

The Origins and Early Days Written in 1982 by Henry McKenzie Johnston CB

Monday, 12 January 1942 in London was cold, the thermometer only just rising above freezing point. A little pale sunshine around noon faded into cloud and sleety snow by early evening. The war news was grim: Hong Kong had surrendered on Christmas Day, Malta was under almost continuous air bombardment, the Japanese had begun to sweep through the Netherlands East Indies and on that very day were entering Kuala Lumpur. Only in North Africa were the enemy not having it all their way, although not for long. Into the black-out and the slushy snow of that early evening stepped from a train the newly appointed Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary of the United Mexican States to the Court of St. James, Licenciado Alfonso de Rosenzweig Diaz. He must for a moment have felt very lonely. The Mexican Consul-General, Gustavo Luders de Negri, had failed to turn up to greet him, his car having broken down on the way to the station. There was no one from the Foreign Office to give him welcome. The only warmth in the cold gloom of this inadvertently chilly reception was that provided by Maria Luisa Arnold (now Fordham), at that time holding an appointment in the Ministry of Information with specific responsibility for keeping in touch with Latin American diplomatic missions — and she it was who organised a taxi to take the new Envoy to his office and residence in Belgrave Square. It was an inauspicious beginning to a new chapter in British-Mexican relations; but Rosenzweig did not allow it to dampen the enthusiasm he brought to his task, enthusiasm which was to lead so soon to the founding of the British Mexican Society. As he said to Maria Luisa in the taxi, it is far more important for a diplomat to be regretfully speeded at the end of his mission than to receive a warm welcome on arrival.

It was scarcely the ideal moment in the development of the drama of the Second World War for a country safely far from the battlefields to be making such an overt declaration of interest in our fortunes, after several years of diplomatic coolness. As most of us with any interest in Mexico well know, diplomatic relations between the two countries were broken off in 1938, following the expropriation on 18 March 1938 of foreign oil companies by President Cárdenas. The British Government, while openly accepting the general right of governments to expropriate in the public interest and on payment of adequate compensation, maintained that there was no justification for this particular expropriation, which was classed as arbitrary. But it was not that which actually caused the break in relations between the two countries. On 11 May 1938 the British Government delivered a Note which was primarily a demand for the immediate payment of the third instalment (which had been due on 1 January) of the settlement, agreed on 31 December 1935, of British claims arising out of revolutionary actions between 1910 and 1920. But in making this demand the British Government pointed out that the instalment due to the United States had been paid on time, and the Note went on to say:

"The unexplained delay in making this payment has obliged His Majesty's Government to review the position in the light of the attitude manifested by the Mexican Government towards government indebtedness generally."

The Note then rehearsed in some detail Mexico's internal and external indebtedness and finished by contending that these failures to keep up payments in themselves rendered the oil expropriations unjustified because, clearly, proper compensation would not be forthcoming. The Mexicans did not take kindly to this and in presenting their cheque for the outstanding instalment, which they handed over on 13 May, they

delivered to the British Minister in Mexico City a Note stating that they were withdrawing their Minister in London, leaving their Consul-General to take care of non-diplomatic matters. HMG immediately decided to reciprocate with similar action in Mexico, rather than risk being asked later by the Mexicans to withdraw the British envoy; and a week later the severance of diplomatic - but not consular - relations was effective.

Mexico, however, was not slow after the start of the War to decide that friendship with the nation standing up to Hitler was more important than the "disgusto" of 1938. As early as May 1940 messages were reaching the British Government that the Mexican Government wished to mend fences. Britain, however, did not at first react very positively. There were those who were anxious not to weaken the oil companies in their efforts to get better compensation by "giving away" the card of a resumption of diplomatic relations too soon: there were also fears that both Venezuela and Iran, who were then major suppliers of oil to Britain, would react badly (to the detriment of oil supplies) if they thought Britain was going to do a deal over supplies of Mexican oil which would cause their sales to drop. And, odd as it may now seem, apparently additional supplies of oil from Mexico were not at that time considered essential to the British war machine.

