

# BROTHERHOOD IN BOYLE HEIGHTS

*Intercultural activity of Mexican Americans with other groups in a section of Los Angeles furthers local democratic unity*

*By Frances Lym*

**B**OYLE Heights is a section of Los Angeles with a tradition handed down by "old timers" who made it widely known as a center of many different cultural groups. While it was predominantly Jewish at the beginning, a rapidly growing Mexican community has grown up in the area. People's struggles for a better life have been carried on jointly by these two groups. Today the community is changing. Many Jewish people are moving out, particularly among the younger generation. On the other hand, the Mexican community, which has always formed a part of the area, is expanding rapidly.

Of the 400,000 who live in the area known as Greater East Los Angeles (or simply, "the Eastside"), Boyle Heights holds one-quarter of them. According to the 1950 census (already outdated), minorities and minority groups form about 54 per cent of the registered population of the Eastside: 156,000 Mexicans; 55,000 Jews; 16,000 Negroes and 17,500 Asians and other groups. But in Boyle Heights itself, which forms the 40th Assembly District, these minorities and minority groups form about 87 per cent of the registered population.

Today the Boyle Heights community is setting an example of fraternal communal living not only in cultural and intercultural activity, but in political activity as well. This fraternal political relationship made possible the election several years ago of the first Mexican American city councilman in 72 years. He has been re-elected twice since and this in spite of a redbaiting and nationalistic crusade conducted by his opponent, a Jewish candidate in one of these campaigns.

A dramatic story lies behind the intercultural relationship developed in Boyle Heights among these different groupings. It was not too long ago that one group could be maneuvered to fight another to prevent them from pooling strength for political action in their common interest for the benefit of the whole community.

While tensions among the various groups received attention from time to time, only in periods of crisis did the

leaders of the groups get together to discuss a problem immediately critical. One such instance was the "Zoot Suit Riots" during the second World War directed against the Mexican youth. When the Mexican community was brutally attacked, the gravity of the situation was thrust upon all democratic minded people. Progressives in the area took up the fight against police brutality and discrimination. In the course of the next few years many other groups joined in this struggle that forced the attention of the municipal authorities on the problems of the Mexican people.

## *Intercultural Activity*

Alongside this joint action in support of the Mexican community, intercultural activity also developed, mainly in the Jewish community centers. From these beginnings interracial relations have grown in Boyle Heights to the point where they set an example to the rest of Los Angeles.

For a number of years a program of intercultural work has been carried on by the International Institute, which is supported by private agencies. It offers also special social services to people of foreign birth and exhibits of handicraft from the countries of origin of 15 groups. Visitors to these art exhibitions are served with the various national foods and national dances and music are performed.

The Jewish community centers conduct programs and activities throughout the year to provide intercultural life to this varied community. For the past 20 years the Menorah Center has carried on an extensive intercultural program. At first these programs were aided by WPA funds and included citizenship, folk dance classes, music and choral instruction. Orchestras and lectures were provided by the WPA Music Project. But all of this virtually stopped with the end of the WPA Music Project.

In the more recent period the Eastside Jewish Community Center, popularly known as the Soto-Michigan Center, has been one of the spearheads of intercultural activity. This did not happen spontaneously. Demand by the people of the community brought the program into being. Although this center is supported by the Jewish community, it is situated in an area where most of the population is of another nationality.

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## Festivals of Friendship

Probably the finest community brotherhood program of its kind in the country is the annual Festival of Friendship, which was recently observed for the eighth year. The program is planned by the community. The Soto-Michigan Jewish Center donates the services of one of its professional workers for a period to help carry out these plans. The first festival was held in 1948 and was sponsored by the Council of Youth Groups under the guidance of a Youth Project worker. For the eighth annual festival this year, 60 agencies sponsored the festival and at least 25,000 persons witnessed the program, in which the participants were mostly the youth of the various schools in the district. This year the day of the festival was officially proclaimed Festival of Friendship Day for Los Angeles by the mayor.

