
Roberto Haberman and the Origins of Modern Mexico's Jewish Community

Dan La Botz

Roberto Haberman had a remarkable career. A Jewish immigrant from Romania, a U.S. citizen, and a Mexican politician, he was a pharmacist, attorney, and advertising man; a radical journalist and a left-wing socialist, he became an advisor to Felipe Carrillo, the socialist governor of the Yucatan, an assistant to Luís N. Morones, the notoriously corrupt leader of the Mexican labor movement, and an intimate of Plutarco Elías Calles, the president of Mexico. Haberman was also one of the most important and influential Jews in modern Mexico.

As a member of the highest echelons of Mexico's *clase política*, Haberman put forward a scheme for Jewish colonization in Mexico at just about the time that Jewish immigration to the United States was substantially reduced by the imposition of nationality quotas. President Calles embraced the idea and invited Jews to settle in Mexico, leading to the wave of Jewish immigration which created Mexico's modern Jewish community. Surprisingly, no historian, so far as I am aware, has ever before drawn attention to Haberman's crucial role in these developments.¹

Precisely because he was involved in Mexico's revolutionary nationalist government, Haberman was scrutinized by the United States intelligence services. For more than thirty years he was under surveillance and investigation by agents of the FBI and the Military Intelligence Division (MID). Over the years the FBI accused him of virtually everything. In 1918 it suspected him "of activities favorable to the Central Empires." In 1920 the FBI said Haberman was "considered particularly dangerous and important by representatives of the State Department and the Military Intelligence Division." In 1921 an FBI agent reported that "the radicals say he is a secret service agent of the American Federation of Labor, an instrument of [Samuel] Gompers." An FBI memo of 1922 described him as "an intellectual, a Bolshevik of extreme tendencies, a charter member of the Communist Party of Mexico."

Haberman was suspected of draft evasion and investigated by the FBI during the First World War, though he had not evaded the draft and had in fact registered for it even though he was above draft age at the time of the "Great War." He was investigated for the illegal use of a railroad pass, though the truth of the matter was that he generally traveled gratis on Mexican railroads and perhaps on U.S. railroads with a pass issued by Morones. He was investigated for violation of the White Slave Traffic Act, or Mann Act, because he had crossed the border with Mexican women whom he described as his secretaries and who may have been his intimate companions, though it is highly unlikely they were prostitutes. He was investigated for possibly running a business in bogus Mexican divorces, though an investigation indicated that the divorces he had obtained were legitimate. He was not guilty of everything of which he was accused—which is not to say he was an innocent.

Whatever injustice may have been done to Haberman by the MID and FBI spying, the memoranda, letters, and reports of these two intelligence agencies have left us with an interesting if no doubt rather jaundiced record of his life.²

The Young Immigrant

In July of 1917 Robert Haberman was stopped in New Orleans and questioned about his recent trip to Mexico by FBI agent John B. Murphy. The loquacious, and perhaps anxious, Haberman told him his life story.

Haberman was born on March 22, 1882, in Jassy, Romania, and immigrated to the United States with his family.³ They sailed from Rotterdam on the S.S. *Rotterdam*, arriving in the port of New York on May 13, 1901. Haberman was nineteen years old and apparently looking for adventure, for on December 6, 1901, he enlisted in the U.S. Army Hospital Corps. The fact that he served in the Hospital Corps suggests that Haberman may already have been a socialist or a pacifist, though perhaps he simply wanted to gain experience with an eye to a career in medicine. Within a year he had risen to the rank of sergeant, the same rank he held when he was discharged in 1904.

His service in the U.S. Army entitled him to citizenship, and on January 5 or 11 of 1905 he was "naturalized by showing his army

discharge in the United States District Court" in Brooklyn. Apparently he had learned something about pharmacy while in the Hospital Corps, for when he left the service he passed the pharmacy examinations of the California State Board of Pharmacy and the New York Civil Service Commission, subsequently working as a pharmacist in both of those states.

