

A Jewish Immigrant and Spanish Proverbs of South Texas **Ben Edelstein as adapted by Norman Rozeff**

A Russian Jewish immigrant to South Texas and Spanish language proverbs do not seem to have much in common. Yet, that does not prove the case. It was in the year 1906, two years after the coming of the railroad to South Texas changed the face of the area forever, that Morris Edelstein, a 16-year old immigrant from Kalvar'y'a, Lithuania, came to the Lower Rio Grande Valley. After initially peddling his home furnishing and photographic service items from door-to-door, he was able to rent a space to sell clothing in Brownsville, Texas. He continued with the furniture sales too, and soon Edelstein's Better Furniture was established. His business would thrive and grow over the years and would eventually have 14 outlets across the Valley.

Morris became fluent in Spanish. This, of course, stood him in good stead with the large Mexican ethnic population of the community. He, in fact, donated to the city a parcel of his land that had become surrounded by residences for a children's park. He did so in gratitude for the Mexicans that had helped him achieve success.

His family recounts another story regarding his Spanish language skills that proved very valuable. From the year 1910 to 1920 the area was adversely affected by the Mexican Revolution and banditry on both sides of the river. One very serious incident involved bandits who derailed the St. Louis, Brownsville, and Mexico Railway train near Olmito as it was traveling south to Brownsville. Three innocent people were killed. The narrative Morris' son Benjamin relates is as follows:

In the train wreck of October 7, 1915, as the bandits approached my Dad, he told them in fluent Spanish to please leave his suitcase alone. Taking him for a Mexican, they did nothing to him. His knowledge of Spanish saved his life. There was another passenger, a traveling salesman, whom the bandits seized and were ready to kill, when my father shouted in Spanish, "Don't kill him; he is a German!" (which he was not). In those days the people in Mexico had a high respect for Germans. Some of the generals in the Mexican army were of German descent. The Germans were also friendly to the bandits. They furnished the bandits with guns, ammunition, and other necessities, hoping that the bandits would drive all of the Texas settlers out of the state. The bandits stole the black porter's shoes forcing him to run some three miles barefoot before he could spread the news of the train robbery.

The traveling salesman profusely thanked Dad for having saved his life but swore that he would never return to Texas. For as long as he lived, every Christmas time the traveling salesman mailed Dad a Christmas card.

There was an elderly Mexican couple on the wrecked train. When the rangers came to examine the wreck, they came across the elderly couple, thinking they may have assisted the bandits. Dad told the rangers that these people had boarded the train in Houston, that they were only passengers, and had no connection with the bandits. The Rangers proceeded down the aisle. (One can only imagine what was on their minds.)

Perhaps because there are so many proverbs in the Yiddish language used by Eastern European Jews (one collection of them is titled "1001 Yiddish Proverbs"), Morris Edelstein would pointedly express his thoughts by using not only *Yiddish* proverbs but *Spanish* ones too. His family put together a list of Old Spanish proverbs that Morris loved. Here are some of them with their English translation or equivalent as kindly furnished by my daughter-in-law, Norma Cortez Rozeff:

Cuando una rama se seca, dos o tres están floriando. [When one branch withers, two or three will flourish.]

Comiendo buena cena y durmiendo en cama buena, aunque sea noche mala para mi es noche buena.

[Eating a good dinner and sleeping in a good bed, for me, makes a good night.]

Aquí en paz descansa mi queridísima suegra y también en mi casa nosotros descansamos.

[Here in peace is where my beloved mother-in-law rests and in my home we also rest.]

Para cambio, aunque sean guaraches.

[For a change, even sandals would make a difference.]

El hambre es la mayor salsa.

[Hunger is the best sauce.]

El que nada no se ahoga, y el que ahoga, sigue nadando.

[The one who swims will never drown, and the one that drowns will follow floating.]

Ya mero, nada más falta el mero.

