

Tijuana Jews: An Interview with Isaac Artenstein

Jason Weiss

Isaac Artenstein (b. 1954, San Diego) studied painting and photography at UCLA, and film and video production at Cal Arts. He wrote and directed the feature film Break of Dawn (1990, historical drama), which premiered at Sundance and was later shown on Telemundo and the BBC. He produced the romantic comedy Love Always (1996) which aired on the Lifetime Channel, the thriller Bloody Proof (2000) for Univision, and the social satire A Day Without A Mexican (2004). Artenstein has also directed and/or produced a number of award-winning documentaries, including Diana Kennedy: Cuisines of Mexico (1981) and Ballad of an Unsung Hero (1983; about radio pioneer Pedro J. Gonzalez), as well as In the Name of the People (1985; about the civil war in El Salvador), narrated by Martin Sheen. He has taught film production and directing at the University of Southern California and the University of California at San Diego, and was a founding member of the Border Arts Workshop in San Diego. Currently, Artenstein is developing a feature film based on his 1991 play Under a Brilliant Sky, about the photographers Tina Modotti and Edward Weston. His new documentary Tijuana Jews had its premiere at the San Diego Jewish Film Festival in February 2005.

Jason Weiss edited Steve Lacy: Conversations, a book of selected interviews with the late soprano saxophonist and jazz composer, forthcoming from Duke University Press.

J.W.: Let's begin with some historical background. When did Jews first settle in Tijuana? How and when did the community start to grow?

J.W.: The first “minians” (required quorums for Jewish religious rituals) were in the home of Jack Swed, one of the community's pioneers. Swed came from Syria to New York, and at the outbreak of World War I, he was sent to Mexico by his parents along with other Syrian-Jewish youths to avoid being sent to war. From Mexico City he made his way to Tijuana in the early 1920s, during the heyday of Prohibition. It was then that Tijuana gained much of its colorful reputation: it boasted the world's longest bar (La Ballena, or The Long Bar, one city-block long) for thirsty Americans, the Agua Caliente Casino, the Caliente Race Track (featured in *Seabiscuit*), and Revolution Avenue. It was on the commercial stretch of Revolution Avenue where tourists mingled with Hollywood movie stars in bars, curio shops, and Mr. Swed's duty free shop, buying perfumes and other imports at bargain prices. The first golden age of Tijuana was clearly during Prohibition in the 1920s.

The second golden age came about with World War II and the boom it represented to the entire West Coast. As the Jewish community grew, Mr. Swed became its first president. During the 1940s a small hall was rented on Second Street to start the Maguen David Club. This was followed by the larger Hatikvah Club in the 1950s and the Centro Social Israelita of Tijuana, built in the mid-sixties and inspired by the great Jewish Sports Center of Mexico City. The Tijuana community flourished with over 150 families back then. Right now there are about 600 Jewish



Celebration, Club Hatikvah. Tijuana, 1961. From *Tijuana Jews*, directed by Isaac Artenstein. © Cinewest 2004. Photo: Courtesy of Isaac Artenstein.



Isaac Arstein, *Justo Sierra School*. Tijuana, 1958. From *Tijuana Jews*, directed by Isaac Arstein. © Cinewest 2004. Photo: Courtesy of Isaac Arstein.

families of Mexican & Latino descent in the Tijuana-San Diego border region.

J.W.: Your film, *Tijuana Jews*, covers, above all, your own childhood in the 1950s and 1960s. Besides the importance of that time for you, how does that period stand in the overall history of Jews in Tijuana?

I.A.: The 1950s and '60s represented Tijuana's third golden age, fueled by California's post-war growth in the 1950s and by the 1960s counter-culture's appetite for sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll (and leather jackets). Tijuana Jews like my father thrived along Revolution Avenue, where all the curio shops were located. The community built its first sports center and Jewish School in the 1960s, and hosted some of its most memorable parties.



*Nathan Arstein's Store, Revolution Avenue. Tijuana, 1954. From *Tijuana Jews*, directed by Isaac Arstein. © Cinewest 2004. Photo: Courtesy of Isaac Arstein.*

From its inception, Tijuana was very connected to American culture and historical realities. Everyone in my generation recalls where they were when John F. Kennedy was shot and when the Beatles went on the Ed Sullivan show. I also remember the '60s as a very special time, when my father became a boxing promoter and I began to take my first black-and-white photos and 8mm movies at the fights.