Haberman studied law at the Brooklyn Law School, which was then part of St. Lawrence University, and received an L.L.B. degree in 1912. He then went on to New York University, where he received a law degree in 1916. Now both a pharmacist and a lawyer, he was in a position to earn a living and support a family.

Sometime in 1910 Haberman met and began to keep the company of Brundin Thorberg, a Swedish immigrant who was studying at Barnard College, from which she graduated in 1906. Haberman went to Fresno, California, in 1912 to practice law, and perhaps also to be near Brundin, who was studying at the University of California in Berkeley, where she received her M.S. degree in 1913. Returning to the East Coast, Haberman and Thorberg were married in New York on October 30, 1914. An FBI agent would later write, "*HABERMANN'S* [*sic*] wife is a biology teacher in a *New York High School*, and judging from her letters to him is a woman of more than ordinary attainments."⁴

That same year Haberman went to work for Joseph Ellner Co., Ltd., "advertising specialists," a firm often involved with left-wing causes. He apparently got the job because he had previously been on the advertising staff of the *New York Call*, a socialist newspaper. Haberman must have been quite active in the socialist movement, for not only was he associated with the *Call*, but FBI records indicate that he stood as the socialist candidate for a New York judgeship in 1916.⁵

Revolution in the Yucatan

During these years the Mexican Revolution, which had broken out in 1910, was an important issue in American politics, especially since President Woodrow Wilson had sent troops to Mexico on two occasions. The socialist movement in the United States took a great interest in the revolution, supporting its radical wing and actively opposing American intervention. One area of particular interest to American

socialists was the Yucatan, at the time a virtual colony of the International Harvester Company, producing henequen fiber which was used to make binder twine for harvesting machines.

Not surprising, Haberman, as an active socialist, was directly involved in some of these matters. When questioned by Murphy of the FBI in New Orleans in 1917,

HABERMANN [sic] explained his trip to Mexico in this way. He had a conversation in the *Civic Club* in *New York* with Modento [sic, i.e., Modesto] Roland, a *Mexican engineer* about the value of "exploiting" *Mexico*, especially *Yucatan*. The discussion developed to a point where Roland [sic] offered to arrange matters so that HABERMANN [sic] could go to the *Yucatan* at the expense of the *Hennequin* [sic] *Commission*, get data about the country, come back to the *United States* and "write up" his observations for the *Commission* for their use in inducing colonists to settle in *Yucatan*. HABERMANN [sic] accepted this offer, at the same time hoping to be able to get at least part of the *Commission's* advertising account for the *ELLNER CO*. He left *New York* on *April 19, 1917* on the *SS "Monterey"*, of the *Ward Line* without waiting to get his *American passport*, which he had applied [for] at *No. 2 Hector* [sic, i.e., Rector] *St., New York*, having only a passport issued by but not signed by the *Mexican Consul-General* at *New York*. He is now on his way back to *New York*, he states, with notes and photographs covering his trip, as well, as a number of copies of "*La Voz de Revolucion*", a *Mexican Socialist newspaper*, which he says he intends to use for reference, it being the only newspaper of any account published in the *Yucatan*.

In explaining his socialist views, "HABERMANN [sic] stated that he himself is a *Socialist* 'of a constructive type and not a destructive anarchist.' "

Haberman then went on to tell Murphy a little about his experiences in the *Yucatan*.

HABERMANN [sic] further stated that in *Yucatan* he had been on good terms with the *American Consul, O.O. Marsh*; but that he had had altercation[s] with some younger *Americans* down there about the war, in which he had accused them of being "*slackers*" for having run down to *Mexico* for the obvious purpose of escaping conscription. It is his belief that these men reported him to the *Consul* as a "*spy*" to "*get back at him.*"

There were a large number of so-called slackers in *Mexico* at the time, some of whom were simply evading military service, while others were pacifist and socialist opponents of the war. It seems odd that Haberman would have found himself involved in altercations and recrimina-

tions with the “slackers,” who would have been just his kind of people. It may have been a story Haberman fabricated in an attempt to ingratiate himself with the U.S. government and portray himself as a loyal American veteran. In any case FBI agent Murphy believed “there is nothing to indicate he is a *German agent*.”⁶

