FINAL THOUGHTS

In order to explain Mexico’s position toward the Jewish exiles during the years of Nazism, we must tease apart the threads of a complex and tangled web of political, economic, and legal circumstances. Looking at the situation from a distance, what seems to stand out is the generalized indifference and absence of political willpower—in all sectors of the government and in most of civil society—to help a people who received little empathy due to preexisting prejudices. Widespread distrust and wariness towards foreigners in general, the geographical and cultural distance that separated Mexicans and Jews, and the automatic classification of the latter as “undesirable foreigners” constituted a great obstacle to seeing them as people in danger and often threatened by death, especially as the war progressed. Hence the difficulty of placing them in the category of refugees, legally and practically, and doubts as to their categorization as persecuted people; hence the almost total absence of humanitarian arguments in discussions of the Jewish situation, although they were heard when talking about other groups of refugees.

The Mexican state had no experience with sheltering large groups of persecuted people searching refuge, nor did it have legislation that might allow it to define the limits of its action. Thus the first regulations seemed to be on the order of precautionary measures: refusing to authorize admission, even for very small groups, with the objective of sending a clear message in the face of what they thought might turn into a veritable avalanche of refugees. In light of this fear, the government’s intention to study the matter and observe the position of other countries seemed to be the most appropriate immediate solution.

Lázaro Cárdenas’s government, the first to have to deal with the matter, responded to requests for asylum, individual and collective, as they came in. Many of the provisions that were implemented were improvised as they went along, as were many other matters, resulting in a series of events, arguments, stipulations, and interpretations that not only lacked coherence or any clear relationship with one another, but also at the time seemed to contradict one another. As we have mentioned, the internal contradictions and lack of structure were characteristic of the Mexican state in that era, still in the process of consolidation. Its inability to orchestrate a more or less articulated response was not limited to the case of the
Jewish exiles, but the latter is a vivid illustration of how the government functioned in this transitional period.

In addition to the difficulty the government authorities faced in deciding the legal status of applicants for asylum, other problems cropped up: contradictions between federal laws; the simultaneous issuing of conflicting public and confidential provisions; the dissimilar positions assumed by different government agencies involved in deciding how the country should respond to applicants for asylum; the differences that existed within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of the Interior, and Congress; and the fact that government officials (including President Cárdenas himself and Minister of the Interior Ignacio García Téllez) changed their position. These factors, in combination with the government’s claims regarding the generous refuge the country offered to politically persecuted people, created tremendous confusion for government officials, refugees, and all those involved in the process of admitting them.

As a result of this confusion, at different moments government authorities approached the refugee crisis in distinct ways, resorting to one group of provisions or another depending on their own viewpoint and position on the problem at hand. This is best exemplified in the case of the steamship Quanza. While Secretary García Téllez would not allow the refugees to disembark because of technical violations of immigration provisions, the minister in Lisbon, Juan Manuel Álvarez del Castillo, who had documented the refugees, defended their right to free passage through the country, arguing not only that it was an exceptional situation, but also that he had acted in keeping with President Cárdenas’s goodwill towards the victims of totalitarian Europe. Thus, while one official considered the passengers of the Quanza to be emigrants, the other thought of them as refugees.

The main differences within the government took place during the first years of Cárdenas’s term, when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (specifically Vice-Minister Ramón Beteta) supported a proposal to open the doors to limited, selective Jewish immigration while the Ministry of the Interior firmly opposed the measure. However, the differences did not lead to an open confrontation, and as we have seen, the Ministry of the Interior took complete control of matters related to immigration.

It is difficult to track President Cárdenas’s position. Many sources show that his personal stance was favorable to the cause of the refugees, without distinction of religion or nationality. It appears that the commitment he made in 1938 to collaborate with the Western powers in solving the conflict was sincere, as were his attempts at supporting some of