J.W.: As a filmmaker who has been active for over 25 years, why did it take you so long to make this documentary? What compelled you to begin? What obstacles complicated your project along the way?

I.A.: The border has always informed my themes and stimulated my creativity in one way or another. I guess it took me a long time to make *Tijuana Jews* because I knew it would be a very personal journey. I felt compelled to start when I heard the constant reactions of surprise in the U.S. about Jewish communities in Mexico, let alone Tijuana, whose dark legend continues to fire up the imagination with stories of free-flowing liquor, cheap narcotics, beautiful señoritas and black velvet paintings.

The other compelling reason to jump-start the production was that the first generation of Tijuana Jews, originally from Europe and the Middle East, were disappearing, and so were their stories. Helped by Strul Goldstein, Gregorio Goldstein (lifelong friends from Tijuana; Strul was associate producer on the film), and my wife and collaborator Jude Arstein, I decided to launch the project in the year 2000. Five years later, and some 50 hours of videotape later, we're about to premiere the finished one-hour documentary.

The main obstacles were really economic. *Tijuana Jews* received no support from any of the Jewish or Latino film funds. I honestly don't know the reason, since I have a pretty good track record as a filmmaker, and most people that saw the work in progress were fascinated by the subject matter. The funding came mostly from individuals, asking door-to-door, fundraising party to fundraising party.

J.W.: Have there been past attempts to tell this history?

I.A.: In the past, there were historians flying in from places like Mexico City who tried to document this community, but they never published anything of substance. Mine is the first effort to put the Tijuana Jews story on film.

J.W.: The film focuses on your own parents' lives in Tijuana along with a number of other Jews of their generation and older. Both your father and mother were born in Mexico, he of Polish ancestry and she Turkish; hence they had a mixed marriage, being of Ashkenazic and Sephardic origins respectively. Were there any particular tensions or difficulties for the Jewish community in Tijuana, where the two Jewish histories had to inevitably merge? Growing up, were you conscious of different traditions mixing together in your upbringing and that of your friends?

I.A.: It was a big deal in the 1950s for an Ashkenazi to marry a Sephardic Jew in Mexico. My parents were among the first to break that rule. My grandfather Rafael, originally from Turkey, objected to the fact that my father was Ashkenazi—and the fact that my father showed up at parties in very hip zoot suits. But it was very clear that Nathan and Sara's love for each other would conquer all, and they convinced Rafael to give his blessing—as long as the ceremony was held at the Maguen David temple (Sephardic) and the reception at the Hatikvah (Ashkenazi). Like everything in Tijuana, it was all a matter of negotiation. I still remember going to services at the Club Hatikvah in the 1960s, and having two separate rooms for prayer. I didn't know one was for Ashkenazis and the other for Sephardim—I was simply told by my mother that different groups liked to pray at different speeds, that was all. At one time the Ashkenazi Jews did separate and created their own temple, but soon the community re-joined. The truth is that the Tijuana Jewish community was too small and inter-related to afford separations that in larger communities—like Mexico City—are still in place to a certain extent.

These differences were really a non-issue with my Jewish friends growing up in Tijuana. Some of their mothers served borrechas, while others made brisket. It only made special occasions that much more interesting. Plus we had the weight of a rich and very complex Mexican culture to deal with, not to mention the U.S. to the north, and all along Revolution Avenue.

J.W.: What kind of documentation existed on the subject when you started your film? You use many interviews, but were there any particular repositories of materials available, particularly of photos and printed matter? Where did you find the period film footage?

I.A.: Most of the documentation came from family photo albums, old 8mm films, some community archives, but for the most part from direct testimonials that I videotaped during our production phase. My uncle Nathan Golden, who was the first Jewish charro (Mexican cowboy) and an owner of legendary night clubs in the 1950s, left behind a rich repository of photos and 8mm film from the era, including the time that he was president of the Tijuana Jewish Community.

Tijuana, being a tourist town, teemed with photographers with speed graphic cameras making 4 × 5 negatives of tourists at bars and nightclubs. They would shoot their photos, then rush to strategically located darkrooms downtown, and deliver the finished prints before last call. The same photographers were also hired to shoot weddings, Bar Mitzvahs, and other Jewish community celebrations. You can say that there's a rich black-and-white memory to this community.