U.S. Consul Marsh certainly remembered Haberman's stay in the Yucatan, and reported it to the Office of Naval Intelligence. He also wrote to the secretary of state that Haberman was “a rather mysterious American of Roumanian origin. . . . I am inclined to believe . . . [he] is poor, sincere, and honest but disposed to place the principles of socialism over any established government including his own, the U.S.” Later Marsh changed his opinion of Haberman, describing him in another letter to the secretary of state as a “pernicious foreigner” who had become a “dangerous character.”⁷

Haberman may really have gone to the Yucatan to investigate the henequen situation and do some work for the Ellner advertising company, as he claimed, but it is likely that these activities were a cover for international solidarity work for the Socialist Party. In any case, while in the Yucatan he was swept up in the Mexican Revolution. He established contact with the revolutionary government led by socialist Felipe Carrillo Puerto, and in 1918, when Haberman returned to the Yucatan, Carrillo hired him as an advisor to help create a system of consumer and producer cooperatives for the League of Resistance, the Yucatan's peasant revolutionary army. By 1919 Haberman had been named inspector general of cooperatives and put in charge of the operation.⁸

In April of 1918 the U.S. Postal Censorship intercepted a letter from Haberman to his wife in which he told her about his activities. He had been just been to the First Socialist Workers Conference, held in Mérida, he wrote, where he spoke for the cooperatives and for a socialist normal school. At that same meeting a motion for women's suffrage was passed, as well as support for the use of general strikes, boycotts, and sabotage as measures for defense against the counter-revolution. Haberman enclosed an article for the *Call* entitled “With the Bolsheviks of Yucatan.”

In fact Haberman played an important role at the conference. He headed the commission on agricultural cooperatives, and was a member of both the commission on social well-being and the commission

to create a socialist normal school.⁹ During that period Haberman was quite involved in education in the Yucatan as a promoter of the anarchist Ferrer's theory of "rational education." José Vasconcelos, the famous Mexican philosopher and minister of education, wrote in his memoir *El Desastre* that "the Jew Haberman from the New York ghetto" had had "the staff end their meetings by shouting 'Long Live the Devil! Death to God!'"¹⁰ Vasconcelos, who came to hate Calles, Morones, and Haberman, may have fabricated the slogan "Long Live the Devil!", but "Death to God!" was certainly in keeping with the anarchist philosophy and the anticlerical sentiments of the Mexican Revolution.

Labor Agitator and Educator in Mexico City

In 1919 or 1920 Haberman left the Felipe Carrillo government in the Yucatan and went to Mexico City. The socialist journalist Carleton Beals was there at the time and remembered Haberman in his memoir *Glass Houses: Ten Years of Free Lancing*.

Roberto Haberman, looking for a place to land, found it with Morones. Having planned for some time to leave for Europe, I had turned over to Roberto the English Institute, which he ran between the hours when working at the American Drug Store as clerk and pharmacist. He wanted to get into local politics and chuck both jobs. Morones gave him his chance.

Haberman, of Rumanian Jewish origin, had been a California lawyer—I had known his brother-in-law out there—and was now married to a very handsome, tall, Swedish girl named Thorburg [*sic*]. Haberman had come to Mexico for the Hindus who wanted to start a land colony in Yucatan, then famed as a sort of Socialist Utopia. In Yucatan, he soon got on well with Felipe Carrillo and was put in charge of the co-operative stores of the Liga de Resistencia.

But when [Mexican President] Carranza menaced Carrillo's position in the state, Haberman had to get out and came up to Mexico city. Soon after the Obregon revolution he paid a call on Morones, whom previously he had considered something of a shyster, and came back a complete convert. From then on he was very intimate with Morones and soon became a prominent liaison officer between him and Gompers of the American Federation of Labor.¹¹

Luís N. Morones, formerly a leader of the electrical workers union and of the anarchist House of the World Worker, had in 1918 founded the Regional Confederation of Mexican Workers (CROM), which, with the support of Presidents Carranza, Obregon, and Calles, became a state-sponsored quasi-official labor federation. Morones also served in the government, first heading the National Munitions

Works and the army purchasing department and then as secretary of industry, commerce, and labor in several cabinets. After the presidents themselves, Morones was the most important man in Mexican politics. While spouting the rhetoric of anarcho-syndicalism, Morones used his labor union office and political positions to become immensely wealthy, and was notorious for his orgies.