But early in 1941 a particularly interesting communication was received through private hands, after there had been a change of President in Mexico. It was a letter dated 7 December 1940 from one J. Slater Hansen to a certain Mr. H. G. Wells (not the author) confirming a telephone call he had made from the office of the Mexican Foreign Minister, Senor E. Ezequiel Padilla. Apparently the Foreign Minister had spoken personally to Mr. Wells to confirm that the message being conveyed by Mr. Hansen was genuine; and the key part of the message was:

"President Camacho authorises you to take whatever steps you may think advisable to re-establish normal diplomatic relations between Mexico and Great Britain. "

The immediate reaction by Foreign Office officials, recorded in a minute dated 16 January 1941, was perhaps understandable:

"How do we know that Mr. Hansen is empowered by the President to talk like this? "

But, fortunately, someone decided to recommend that the possibility of restoring diplomatic relations should be fully explored; and, in his neat hand and usual red ink, Anthony Eden minuted:

"I am glad that this matter is to be considered afresh. Even in wartime I do not like giving the Shah and Venezuela a veto on our relations with anybody. "

While a couple of weeks later 'Rab' Butler minuted:

"I have long been wishing to restore our relations with Mexico; and there is persistent pressure on the subject in the Commons. "

The British Government were not left without clear signs of Mexican feelings or indeed the desire of others to see the breach healed. For instance, the Mexican press published a statement by the Mexican Foreign Minister which included the following:

"a people which fights and suffers on behalf of human liberties, with the heroism with which England is doing this, is virtually in relations with all peoples of the world. What is lacking in our case as regards the form is amply compensated for in the spirit as a result of our international friendship. "

There was also a private approach to a British businessman in Mexico, Mr. P. A. O'Hea, by a former Mexican Foreign Minister, Licenciado Isidro Fabela, seeking to use private channels through which to bring about a resumption of formal relations: the former Republican Spanish Minister of War, Indalecio Prieto, also expressed a desire to act as intermediary for the same purpose.

The United States Government too showed in various ways that they thought the time had come to put the expropriation business behind them and get everyone concerned, if not to let all bygones be simply bygones, at least to talk to each other again in the recognised way of international diplomacy. And by the end of August 1941 the Foreign Office were informing our Embassy in Washington that "we are now prepared to consider favourably the resumption" of relations. On 29 September, Anthony Eden submitted to Buckingham Palace a paper proposing the resumption and seeking the King's reactions. On 2 October, the King's Private Secretary, Sir Alexander Hardinge, replied that "it certainly seems to the King that in all the circumstances it is the wisest policy to renew our relations with the Mexican Government" and that His Majesty was prepared to sign a submission from the Foreign Secretary for the appointment of a new British Minister to Mexico City.

And so, on 15 October 1941, three years and five months after the 1938 break, the Mexican Government received an approach from the British Consul-General in Mexico City, Mr. T. Ifor Rees, proposing the terms of an announcement (subsequently made on 22 October) of the resumption of full diplomatic relations. It read in part: "His Majesty's Government have followed with interest a series of declarations and actions by which President Camacho and the Mexican Government have shown their clear-sighted appreciation of the issues raised by the aggressive actions of the Totalitarian Powers, as well as the Mexican Government's devotion to the principles of democratic government. "

Mr. Charles (later Sir Charles) Bateman was named, a few days later, as the British Minister to go to Mexico City and Licenciado Alfonso Rosenzweig Diaz (at the time Minister in Venezuela) as the Mexican envoy to London. The Mexican press greeted the news with acclaim: "Who loves liberty cannot be other than a friend of England" was one of the more striking passages. On 21 November the British Club in Mexico City gave a dinner in honour of Rosenzweig (attended, incidentally, among others by Jaime Torres Bodet, who a few years after the war, after being successively Mexican Minister of Education and Foreign Minister, became Director-General of UNESCO). This, too, attracted considerable press notice, even getting a mention in the British press, where a leading article had already appeared in The Times on 23 October welcoming the resumption of diplomatic relations.

