

MYTHS, LEGENDS AND REALITY by Si Frumkin

We like to assume that history is based on facts but we are wrong. Most history, ancient as well as relatively recent, is based on myths and legends. Some myths are based on facts that, with time, were embellished. Others are intentional falsifications or unsubstantiated tales passed on for generations by poets, dreamers and demagogues. What most myths have in common is that most of them are never questioned or investigated – they become unchallenged history.

Migration – the movement of masses of people from one place to another - is a fertile source of myths. One of the better known is the saga of Mayflower pilgrims landing at Plymouth Rock, making friends and sharing a turkey with the natives at the first Thanksgiving ceremony and founding the American nation. Just about everything about this story is inaccurate and has been exposed by historical research, but it is believed by the overwhelming majority of Americans.

Another myth that is accepted without questioning it is the belief most black Africans were transported into slavery in the United States. The fact is that of the ten million Africans who were kidnapped and sold by other black Africans to overwhelmingly Arab slave traders, less than 5 out of every hundred were taken to the U.S. – 96% were sold in Brazil and the Caribbean islands.

A more recent migration was that of about 4 million Jews from Czarist Russia between 1880 and 1917. Their descendants in the U.S. and South Africa firmly believe that their ancestors left because of pogroms and anti-Semitism, that Jews were murdered by the Cossacks daily and that they had to leave or perish.

The facts are different. Yes, there was anti-Semitism and there were pogroms but when compared to the bloody 20th century they were relatively insignificant – the infamous Kishinev pogrom of 1903 that outraged the world and gave the English language the word “pogrom”, lasted three days and was responsible for 47 Jews murdered and 92 severely injured, hardly a number to cause a flight of millions. At present, there is very little concern with much larger numbers that are murdered daily around the world.

Furthermore, most of the Jewish immigrants came from the Czarist Empire – not Russia itself where only very few Jews were allowed to reside. Most Jews came from the of Settlement, a giant ghetto that covered parts of Ukraine, Belarus, Poland and the Baltic areas where many towns and cities had Jewish majorities.

The reasons for the Jewish flight were primarily economic – as they were for the Irish and Italian emigrations – disruption by industrialization and development of urban economies. Jews were not allowed to be farmers; they were pauperized and had to eke out a living as artisans and laborers. There was no supporting community help and, in order to survive, some had to take a chance on leaving for an unknown country far away. The men came first and later, if it was possible, brought their families as well.

And here are five contemporary myths about a contemporary immigration: the influx of Mexicans and others like them across our porous borders. So, here for your consideration, are the largely ignored facts about it:

Myth #1. Migration is caused by lack of economic development.

International migrations do not originate in really poor countries, but in those that are developing and growing dynamically. (See, *immigration from Czarist Empire, above*) Mexico is not a poor country. It has a trillion dollar economy, a per capita income of \$9,000, (Russia has \$9,700), a fully industrialized economy, high urbanization and high life expectancy.

Myth #2: Rapid population growth causes migration.

The fertility rate in Mexico is 2.3 per woman, slightly above “replacement” level. Arab and sub-Saharan countries have the highest birth rates and minimal migration.

Myth #3: Migrants move because the wages are higher in target countries.

Research has shown that international migration is a tool to overcome the lack of credit opportunities. Mexico has virtually no mortgage banking and a large share of money earned by Mexican workers in the U.S. is used to build or buy homes in Mexico. Six out of every hundred of Mexican immigrants buy a house in

Mexico after just 1 year in the U.S.; after 5-9 years – 41% will do so, and 64% after staying more than 10 years.

Myth #4: Mexican migrants are attracted by generous public benefits.

Illegal immigrants are not likely to use public services. Only 10% have sent a child to a U.S. public school, 7% have received SSI and less than 5% have used food stamps, welfare or unemployment compensation. However, 60% had Social Security and income taxes withheld. Immigrants from Russia, Cuba, Vietnam, Thailand or Cambodia are more likely to use government benefits.

Myth #5: Most Mexican immigrants want to settle permanently in the U.S.

Mexican immigrants come and go. 80% say that they had made no more than three trips to the U.S. and 75% stayed less than two years. Most Mexican immigrants do not intend to permanently settle north of the border.

Recent research shows that about 17% of all able-bodied Mexicans between 17 and 35 are working in the U.S. This enables Mexico to maintain a viable economy and a sustainable rate of unemployment while providing a willing, cheap and, most importantly, **peaceful** working force for the U.S.

Can you imagine what the situation would be if Mexico were a Moslem country with a population eager to reoccupy Arizona, California, New Mexico and Nevada from the Gringos? The attacks of suicide bombers, riots, car burnings, bombs in supermarkets, sports stadiums and on freeways?

I think the myths are just that – myths. Let us stick to reality and be grateful for it.