In choosing to go to work for Morones, Haberman had made a momentous, opportunistic decision to break with his radical past, for throughout the early twenties Morones's "yellow" trade union federation was engaged in a frequently violent struggle with the anarchist and Communist "red" labor unions for control of the workers' movement.¹² In taking up with Mexico's new revolutionary nationalist establishment, Haberman assured himself not only of employment but also of a substantial salary and the perquisites of office, which could be lucrative. With his energy, ambition, talent, experience, knowledge of languages (Romanian, English, Spanish, and some French and German), and ties to U.S. socialist and labor circles, Haberman soon created a role for himself and became part of the inner circle of the ruling elite. He was to remain true to this political choice and loyal to the Mexican state to the end of his life.

Through his newly established connections with Morones, Haberman was appointed the head of the Foreign Language Department of the Ministry of Education, then headed by Vasconcelos. Haberman was also employed by the secretary of agriculture as a translator. In addition to his government jobs, Haberman was a director of the Institute of Social Science, as well as a professor at the National University of Mexico.

For a brief time in the 1920s Haberman played an important role in the development of public education in Mexico City. As head of the Foreign Language Department, he could also find jobs for friends and family members. Beals remembered that in 1923,

Immediate financial worries were solved for me by Roberto Haberman, at that time in charge of the language department of the public schools. He put me in charge of two English classes, one in Colonia Vallejo, a very poor district north of the city, the other in a large commercial school for girls.¹³

Haberman also found a job for his nephew Basilio Ilesco, a decision he would later regret.¹⁴

Haberman's services to Morones were politically more important

than his educational work. Morones received support for his “yellow” labor union from Samuel Gompers, the head of the American Federation of Labor. When Gompers and Morones held meetings of the Pan-American labor movement, it was Haberman who acted as the translator and go-between.

José Allen, the head of the Mexican Communist Party and also a secret agent for U.S. Military Intelligence, wrote a report on the Mexican left in 1921 in which he gave quite a subtle and insightful description of Haberman:

While Haberman is an active Socialist and sincere, [he] is not anti-American, and on the contrary is distinctly friendly with many leaders of the American Federation of Labor. He helped Morones “kid” Gompers but is too much of an opportunist to do anything against the U.S. government. Friendly relations with Haberman might be established to good advantage by proper parties and would be the most effective tactics [*sic*] to use in dealing with him.¹⁵

A connection between the U.S. government and Haberman might well have been mutually beneficial. In 1921, in his capacity as a representative of Morones and the Mexican labor movement, Haberman paid a visit to J. Edgar Hoover, at the time the number-two man of the FBI, and later its head. Haberman was taken to Hoover by E. C. Davison, the general secretary of the International Association of Machinists (IAM), one of the most important unions in the AFL. Haberman’s mission in speaking with Hoover was to obtain FBI help in suppressing the growing Communist threat to Morones’s labor organization. Hoover reported:

I gather from the statement of Mr. Davison and Haberman that Haberman was a member of the International Machinists Union [*sic*] and that one of his duties was to keep the central organization informed of radical elements within that body. He [Haberman] claims to have been directly responsible for the deportation by Obregon of some of the leading Mexican radicals. He stated that GOMPERS, MORONES and himself have been subjected for many months to vicious verbal assaults by the communists in Mexico, to which they paid little or no attention until direct evidence was obtained that these communists had voted upon a course of action for the purpose of assassinating the leading Pan-American labor leaders.¹⁶

Neither Mexican nor American Communists engaged in political assassination in the early 1920s, and it is most likely that the story of

the plot to kill Gompers and Morones was a rather sophisticated attempt by Haberman to get the U.S. government to help Morones crush the Communists, who at that particular moment were stronger than the CROM. Intrigue, espionage, provocation, and sophisticated police agency generally seem to have been Haberman's métier.