Bateman presented his Letters of Credence in Mexico City on 7 October 1942, accompanied by two people well known to members of the Society, John (now Sir Nicolas) Cheetham and Bob (later Sir Robert) Marett (who, to our sorrow, died in November 1981). Marett was an old Mexico hand, having worked there since 1931 before, as an employee of Shell, coming away at the time of the oil expropriation. He had returned to Mexico not long after the outbreak of war as a 'Special Agent' of the Ministry of Information to organise propaganda against the Germans, without of

course, any diplomatic status - and his work must certainly have had more than a little to do with the fact that the Mexicans, under the Presidency of Camacho, made the overtures they did to restore full diplomatic relations. It was therefore natural that he should be taken (albeit only temporarily - he moved to Washington in May 1942, again as a Ministry of Information man) onto the staff of the newly opened Legation. Cheetham had been summoned from the British Embassy in Buenos Aires.

Rosenzweig was rather quicker off the mark, presenting his Letters in London on 21 January 1942. And one imagines that he quite soon forgot the chilliness of his first arrival only nine days earlier, as the proper acts of recognition and acceptance quickly followed this formal moment. He was guest of honour at a luncheon given by the Foreign Office on 10 February and was received by Her Majesty the Queen on 12 February. On 14 February (presumably, however, with no deliberate choice of St. Valentine's Day) Anthony Eden sent a special message to the Mexican Foreign Minister welcoming the opening of a new era in British-Mexican relations. Rosenzweig showed from the start a positive attitude to British-Mexican relations, although it was not all plain sailing. Shortly after Bateman's arrival in Mexico some of the Mexican press set out on a campaign to denigrate Britain in the aftermath of the debacle in the Far East, spreading - or trying to - gloom and despondency, and levelling personal criticisms at Winston Churchill over his conduct of the war. Perhaps, however, this only served to fuel Rosenzweig's determination to bring about the creation of the non-governmental body which he hoped would play a significant role in the development of these relations, the British Mexican Society.

In setting about the task, Rosenzweig stepped somewhat outside the boundaries generally considered in London at that time as appropriate for the activities of 'friendship' societies. These societies were, of course, perfectly acceptable to the British Government; but they were expected to confine themselves generally to cultural matters and to do so with the knowledge and co-operation of the British Council. Rosenzweig's first formal approach was not to the British Council, but to the Foreign Office, in a letter dated 1 May 1942, with which he enclosed a draft of the proposed constitution of a British Mexican Society (having incidentally, the good sense to recognise that he was dealing with something bigger than simply England, which the Mexican press and even politicians tended to equate with the whole of the United Kingdom). Indeed, he had had no contact with the British Council at that time. The Foreign Office were slightly concerned at the suggestion in the draft that the proposed Society should "co-ordinate" all activities in pursuit of the principal stated aim "to make the relations of understanding and friendship between Mexico and Great Britain closer and more effective": there was a feeling that this was straying a bit into politics. The proposals as a whole, however, were acceptable to the Foreign Office, who had in fact been in touch with their development in the person of Rodney Gallop of the North American Department, who was the "desk" official particularly charged with Mexican affairs and had been on the staff of the British Legation in Mexico City in 1935. So a favourable reply was returned adding only the tactful suggestion that "encourage" would be a more appropriate word to use than "co-ordinate", a suggestion readily accepted by Rosenzweig.

The reply, however, was not despatched until 30 May; and in the interval the political situation had advanced. Despite the still desperate war situation - for example, further disasters in South-East Asia, Rommel's new offensive in the Western Desert (which led to the fall of Tobruk on 21 June) and the Americans still reeling from Japan's

attacks on them - Mexico had chosen this moment to declare war on the Axis Powers, on 28 May, following the sinking of two of her tankers by the Germans earlier in the month. It was therefore understandable if Rosenzweig had in effect decided to go ahead without a reply - and he was certainly not going to be side-tracked by any "consultation" at that stage with the British Council as was suggested by the Foreign Office. Although some might have thought the founding of the British Mexican Society almost an irrelevance compared with a declaration of war, Rosenzweig had already assembled a band of enthusiastic British supporters of his idea and to him it was as important to make it a reality then as to call on Anthony Eden on Tuesday, 2 June to communicate the declaration of war formally.