[Already pure, nothing more does the pure lack.]

Al cabo nada más estamos hablando.

[To the end we are nothing more than talk.]

Apuntámelo en el hielo.

[Write it on ice.]

No lloro, solo me acuerdo.

[I don't cry, I just remember.]

De grano en grano llena la gallina el buche.

[Grain by grain the chicken will fill up its gizzard.]

Dichoso el calvo, que ni el peina se la atora.

[Lucky are the bald for the comb does not get stuck.]

El que no habla, Dios no lo oye.

[If you don't speak out God will not hear you.]

Algo, es algo dijo el diablo cuando se llevo a Miguel.

["Something is better than nothing", said the Devil as he bore himself to (the angel) Michael.]

Cuando un coyote canta y acaba con 'qua, es que el tiempo va a cambiar o que sigue como esta.

[When a coyote sings and ends with a "waa", it's because the weather will change or stay as is.]

Cuando el tecolote canta, el indio muere.

[When the owl sings, the Indian dies.]

Panza llena, corazon contento.

[Full belly, contented heart.]

En boca cerrado no entran moscas.

[In a closed mouth flies do not enter.]

El que no llora, no mama.

[One who does not cry does not suckle.]

Poca gente buena pero el diablo es mucho.

[There are few good people, but the devilish are many.]

Poco veneno no mata.

[A little poison will not kill.]

Lo del agua al agua.

[What belongs to the water goes to the water.]

El trabajo mas lento-- El Relámpago.

[The slowest worker—lightning.]

Más vale tarde que nunca.

[Better late than never.]

Al ojo del amo engorda el caballo.

[Under the care of the master, the horse will thrive.]

El que madruga, Dios le ayuda.

[God will help the one who rises early.]

No por mucho madruga amanece mas temprano.

[It is not because one awakes early that there is an earlier sunrise.]

Más vale pájaro en mano que ciento volando.

[A bird in the hand is worth one hundred flying.]

Todo el que a su hijo consiente, va engordando una serpiente.

[One who spoils the child is fattening a serpent.]

Camarón que se duerme se lo lleva la corriente, y mismo pasa entre la gente.

[A sleepy shrimp is taken by the current, and the same happens to people.]

Perro que ladra no muerde.

[A dog that barks doesn't bite.]

Cuando el río suena, agua lleva.

[When the river makes noise, water is flowing.]

El que tiene hambre le atiza a la olla.

[He who is hungry stirs the pot.]

Árbol que crece torcido, nunca su tronco endereza.

[The tree that grows crooked will never straighten.]

No hay borracho que coma lumbre.

[There is no drunk who will eat fire.]

El borracho y el muchacho siempre dicen la verdad.

[The drunk and the young always tell the truth.]

Limosnero y con garrote.

[A beggar with a club.]

Tanto peca el que mata la vaca como el que le agarra la pata.

[As much as he who kills the cow sins so does the one who holds the cow's leg.]

En el pais de los ciegos, el tuerto es rey.

[In the country of the blind, the one-eyed one is king.]

El que persevera alcanza.

[The one who perseveres will overcome.]

El sordo no oye pero compone.

[The deaf one can't hear but will make things up or an ignoramus will add to the conversation regardless of his knowledge.]

El que con coyotes se junta, a aullar se ensena.

[The individual who associates with coyotes will learn to howl.]

Más sabe el diablo por viejo que por diablo.

[The Devil knows more for being old rather than for being the Devil.]

Si oyes cosejos llegaras a viejo.

[If you take advice you will grow old.]

La rueda que rechina recibe el aceite.

[The wheel that squeaks gets the grease.]

Ya veremos dijo el ciego, pero nunca vio.

["We'll see", said the blind but never saw.]

Poco a poco ando lejos.

[Little by little I get far.]

Let's hope that these proverbs that have distilled so much wisdom and experience over the ages remain part of our culture and continue to be passed down from generation to generation.