Through his association with Morones, Haberman also became intimately acquainted with Mexican presidents Alvaro Obregón and Plutarco Elías Calles. As an insider in the *clase política*, the highest level of the government, Haberman was in a position to offer advice and make suggestions on a variety of issues. In the early 1920s he made a suggestion which was to have a significant impact on Mexico's Jewish community.

The Promotion of Jewish Colonization

In late 1922, while visiting New York City, Haberman was interviewed by S. O. Dingol, a Jewish journalist. Dingol's article about him appeared in the *Texas Jewish Herald* on November 30, 1922. It said in part:

Senor Haberman is a Jew and, although an American citizen, he has been for the past six years an official of the Mexican government, having spent part of his time in the Department of Agriculture. What is more, he is greatly interested in the possibility of Jewish colonization in Mexico. The idea first occurred to him when the Russian sect of Mennonites settled in Mexico about a year ago. Senor Haberman was then active in drawing up their contract with the Mexican government, in accordance with the terms of which they received the following concessions: land, no compulsory military service even during war; official language to be one of their own selection, schools of their own; free railroad transportation for immigrants from the Mexican border to the colony; agricultural implements and other material brought from abroad for building up their colony to be admitted free of duty; railroad freight charges to be only 5 percent of the normal rates.

This gave Senor Haberman an idea that a Jewish colony in Mexico, on similar conditions, would not be a bad thing. The Jews would be free to choose their own language, Yiddish or Hebrew; they would have their own schools and might be able to secure other important concessions. . . . [Dingol discusses the climate.]

With the latest agricultural machinery and with the assistance of experts, it will be easy for every Jew to become a farmer. And should the Jews engage one half of the necessary number of experts to teach them farming, it is Senor Haberman's opinion that the Mexican Government will come to their assistance and engage the other half at its own expense.

There is no anti-Semitism to speak of in Mexico. Although it is true that the

Mexicans use the word "Judes" to denote anyone that is not straight in his dealings, nevertheless, there is nothing anti-Jewish about it. The average Mexican is of a friendly disposition and the Mexican Government is a genuine People's government.

When the idea of Jewish colonization first occurred to Senor Haberman, he took it up with General Calles, the Mexican Premier. He told him that outside of other concessions, the Mexican government would have to free the Jewish immigrants of the \$10 head tax, which Mexico charges for a visa, because \$10 for a Jewish immigrant from Europe is a very big sum of money. The Premier was very sympathetic with the ideas, and told Senor Haberman that all these things could be easily arranged. Senor Haberman is therefore convinced that if a responsible Jewish organization should apply to the Mexican government with a plan for Jewish settlement in the country, many concessions will be obtained.

Haberman advised Jews to come to Mexico and produce consumer goods, such as clothes and shoes, and household furniture. "Factories and business firms producing and dealing in these commodities stand a very good chance for success in Mexico."¹⁷

Why had Haberman made the proposal of Jewish immigration? Certainly he had not theretofore expressed much interest in his Jewish heritage, nor is it likely that his Jewish origins played much of a role in his thinking in 1922; he was, rather, giving expression to the interests of Mexico's revolutionary nationalist government. First, Mexico had lost more than 800,000 people through war, malnutrition, and starvation during the ten years after the outbreak of the revolution in 1910. Second, some industrialists and businessmen, particularly those associated with the regime of the dictator Porfirio Diaz, had fled the country. Third, during the presidencies of Wilson and Harding, that is, from 1916 through 1924, the United States was in a prolonged confrontation with Mexico that twice involved military intervention. No doubt Haberman expected that an invitation to the persecuted Jews of Europe to come settle in Mexico would enhance Mexico's reputation abroad and help to improve its position vis-à-vis the United States.