And so it was that, after a meeting held at the Mexican Legation on the late afternoon of a very hot day (the temperature rose as high as 83° Fahrenheit in London, as it did on the 40th Anniversary), the following telegram addressed to Anthony Eden was handed in for despatch at the telegraph office in Leicester Square at 8. 10 pm. on Friday, 5 June 1942:

"Inaugural meeting British Mexican Society formed to encourage closer understanding and more effective friendship between both countries begs Your Excellency convey His Majesty the King and Prime Minister Mr. Winston Churchill expression of respectful and cordial greeting. "

It was signed J. B. Trend, Chairman.

This telegram caused a little concern at the Foreign Office, for it was entirely without precedent for a Society of this kind to address greetings to the Prime Minister, let alone the King. Even the identity of the signatory was for a moment questioned, although the Private Office minuted with appropriate perspicacity "no doubt (this is) the eminently respectable Professor Trend" - as indeed it was. But a letter signed personally by Eden, dated 17 June, was later received by the Chairman. Eden "warmly" welcomed the Society "as a valuable contribution to the promotion of friendship and understanding between the two countries", asking the Chairman to accept his "sincere good wishes for the Society's success".

(Although not directly relevant to the story of the British Mexican Society, it is appropriate here to mention that while Rosenzweig was taking his initiative in London, the British in Mexico City were engaged in similar work. On 21 May 1942 a group of Mexican intellectuals at a luncheon given by Mr. George Conway - the group included Pablo Martinez del Rio, Edmundo O'Gorman, Rafael Garcia Gránados, José Joaquín Izquierdo, Federico Gomez de Orozco and Carlos Contreras - were addressed by Sir Eugene Millington-Drake, who was starting a tour of Latin America on behalf of the British Council. From this grew the plans for the foundation (in June 1943) of the Anglo-Mexican Cultural Institute, which has since grown into a huge organisation in Mexico. Although it was started by private initiative, Bateman added his support and the Mexican government welcomed the idea. Cheetham worked on people such as Alfonso Reyes, Carlos Chavez, Alfonso Caso and Diego Rivera, and Bateman held a meeting on 1 October 1942 at which draft statutes were discussed. And even though formal constitution did not come until a year after the founding of the British Mexico Society in London, those who were forming the Institute in Mexico City were active before then in such matters as selecting candidates for British Council Scholarships - 18 of them to compete for the first 6 offered in April 1943.)

The original "Aims and Regulations" of the British Mexican Society, which thus came officially into existence on 5 June 1942, included as the stated Object that "of bringing Mexico and Great Britain into relations of closer understanding and more effective

friendship" by "encouraging all activities directed to this end". Membership was to be given to "all persons of Mexican or British nationality" and to "all outstanding friends of both countries, even though of other nationalities". A special category of membership was reserved for "Founder Members": those who accepted the Organising Committee's invitation, attended the opening Meeting and signed the initial Act of the association. The original Act so signed has not been traced, and there is no list as such of those who attended the opening Meeting on 5 June 1942. But it may be safe to assume that they were in fact the following, because it is recorded that together they formed the first Administrative Committee and must therefore have been "founding" members:

Lic. Alfonso de Rosenzweig Diaz	elected Hon. President
Professor J. B. Trend (of Cambridge)	elected Chairman
Mrs. M. L. Arnold (now Mrs. Fordham)	
Mr. Maurice Arram	
Mr. Oliver Bonham-Carter	
Mr. (later Sir) Kenneth Grubb	
Mr. G. Luders de Negri (who had remained in London as Mexican Consul-General throughout the period 1938-42 and was subsequently a consistently devoted supporter of the Society until his death)	
Mr. Norman Leslie	
Mr. C. H. E. Phillips	
Mrs. Catherine Sills	
Mr. Rodney Gallop	

Mr. Leslie agreed to be Treasurer and in addition a Miss M. Roberts was appointed Acting Secretary. Pending a more formal decision at the first Annual General Meeting, the annual subscription was fixed at One Guinea (considerably more in real terms than the present subscription in devalued currency). Of these Founder Members two are still with us, 40 years on — Maria Luisa Fordham and Mrs. Sills.