The Eastside Jewish Community Center also carries out a similar cultural project known as Americans All Festival Week which has run for five years. Each of the first four nights is devoted to a single group: Japanese Night, Negro Night, Mexican Night and Jewish Night. The climax of the festival is Americans All Night. Each group offers authentic presentations of the song, dance, music and drama of the nationality. Speakers discuss the history of their people with emphasis on brotherhood, dignity and respect for minorities and nationalities. Throughout the week there is an art exhibit in which the various groups participate. The exhibit includes oil paintings, water colors, sculpture, wood carvings, handicraft work and ceramics. The kitchen is taken over each evening by the group giving the program for that evening.

The Eastside Jewish Center is also becoming known for its annual celebration of Mexico's Independence Day, on September 16. On this day speakers from the various groups are invited to greet the Mexican people. There are songs, folk dances and dancing to Mexican music. Mexican food is served. There is also an art exhibit along the same lines as that for the Americans All Festival.

Another organization which carries on inter-group activity is the Committee on Inter-Cultural Affairs. This body provides a platform from which important community problems are discussed. This committee recently sponsored jointly with the Community Service Organization (an organization of the Mexican people) a conference on FEP, which brought together many organizations, including trade unions, to discuss job discrimination at a time when an FEP bill was under consideration by the Los Angeles City Council. Unfortunately, the bill was later defeated by one vote.

Other groups engage in inter-group activities: the Japanese American Citizen's League participates in most of the inter-cultural work of the community, and the City Cultural Center. This center was built and established by the Jewish People's Fraternal Order (recently liquidated by the witchhunters) and continues to carry on programs of a cultural nature, including folk dancing, chess tournaments, lectures, etc.

The Eastside Chapter of the Committee for Protection of Foreign Born, composed mainly of the many Mexican persons threatened with deportation under the McCarran-Walter act, also carries on a program of cultural activity. Its fiestas on the Mexican holidays have become widely known and are enjoyed by progressives in the city.

Spurred by such inter-cultural events, Mexican dance, folk and popular, is becoming recognized and appreciated. Dance studios have for several years provided dance instruction for the community. Some are privately run and others are sponsored by the Parks and Recreation Department of the City of Los Angeles. Many youth of Mexican origin participate in classes or projects giving training in the artistic traditions of Rivera and Siqueiros and Orozco.

It would be folly to leave the impression that full integration has taken place in Boyle Heights. The area is no Garden of Eden of brotherhood. But a firm groundwork has been laid. The people are aware of their own national culture and are developing interest in and respect for other peoples' culture. These developments make for better relationships between the groups and provide favorable ground for joint activity in the interests of the community as a whole, whether through participation in inter-cultural or political activities.

### The "Rabinovich" Hysteria

TO what absurd lengths people will go who are reluctant to end the cold war, was illustrated in July in the Yiddish daily press. On July 17, the *Jewish Daily Forward* and the *Day-Morning Journal* exploded the bombshell that the Soviet Union on the eve of the Geneva conference of heads of state had issued a "declaration" that the Jews of the Soviet Union had religious freedom. The papers conjectured that this "declaration" was evoked by the Jewish Labor Committee memorandum to the conference demanding that the Jews of the Soviet Union be "freed." (Who told the *Forward* that Soviet Jews felt "unfree"?)

The truth is that this was no "declaration" of the Soviet Union but an article on the Jewish Religion in the USSR distributed to the United States press by the Soviet Embassy and by the Soviet UN delegation. Furthermore, it was not issued on July 16, as the Yiddish press wanted the people to believe, but one month earlier, on June 15. (We printed this article in our August issue.)

But the tenacious cold warriors were not satisfied with this hoax. The article had been signed by M. Rabinovich. The Yiddish press then sent up an undignified, hysterical hue and cry, "Who is Rabinovich?" What this had to do with anything was hard to see, except that it gave the Yiddish press and the Jewish Labor Committee an occasion to inject something mysterious and sinister in an article which contained information largely available before. For several days the Yiddish press was full of "investgations" to ascertain the identity of the "mysterious Rabinovich."

This tempest in a teapot would be beneath notice if it did not point to the persistent anti-Soviet hysteria of the *Forward* amid attempts to relax international tensions and further world peace.