But perhaps the most important factor was the United States immigration law of 1921, which imposed quotas dramatically curtailing Jewish immigration. Haberman and Calles could expect that some of the Jews who would have gone to the United States before the passage of the law might now be willing to settle in Mexico, especially if encouraged with concessions like those he suggested. In August of 1924, Calles, then president-elect, took up Haberman's suggestion and

made a public statement inviting Jews to colonize Mexico. "I am very warmly interested in the situation of the thousands of Jewish immigrants stranded in Europe," said Calles, "and I have already been in conference with several American Jewish organizations who seek to solve the problem of the refugees."¹⁸

In response to this invitation, the Emergency Committee on Jewish Refugees, headed at the time by Louis Marshall, sent a commission consisting of Dr. Maurice B. Hexter, the executive director of the Federated Jewish Charities of Boston, and Charles E. Asais of Philadelphia to investigate the wisdom of supporting Jewish colonization in Mexico. Upon their return Dr. Hexter wrote a report with the straightforward title *The Jews in Mexico*.¹⁹ In the introduction to his report Dr. Hexter alluded to "the services of a unique personality, the humanitarian Roberto Haberman, a fellow Jew," as well as to a meeting with cabinet member Luís N. Morones. Hexter then went on to analyze the situation in Mexico and its prospects for Jewish colonists. Giving some historical background, he pointed out that because of the Catholic Inquisition, which lasted into the nineteenth century, few Jews had settled in Mexico. Hexter noted that he had been told by Dr. Sidney Ulfelder, a Mexican physician, that before the war there were not more than seventy-five Jewish families and a small number of single men in the entire country. These families had come from the United States, Austria, Germany, and Alsace-Lorraine. In addition, Hexter explained, there also arrived before the war "a rather sizeable number of Levantine Jews."

The heavy influx of Jews started in 1921. At that time and for several months, every German, French or Dutch passenger liner carried to Vera Cruz from 500 to 1000 Jewish immigrants, coming mostly from Russia, Ukraine, and from Hungary.

He quotes a "reliable and hospitable eye-witness" as saying:

it was the most miserable class of immigrants, destitute of any means of living, in health conditions defying description, in dire need of assistance, and in utmost despair, spending days and nights on the streets and squares of Vera Cruz and of Mexico City.

Many of these immigrants found their way to the border towns and the coasts. Hexter estimated that there were 8,000 Jews in Mexico

City and another 1,325 in other cities and towns. Many were peddlers, though there were also farmers, artisans, workers, and some professionals.

In his assessment of the prospects for Jews in Mexico, Hexter was completely pessimistic and strongly recommended against agricultural or urban colonization. He argued that agricultural colonization was unrealistic, given the lack of a large area of fertile country and of markets, the inadequacy of the railroads and other means of transportation, and the impossibility of competing with peon labor. As for urban employment, Hexter argued that Mexico's few cities simply could not absorb more peddlers, artisans, and mechanics. Nor was there adequate social support or philanthropic endeavors to support the Jewish immigrants who might "wend their weary way to Mexico." Finally, he rejected Haberman's argument that there was no anti-Jewish animus in Mexico, quoting some viciously anti-Semitic newspaper articles that had recently attacked the Jewish immigration proposal.

In conclusion, said Hexter,

The writer is firmly and irrevocably convinced that colonization in Mexico should not only not be encouraged but should definitely and firmly be discouraged. The writer has not met with any investigator or student of the subject of Jewish immigration to Mexico who is prepared to recommend otherwise. Even Roberto Haberman, believes such a project to be hopeless.

Despite Hexter's extremely discouraging report, and partly as a result of President Calles's invitation, between 300 and 500 Jews arrived in Mexico each month of 1924 and 1925. As one historian wrote, "It was during these years that the Mexican Jewish community began to take definite form."²⁰

In the course of his report, Hexter made—in a rather off-hand way—what seems like a really remarkable claim that might offer another explanation for the Calles invitation:

It is fairly reliably determined that the idealist [and Mexican President] Francisco I. Madero was a direct descendant of the [Levantine Jewish] migration; and it was repeatedly told to us that the present President Calles is of this same migration.

If Calles was himself Jewish, he might well have had a special personal interest in Jewish immigration.