The Society was ambitious as regards activities: the Aims and Regulations stated that these would be developed "making use of all the means of publicity at its disposal, such as the daily press, periodicals and radio; it will encourage the publication of books on Mexico and will organise such lectures, meetings, cultural and commemorative gatherings, exhibitions, etc, as it may deem necessary to attain its aims. As far as may be practicable in war conditions, the Society will also have its own press medium - a review in air mail edition - which will be called "El Mensajero de Londres" and which will be circulated as widely as possible, in Mexico, in Great Britain and the British Commonwealth of Nations". Alas, no copy of El Mensajero has been traced and research so far has failed to reveal the extent to which the Society was able to obtain the publicity it sought, or the period over which El Mensajero was produced. But during most of the following years up to mid-1963 the Society was publishing fairly regular bulletins of one sort or another. The first after El Mensajero was The British Mexican News, a simple four-page broadsheet of which the first issue appeared in November 1943. In those days there was severe rationing of paper, so it was surely something of a triumph for a small, non-official body such as the British Mexican Society to have been able to get supplies for this purpose. This first issue explained in an "editorial" that the newsheet had as its object "the furtherance of relations between Britain and Mexico", and that it was "the first, we believe of its kind to be published in England dealing exclusively with Mexico". In an introductory message Rosenzweig wrote:

"This new periodical will provide regular and unbiased information on relevant issues of both countries. In doing so it will take into

account the understandable difficulties which occur in the spirit of independent nations."

There was also printed a message of good wishes from the historian and writer, Philip Guedalla (then a Squadron Leader in the Royal Air Force and killed in action not long after). And it reported the presentation of "two magnificent ambulances" to the Mexican Government by the British colony in Mexico as well as the presence of three companies of Mexican troops fighting in Italy with the 5th Army and two with the 8th Army.

This publication advertised itself as appearing quarterly at a price of 3d (just over 1p in the present currency), but such regularity was not in the event achieved. There were only fourteen issues between November 1943 and February 1948 (the price rising to 6d in November 1947), when it was replaced by a free publication called Mexican Bulletin, a slightly better-quality production in a larger format, which even carried occasional photographs. This appeared monthly at first from 15 March 1948 for about a year; but there was then some difficulty in keeping it up. Even the file in the British Library has some copies missing and it has not been possible to be sure when publication finally ceased; but there were probably some 22 issues between March 1948 and February 1957, when apparently it proved no longer possible to get the voluntary help needed to keep it going. Then in 1961 the Mexican Ambassador, Señor Antonio Arméndariz, offered Embassy finance for a year to get something going again and a splendid glossy new version of British Mexican News appeared in February 1962. This, however, seems to have lasted only until July 1963, with six issues, despite the Embassy's offer in March of that year to continue their subsidy for a further year.

Information about the activities of the Society in its first few years of life is scant because there are no surviving Minutes before those of the Annual General Meeting held on 28 September 1944 and there is a gap of a year after these before regular records of Council Meetings start. At this AGM the Mexican Ambassador reported that the Society had been the first of its kind to be formed in Britain, followed by then by only the Anglo-Brazilian and Anglo-Chilean Societies. From Foreign Office files available in the Public Record Office, however, it is clear that Rosenzweig himself continued to be very active in promoting outward manifestations of good British-Mexican relations. In September 1942, for instance, the then Mrs. Arnold was in touch with the Foreign Office about his desire to hold a Reception in honour of the Foreign Secretary or even, perhaps, of the Prime Minister, at which the Heads of other Latin American diplomatic missions would be present. It was evidently felt in the Foreign Office, however, that a Reception of this kind might set a precedent which other diplomatic missions would feel bound to follow and which would, therefore, put the Foreign Secretary (and still more the Prime Minister) in the awkward position of having to agree to attend them all, for fear otherwise of giving offence. But someone in the Foreign Office minuted that Mrs. Arnold was "much approved of" and was "doing extremely useful work in helping the Latin American representatives in London to feel at home and not neglected"; and Eden on 28 September signified his readiness to attend a luncheon in his honour (which he did on 14 October).

