that Trotsky was attacked in the neighborhood of Coyoacan not far from where Rivera lived. At the time José knew only that Trotsky had been taken to the Cruz Verde (Green Cross) Emergency Hospital. He had no idea whether or not Trotsky had survived. It took several days before the authorities finally announced that Trotsky was dead.

At the studio where he had just spent those couple weeks, José would frequently see Frida Kahlo, usually from a distance. She always had her maid or nurse or someone else close by to help her walk. She would sometimes scream over at José to wash her monkeys. One of his duties (and the duty of every student working there) was to clean the monkey cages. Another duty for all of them was to bring the monkeys over to Frida or to Diego whenever it was suddenly announced that some rich American visitors were on their way to visit the studio and might be prospective buyers. In this way they could show what would appear to be the spontaneous proximity of the monkeys on the heads and shoulders of the two artists.

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Lorenzo Barcelata was a famous Mexican musician, composer of many celebrated popular songs, among them ‘Maria Elena’. Often José’s classmate and close friend Edmundo Azcarate, son of one of the city’s wealthiest and most prominent orthopedists, would treat José to a meal in a restaurant or a nightclub. On one such visit to a nightclub they actually saw Barcelata seated at a nearby table.

But even more acclaimed and venerated was Agustin Lara, composer of close to two hundred famous songs that would remain well known in Mexico (and some, like “Valencia” and “Granada”, internationally) for years afterwards. One evening in Monterrey a few years before, when José, then about twelve, was closing his father’s store for the night around 11 P.M., who should come walking in but Agustin Lara himself. He had just finished performing in a show nearby. José was amazed to see him walk into the store. A far cry from the glamorous image José had of him, Lara had the most pimply face José had ever seen.

He was thirsty, Lara told him, and he asked for fresh orange juice. He insisted that the oranges had to be sweet. José fooled him by surreptitiously adding some of the marmalade his mother had made and stored in quantity. Mixing it all well, he served the drink to the musician. It must have pleased Lara enormously, for he gave José a most generous tip before walking out.

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These memories remained with José for years to come. Ever afterwards he would reminisce from time to time about his good fortune in having had these memorable encounters.