His Personal Life in Disarray

Throughout the 1920s Haberman led quite a full life, working for two government ministries and for Morones's CROM unions in Mexico, and traveling frequently to the United States, often in the company of young women. No doubt this life style put a great deal of stress on his family life.

On November 15, 1922, Haberman passed through El Paso, Texas, on the way from Mexico City to Los Angeles. FBI agent Louie DeNette made contact with him there and during the two-hour conversation that ensued Haberman revealed the very personal reasons for his trip to the United States. Haberman told DeNette:

About June 4, 1922, while I was in New York looking after a henequen deal for the planters of Yucatan, my wife ran away from Mexico City with Basilio Iliesco, my nephew, whom I had brought to Mexico, given a good position in the Department of Education, permitted to live in my own home and treated with utmost kindness, which he repaid by ruining my home. . . . They went to Los Angeles, California. They took my little boy, aged four years.

When I returned to Mexico after completing the henequen deal, I was absolutely dumfounded. I at once instituted inquiry and after some time learned that they were in Los Angeles. I obtained a leave of absence from my Department and went to Los Angeles to recover my boy if possible. I found my wife and Iliesco in poverty, Iliesco having pawned all her clothing. I have given my wife a month to make up her mind whether to return to Mexico City or to stay with her lover. If she returns I will see that she is provided for and I will take care of the boy, but I shall never resume martial [*sic*] relations with her. As for Iliesco, he made a false affidavit when he entered the United States, to the effect that he was a Mexican citizen when, in truth, he is Roumanian. These facts have been given the American Immigration authorities at Los Angeles.²¹

Haberman was not the kind of man to remain alone for long, and on February 26, 1926, he married a Mexican woman, Esperanza Dominguez. An FBI agent who questioned her said she was unable to give an intelligent explanation of her husband's activities. But then, who could?²²

The Divorce Business

By the early 1930s the CROM labor movement was in decline, and Calles, the *Jefe Máximo* of the revolution, was being eclipsed by General Lázaro Cárdenas. Haberman was no longer at the center of the Mexican Revolution, and with the decline of his faction would be moved to the periphery. While still involved in the labor movement and the government, he now seems to have spent more of his energies

on his law practice, specializing in divorce. In 1934 he maintained an office in New York City at 66 Fifth Avenue and was listed in the phone directory as a Mexican attorney.

Another attorney engaged in litigation in Mexico, a Mr. Schuster of Schuster and Feuille, described Haberman to an FBI agent.

Haberman, he said, is a man probably 50 years of age, 5'8" in height, weighing 150-160, stocky build, gray hair and clean shaven. He possesses, no doubt considerable ability, is a good talker and a man of more or less attractive personality and is well known to people in Mexican circles.

Haberman had written a book, *The Divorce Laws of Mexico, with Appendices Including Decisions of Local Jurisdictions in the United States with respect to Foreign Decrees*, which had seen two editions. Still eager to pin something on Haberman, the FBI tried, without success, to make a case that he was selling bogus divorces.

After the abortive Calles rebellion against Cárdenas in 1935, Calles, Morones, and their associates were no longer welcome in Mexico. Haberman, being so close to Morones, must also have been forced to leave Mexico at least until 1940, and probably worked as a divorce lawyer in New York during those years. After World War II, Mexico turned in a more conservative direction, and from 1948 until his retirement, Haberman "helped to organize the social security program instituted by President Miguel Aleman Valdez."²³

At some point Haberman returned to the United States, and in 1962 he died in the Veterans Administration Hospital in Lebanon, Pennsylvania. Haberman was survived by his third wife, the former Suzanne Fike Sackett, his son Robert Jr., and a sister, Mrs. Ray Niccoll.²⁴

Haberman was typical of a generation of Eastern European Jews who were involved in socialist and nationalist revolutions around the world. They were active in labor unions, the Arbeiter Ring (Workmen's Circle), Poale Zion, anarchist groups, and the Socialist and Communist parties. Men and women of Haberman's stamp were familiar figures in Europe and the United States, but in Mexico, where Spaniards or native-born Americans usually played the role of foreign agitator, he was rather a rarity.

