



## Diego, Frida, and Trotsky

By Albert Bildner

**T**he recent movie *Frida*, brought back vivid memories of my youth. I knew all three principals - Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo and Leon Trotsky.

The year was 1937. I had just graduated from Yale University. With \$200 saved from working in a grocery store owned by my father, I had bought a second-hand 1931 Packard limousine, color black. It had a roll-up window between the front and back seat; there was a voice tube for the back seat passenger to speak through to give orders to the driver; two small flower vases were on either side of the rear interior.

With two friends, I embarked on a journey starting in New York City headed for Mexico City. I had kept in touch with another Yale graduate, Bernard Wolf, then based in Mexico City who was doing translating work for the exiled Russian communist leader Leon Trotsky. I spoke Spanish fluently, having studied it in university, and Bernard had assured me of a job doing Spanish translation. I was lured by the prospect of traveling to Latin America and meeting Trotsky. The trip took four days to Laredo, Texas, plus another four days from the US border to Mexico City.

Upon arrival in Mexico City, the three of us, including Kevin Lynch who would later become a world-renowned professor in the field of urban planning, checked into a flea joint on Calle Ayuntamiento; we paid \$5.00 per day for a room with three cots. In my Packard, I drove to the house in Coyoacán (a suburb of Mexico City), owned by the artists Diego Rivera and his wife Frida Kahlo, but then occupied by Trotsky, his wife and grandson.

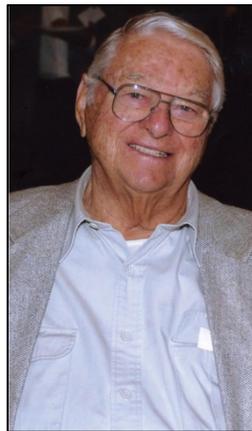
Leon Trotsky arrived in Mexico on January 9, 1937. He was ordered into exile by Stalin first to some island off the coast of Turkey, then to Norway. Due to the dictator Stalin's paranoia about the proximity of Trotsky to Moscow, the exiled former Russian leader ended up in Mexico City, as then Mexican president Lázaro Cárdenas, known for his socialist views, was the only Latin American

country willing to receive Trotsky. Diego Rivera, already internationally acclaimed as a muralist, and Frida were both communist sympathizers, so they offered Trotsky one of their homes as a refuge.

The Coyoacán house became a meeting place for the artist friends of Diego and Frida. One of the regulars was Doctor Atl, the one legged painter whose specialty was painting Mt. Popocatepetl, a mountain the amputee would climb with one leg and a crutch. Pablo O'Higgins and Alfredo Zalce were also visitors there. David Alfaro Siquieros, another famed artist friend who was known to be somewhat crazed, was already in jail for trying to kill Trotsky. Since the house was mainly a refuge for Trotsky, there were several, perhaps a dozen young people, doing translation work for the exiled Communist leader. I was given the job of reading Spanish magazines and newspapers and translating certain articles into English, or vice-versa. Trotsky was intelligent, well-read and articulate. He looked and sounded like a professor. He had a wide vocabulary, with a good command of the English language, but spoke with a heavy accent and mispronounced words. (For example, he would say "monses" when he meant "months".) One time I asked him about Stalin's statistics on the USSR's increased production of wheat, corn and other agricultural products. I will always remember Trotsky's answer to me; he said

"Everyone has a coefficient of exaggeration ... and Stalin's is about 30%." I would come to use this expression of Trotsky's many times during my business career.

I met Frida Kahlo on several occasions while working in the Coyoacán house. She and Diego would come in and out of the house. Frida typically wore the Mexican peasant blouse with a long skirt down to her ankles. She had been partially maimed in a street car accident, (where she was impaled on a metal rod), and in this way covered her leg deformity and limp. My first impression of her face revealed bushy, connected eyebrows and a mustache. She was friendly, made small talk with the young people and would have purposeful conversations with Trotsky. I did not get the impression that she was a lover of the much older Trotsky, although the movie "Frida" portrays her as such.