Rosenzweig, however, did not give up. In May 1943 he expressed a wish to invite Winston Churchill to lunch or dinner to mark the second anniversary of Mexico's declaration of war. The Foreign Office sent encouraging signals to No. 10 Downing Street, but the invitation was declined. Similarly an invitation from the Mexican Government to the Prime Minister to visit Mexico was declined. The Anniversary was, however, marked by a British Mexican Society party at the Dorchester Hotel, which received mention in a Reuters news despatch. And eventually, in June 1944, just after the second anniversary of the founding of the Society, Rosenzweig achieved his aim. Earlier that year the status of his Mission had been raised from Legation to

Embassy (as, of course, had that of the British Mission in Mexico City), and as Mexican Ambassador he was able to be host, on 15 June, at a luncheon attended by the diplomatic representatives of all the other belligerent Latin American countries, at which Winston Churchill was the guest of honour. Mexico and, with reflected glory, the Society were at last properly on the diplomatic map in London.

This outline of the origins of the British Mexican Society is meant to be just that, not a history of its first 40 years of life. It may be that at some future date, possibly at the 50th Anniversary, the story will be carried forward with some details of events and activities subsequent to September 1944 (when it was recorded that during the preceding year activities had been somewhat curtailed because of flying bombs). If it is, it will no doubt, for example, describe the changes since the cost of the menu for the first dinner dance in December 1949 could be held to only 10s 6d (52p!), with the price of tickets being set at One Guinea (£1.05p). That occasion was evidently regarded as a great success: as the Minutes of the Council of 10 January 1950 record:

"owing to the difficulty of obtaining a licence, champagne had been provided and this had greatly helped towards the success of the evening".

One can understand that it would have - but it involved the Society in making a loss on the evening of £201. But if that raises some nostalgia among our older members, what about a quotation from Issue No. 7 of British Mexican News? Appearing in December 1945 it carried a reference to:

"travel facilities from this mist-covered island to sun-drenched Mexico City including an air journey of only 52 hours - lunch Monday in London and arrive in Mexico at 11 o'clock on Wednesday".

And it was reported that airmail letters to Mexico were "now arriving within 8 days". Since then there has been both progress and regression in these matters!

Issue No. 8 in February 1946 carried the following touching message from Mexican children in their sixth year at the Carlos A. Carrillo school:

"We know the children of England have suffered most grievously from anxiety, fear and danger, and yet have never lost their faith in the cause they defended, because of their confidence that the Day of Victory would come, as happily it has, with the resplendent dawn of Peace. All Mexican children, and particularly the scholars of this school, send heartfelt wishes for the increasing greatness of your Country and for joy and happiness to return soon to your hearts saddened by war. "

The message was signed by:

Homero Cancino Osorio

Ernesto Ortiz Olvera

Roberto Diaz Morán

Jose Vilchis Villaneuva

Julian Arias Garcia
Francisco Buentello R.

Ah, where are you now, you warm-hearted Mexican friends of Britain? And did you realise truly what was still being suffered? For in the same issue there was the sinister announcement, at a time when food rationing in Britain was still severe, that the Ministry of Food had approved a recipe for Mexican Hot-Pot which "makes corned beef go further". This "delectable" dish was made on a foundation of potatoes and onions, spiced with vinegar, sugar, parsley, salt and pepper. Nostalgia indeed for those of us old enough to remember; but was it fair on Mexico to give it such a name?

Our Society, after 40 years, is alive and well, and even if it does not often now call forth such resounding expressions of friendship as that from the pupils of the Carlos A. Carrillo school, it still stands for and works for the spirit behind them. And it should look forward to a particular milestone yet to come. Earlier in this brief survey there was mention of the luncheon organised by the Mexican Ambassador in London in June 1944, in honour of Winston Churchill. Shortly after this luncheon the Secretary of the Society (then Captain Holms) enquired whether, in view of his attendance, Churchill would accept honorary membership of the British Mexican Society. Not surprisingly, considering the awkward precedent this would have set, the invitation was politely declined. But we should not lose heart: it may yet be possible for the British Mexican Society to have a British Prime Minister as an honorary member. At that time, in 1944, a Foreign Office official minuted:

" . . . better to wait for some occasion as the centenary of the Society's foundation before asking one of Mr. Churchill's successors in office to become an honorary member. "

So it will be up to the Committee of the day in 2042 (only 60 more years to go!) to approach the Prime Minister then in office - always assuming the holder of the office at that time is felt to be worthy of such an honour; and as evidence of their right to do so they can refer the staff at No. 10 Downing Street to Foreign Office file AMI 2469/2469/26, to be found in the Public Record Office under reference FO 371 38349.