Yet in some ways Roberto Haberman, the Jewish, Romanian, American radical, became a loyal Mexican nationalist. The bond was forged when he seized an opportunity in a moment of desperation,

grasping the strong but dirty hand of Morones and in all the years thereafter never letting it go. Ironically, his relationship to the corrupt Morones made it possible for him to influence the course of Jewish history.

During the most active years of his life, Haberman was first a socialist and then a Mexican nationalist, and probably attached little importance to his Jewish heritage. Most likely none of his three wives were Jewish, and so, of course, neither was his son. When Haberman took an interest in Jewish colonization in the early 1920s, it was probably primarily out of Mexican nationalist motives, and only incidentally related to his own Jewish background. Yet, whatever the motives, his call for Jewish colonization led to the wave of Jewish immigration that helped to create Mexico's modern Jewish community.

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Notes

1. See Harriet Sara Lesser, "A History of the Jewish Community of Mexico City, 1912-1970" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1972); Corinne Azen Krause, "The Jews in Mexico, 1857-1930" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1970); and Silvia Seligson Berenfeld, *Los Judíos en México: Un Estudio Preliminar*, Curadernos de la Casa Chata 88 (Mexico City: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1983). All of these discuss the Calles invitation and its impact on Jewish immigration, but none of them mention Haberman's role.

2. This article is primarily based on 300 pages of material obtained from the U.S. Justice Department, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) under the Freedom of Information Act. References to these materials is as follows: FBI, date, document, page (unless the information is given in the text).

3. The following account of Haberman's life is based primarily on FBI, "Robert Haberman: Suspected German Agent," July 9, 1917, a report by John M. Murphy of the FBI's New Orleans Office. Some of this information can be confirmed from the *New York Times* obituary of March 5, 1962, as well as from other sources.

4. FBI, Report, New Orleans, Agent Murphy, July 3, 1917.

5. FBI, October 16, 1918, Plant Protection Section to W. L. Food Administration, p. 1.

6. FBI, Report, July 2, 1917.

7. These memos are cited in James C. Carey, *The Mexican Revolution in Yucatan, 1915-1924* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1984), p. 141, n. 35.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 111 and 113.

9. Antonio Bustillos Carrillo, *Yucatán al Servicio de la Patria y la Revolución* (Mexico City, 1959), p. 232.

10. José Vasconcelos, *Obras Completas* (Mexico City: Libreros Mexicanos, Unidos, S. de R.L. de C.V., 1957), p. 1297. *El Desastre* was originally published in 1938. My translation.

11. Carleton Beals, *Glass Houses: Ten Years of Free-Lancing* (New York: Lippincott, 1938), p. 71.

12. See Dan La Botz, *The Crisis of Mexican Labor* (New York: Praeger, 1988), chaps. 1 and 2.

13. Beals, *Glass Houses*, p. 117.

14. FBI, Report, November 15, 1922, El Paso, Texas, p. 6.

15. [José Allen], "Important Covering Attitude of Prominents [*sic*] Mexican Government Officials . . .," a supplement to the MID's General Intelligence Bulletin of June 11, 1921, found in Randolph Boehm, ed., *U.S. Military Intelligence Reports: Surveillance of Radicals in the United States, 1917-1941*, microfilm (University Publications of America, 1984).

16. FBI, Letter, August 2, 1921.

17. FBI, Report, December 7, 1922, pp. 1-2.

18. Cited in Maurice B. Hexter, *The Jews in Mexico* (New York: Emergency Committee on Jewish Refugees, 1926), p. 17.

19. The report was originally published in the *Jewish Social Service Quarterly*, March and June 1926, and subsequently issued as a pamphlet (see n. 18 for the full citation).

20. Solomon Kahan, "The Jewish Community in Mexico," *Contemporary Jewish Record* 3, no. 3 (May-June 1940): 254.

21. FBI, Report, November 15, 1922.

22. FBI, May 25, 1926, report, p. 1.

23. "Roberto Haberman Dead at 79; Founder of Mexican Labor Unit [*sic*]," *New York Times* March 5, 1962.

24. *Ibid.*