

The Mikvah

(Mexico City, Mexico, 1976)

In 1976, my wife and I went to Mexico City. I hadn't been back there since my "red light" experience in 1965, the bitterness of my stolen camera on the bus, still fresh in my recollection. While Peg was mainly interested in a tourist experience of Mexican culture, I was excited to learn about the Jewish communities in Mexico City in order to write an article.

Peg and I took the bus on the winding narrow cliff road to the mountain village of Villa Juarez. However, this was not the same small, quiet, picturesque village that I had volunteered at ten years before. Now, trucks roared through the middle of the town, destroying the state of tranquility that I had so treasured. Although Cruz Azul still existed, none of the nuns I had worked with were still there. Joe's painting – a little worse for age – still decorated the dining room hall, a fragment testifying to our one-time presence in this town.

We returned to Mexico City.

As part of my research of the Jewish communities, I visited a number of synagogues in Mexico. We attended a service at an Iranian synagogue, and were invited to a wonderful wedding the next day, a fascinating mixture of Jewish, Iranian and Mexican cultural traits sprinkled throughout the celebration.

I had been told of a very old Sephardic synagogue in Mexico City. So, one day, I set out to locate it. I found the gray stone structure and wandered around, knocking and trying to open doors in hope of finding someone to interview.

I discovered some steps that led down to a small door.

I heard voices on the other side.

I knocked on the door. No one responded.

I knocked again and again.

Suddenly, the door was yanked open.

Out flew an elderly, wrinkled old woman, in a traditional Middle Eastern dress. Shrieking, she raced at me. Bewildered, and fearful, I ran for my life. She chased me across the large lawn, waving her arms wildly and yelling harsh words.

Later, after reflected on this harrowing experience, I realized that my innocent search for someone to interview had led me to the synagogue's mikvah, the ritual monthly cleansing bath for observant woman. Never did I get that interview! But I did escape with my life.