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My encounters with Diego Rivera were memorable. He was fat, unlike in the movie, a jovial character with a pleasant personality, and an eye for women. He loved my Packard when he first saw it and asked if I would be his chauffeur to drive him to Chapingo, some forty miles away. He was touching up the murals he had painted on the walls of the Agricultural School, where he had painted a theme of the Goddess of the Waters. I would drive him twice a week; Diego would sit in the back seat wearing a big sombrero. I would also drive Diego to the house in San Angel where he would paint portraits of women. He allowed me to watch him paint. One day I watched him paint an obese, unattractive woman whom he made appear slim and beautiful. Later, I said to him "*Diego, tu sabes que esa mujer no parece guapa y bonita como tu la pintaste.*" I will never forget his answer: "*A nosotros los artistas tambien nos gusta comer.*"

Four months later, it was time for me to return home, where I had a job waiting: to run the Big Ben, the first supermarket chain established on Long Island. I was saying my good-byes to the people at the Coyoacán house. Trotsky came downstairs in his bathrobe and asked me if I wanted a glass (not a cup) of tea. He asked me to go to the garden and pick a lemon from a tree. When I returned, he had two glasses of tea ready. I watched him sip his tea "Russian style"; with a cube of sugar between his teeth. In one of his books, Trotsky argues the basic differences he had with Stalin, who wanted the communist revolution contained in the USSR while Trotsky, who was to be Lenin's heir, challenged Stalin, believing that the revolution should have been exported to the world. Before I left, Trotsky gave me an autographed English version of his book *The Revolution Betrayed*.

When I told Frida I was going back to the United States, she asked me about some hill-billy (mountain) music, which she said she loved. She asked me to send her some hill-billy records, which I did, months later. That was the last time I saw or heard from her. In 1954, Frida Kahlo died in her bed on the top floor of the Coyoacán house; the last thing she saw was a picture on the wall of Marx, Engels and Stalin. Her wheelchair and easel were by her bedside.

In 1939, Diego and Frida had violent arguments with Trotsky on political grounds; the couple had reverted to Stalinism. Trotsky was forced to leave

the house where I had met him and moved into another a few blocks away called "Casa Azul."

In August 1940, Leon Trotsky was assassinated in Casa Azul by Jacques Mercader, a Spaniard who was brought by his mother to the USSR after the Spanish Civil War and raised as a rabid Stalinist. He was trained by the secret police to kill Trotsky. Mercader met an American woman named Silvia near Notre Dame cathedral in Paris (the meeting was set up by the Russians). The two became lovers and Silvia brought Mercader back to Mexico. She knew the Coyoacán group and vouched for Mercader to enter the inner circle of Casa Azul.

Mercader split Trotsky's skull with an alpenstock (an ice-climber's axe) which he had hid inside his raincoat. For this, he spent 25 years in a Mexican prison. Upon his release, a Czech plane picked him up and brought him to Russia where he disappeared. Trotsky's body was cremated and his ashes are buried in the courtyard under a stone that bears his name above a hammer and sickle.

The house is now a popular tourist stop. Trotsky's office where he was killed is exactly as he left it, with an old-fashioned typewriter with Russian letters.

Diego Rivera passed away in the late 50s after a bout with cancer. He had gone to Russia for an operation but died shortly after his return to Mexico. Before I left Mexico, Diego gave me three small drawings.

The world has only recently come to appreciate Frida Kahlo's great artistic talents with the rise of feminism. Details of her personal life have surfaced, particularly her life-long excruciating physical pain and the emotional suffering she endured from her famous philandering artist husband, and their camaraderie with the exiled Trotsky. Frida has since been acclaimed in international art circles as a great artist with her self-portraits surrealistically portraying her inner struggles with pain and with Diego: today, her paintings are valued in the millions of dollars.

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