

HUGO B. MARGÁIN

Mexican Diplomat, Academic and Statesman



For the National Autonomous University of Mexico, and particularly for the magazine *Voices of Mexico*, Ambassador Hugo B. Margáin occupies a very special place as a dedicated teacher and an imaginative promotor of culture. As editorial director of *Voices of Mexico*, he began one of our publication's most creative periods. It was then that the magazine became a vehicle for disseminating Mexico's best voices and consolidated itself as the only university publication that aimed to take the most important issues in Mexican culture, art, science, politics, economics and society before the U.S. and Canadian publics. Even prior to regional economic integration, the mission and work of *Voices of Mexico* under Margáin's guidance were an insuperable effort to build bridges of understanding among three countries united not only by history and geography, but, particularly in the case of the United States and Mexico, by a complex bilateral relationship that included difficult, thorny problems. For these and many other reasons, Hugo B. Margáin Gleason's death last September 12 has a profound effect on Mexico's university and cultural communities.

If any of Margáin Gleason's attributes stand out, it is his unswerving love for Mexico. Born in Mexico City in 1913, his love of country led him to outstanding achievements as a professor and editor, a brilliant diplomatic career and to acquit himself successfully in some of the highest posts in public administration.

An excellent lawyer, he graduated in law from the UNAM in 1937. In an interview published in the Mexico City daily *Excélsior*, September 9, 1993, he said his thesis had been on “the gap between the law and reality in Mexico.” From then on, his reflections on his country would become a vocation and the leitmotif of all his professional activities, whether in academia, politics or diplomacy.

Though he was a professor at the Mexico College and the UNAM between 1942 and 1951, his teaching went beyond the classroom since he was a true guide for all the young people who collaborated with him at all the institutions he worked in.

He began his long career in government in 1951 and went into Mexico’s foreign service in 1965. He was Mexico’s ambassador to the United States from 1965 to 1970 and from 1976 to 1982, and he filled the same post in Great Britain from 1973 to 1974. Always respectful, his two periods as ambassador in the United States were characterized by a decided, solid defense of Mexico’s interests in what is undoubtedly the most important country where Mexico has a diplomatic mission, both because of its specific weight in the world and because of the problems that naturally arise from having such a long common border. His role as representative of Mexico was also decisive when he held the posts of president of the Special Group of Governors of the Inter-American Development Bank and governor of the International Monetary Fund from 1970 to 1973.

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Mexico’s presidents from Miguel Alemán to Carlos Salinas de Gortari. Judging by his own recollections stated in the aforementioned *Excélsior* interview, his closest relationship and collaboration was with Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, Luis Echeverría Alvarez and José López Portillo, whose administrations ran consecutively from 1964 to 1982.

Invariably concerned with the impact on society of the exercise of power and government, Margáin was responsible for important contributions to the well being of Mexico’s working class. It was his idea to write profit sharing into Mexico’s labor legislation; after making the suggestion, he developed the project itself. His time as head of the Commission on Profit Sharing ended in 1963 when the system was formalized, and as such it continues to this day, a gain for labor that Mexico’s private sector workers and employees all enjoy. He also played an outstanding role in the creation of the INFONAVIT, the body that plans, finances and builds public housing for Mexico’s workers.

Margáin held different posts in the Ministries of Trade and Industry and of Finance and Public Credit. In the former, he was head administrator and then vice-minister of industry and commerce from 1961 to 1964. In the latter, he held different posts under different administrations, from heading up the Federal Retail merchants Tax Division in 1951 to being minister of finance from 1970 to 1973 in the last few months of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz’s presidency and the first years of Luis Echeverría’s. In all his posts, he designed fiscal policies and annual budgets that aimed to raise the living standards of the poorest sectors of society, as well as financial and economic procedures that rationalized and smoothed out the spending of public funds and propitiated a fairer distribution of wealth, a permanent need in a country like Mexico that suffers from great inequalities.

He received many national and international honors; for example, the University of Chicago conferred upon him the degree of doctor *honoris causa*. He was also active well into this decade in the last years of the Salinas administration, as the head of Mexico’s delegation to the bilateral high-level working group to deal with drug

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trafficking. His ideals and convictions were as solid as his mind was penetrating and shrewd in their implementation, despite some differences of opinion with the presidents he served.

Margáin's love of Mexico led him to accept the invitation made to him to head up *Voices of Mexico* by then-UNAM Rector José Sarukhán and then-director of the Center for Research on North America, Mónica Vereá.

His broad and profound relations with Mexico's cultural and political milieus as well as his vast knowledge of his country resulting from long years of service to the great national ideals made it possible for the magazine to progress greatly under his supervision even in the difficult field of dissemination among such demanding readerships as those in the United States and Canada. To his collaborators and those who have succeeded him in this worthwhile task, his example has been both a stimulus and a model. From the pages of this publication that he loved so much, they wish also to pay homage to him, to his work and his life, which should be known both to his fellow countrymen and the reading public in the countries his efforts were aimed at. That effort, we are sure, will make it possible for him to remain with us always. ❧

*Paz Consuelo Márquez Padilla
Diego Bugeda Bernal*