J.W.: How did you construct a coherent history out of all these materials?

I.A.: I first attempted to let the community tell its own story, in its own words, without any commentary or narration, while illustrating it with photos, tinted post-cards and 8mm movies. I got good responses when I screened the work for friends and colleagues such as the documentary filmmaker Mark Harris and the director Paul Mazursky, but something seemed to be missing. They asked me: If I was a part of this community, why was I reticent to include my voice? Like many people, I'm not crazy about hearing my own voice played back. But I overcame that hang-up, and this resulted in a more intimate and personal telling of the Tijuana Jews story.

J.W.: Given Tijuana's cultural and geographical position since the 1920s with regard to southern California, and the concurrent rise of the movie industry, was there a particular rapport between Hollywood and the Jews of Tijuana?

I.A.: It was mostly during the 1920s and '30s that movie stars like Charlie Chaplin, Clark Gable, Jean Harlow and others would come to gamble at the Casino, bet on the horses and go shopping at Swed's Import Shop. Mrs. Shirley Swed, Jack's wife, remembers Al Jolson singing duets *a capella* with Mr. Swed at the store. Most of the contact between Hollywood and Tijuana Jews was sporadic and anecdotal. I certainly wished my ancestors had schmoozed the Hollywood crowd a little bit more

- J.W.:** The film even makes an amusing reference to Rita Hayworth in Tijuana.
- I.A.:** Shirley Swed recounts for the camera meeting Rita Hayworth when she danced flamenco with her father at the legendary Agua Caliente Casino in Tijuana. At that time, Prohibition was law in the U.S. and Hayworth's name was Rita Cansino. Jack Swed came to the defense of Rita when she was being hassled by some drunks. The Sweds became fast friends with the Cansinos, and frequent guests at the home of Rita Hayworth and her parents in Hollywood.
- J.W.:** How would you characterize the differences between Mexican and American Jews?
- I.A.:** I would say they are the differences inherent to Anglo and Latino cultures. The main one is that Mexican Jews undergo a process of acculturation, while American Jews largely experience a process of assimilation. In other words, Mexican Jews negotiate between various cultural experiences and epochs, while American Jews feel a pressure to simply Americanize. This is from my own geographic perspective encompassing Alta and Baja California—with a sprinkling of Mexico City and Brooklyn.
- J.W.:** Towards the end, the film focuses on a shift in population that gradually occurred. A number of Jewish families began to move across the border to become citizens of the United States while still maintaining business and cultural ties to Tijuana. How has this trend developed since then? How has it affected the Jewish community of Tijuana, and how has the transplanted community been affected by this change?
- I.A.:** In the 1960s, like many families in Tijuana, my parents decided to move the family across the border to Chula Vista, in San Diego County. The main reason was to get a good education for their children. This trend has definitely continued—a majority of Tijuana Jewish families now live on the American side, while their heads of household cross every day to work in Tijuana (kind of a reverse migration pattern). The Latino Jewish presence in this region has been impacted also by the arrival of Jews from Mexico City who came due to the social and economic crises in Mexico that started in the early 1980's. There's also a sprinkling of Argentinean and other South American Jews that make up part of this community in San Diego.
- The Centro Social Israelita of Tijuana is kept alive by the participation of Chabad House, which has given it a more orthodox imprimatur, while at the same time keeping the doors open for those who desire a Jewish experience in Tijuana.
- J.W.:** With respect to maintaining a certain continuity of traditions, how do the younger generations of Jews in and from Tijuana consider their

obligations? How do they engage with the culture north of the border, where some of them now live? Do you see any notable differences in a sort of Jewish self-image between those from Tijuana and American Jews from the north?

I.A.: One of the most interesting aspects of Tijuana Jews and their children on the American side is how they keep their Latino heritage alive. Many of their children, even though born in the U.S., speak Spanish fluently. At the same time, like most American youth, they're up on hip-hop culture, video games, as well as rock en español and whatever Hollywood sends down the pike. They are also one of the biggest constituencies of the yearly San Diego Latino Film Festival.

The Ken Jewish Community, founded by Mexican Jews in San Diego's South Bay, has very strong youth programs, which include summer camps as well as educational, artistic and sports activities. It reaffirms and continues to define for young people their evolving identity as Mexican Jews.