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LETTERS FROM “EXILE”: HANNES MEYER’S CORRESPONDENCE FROM MEXICO (1938-49)

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INTRODUCTION

In 1938 Hannes Meyer arrived in Mexico for the first time in order to participate in the 16th International Conference on Housing and Urbanism. A year later, being offered a position as head of the newly established Institute of Planning and Urbanism, he and his family settled in the country for the next ten years. Meyer was an avid writer; however, he never kept a diary or wrote a memoir¹. Instead, he maintained an intense correspondence with a large group of family, friends and acquaintances throughout the different periods and places he lived in. His personal letters, written mostly in German but also in Spanish, French and English², exposed his state of mind, at the beginning of optimism and urgency to take part in the politics of exile, and later of frustration, anxiety and disappointment, revealing the deterioration of his status, especially after the economic crisis of 1946 and the return of most of the refugees to their countries. At the same time, a deep necessity to reconnect with

his past is also evident, not only through the correspondence with his Bauhaus circle, but through the return to the family roots.

Meyer was a keen observer; his descriptions of the land, its people and customs were detailed, yet, they were biased. He had the same ability to write long, engaging narratives of daily life and short, objective messages dealing with specific issues, notably those regarding his intervention on behalf of refugees. His topics versed from world and local politics to art and architecture, from health and family life to professional challenges and achievements.

The frequency of his writing was also significant; it depended mainly on the possibilities to sustain a continuous communication with his counterparts. Thus, he wrote profusely between 1939 and 1940 and resumed contact only after the end of war. **His** correspondents were as diverse as his interests, including architects, artists, politicians, family and former students, located in every corner of the world, from South Africa to Israel, from Chile to the United States, Germany or England.

Meyer never thought of Mexico as a permanent option; as his mood, his impressions of the host country and its people changed through time according to his circumstances and the political orientation of the government in power, from approval of the leftist Cardenas to rejection of the rightist Miguel Aleman. My aim is to retrace his path and recount such impressions.

DESTINATION: MEXICO

Meyer travelled twice to Mexico. His first trip, between August and November of 1938 was aimed at getting to know the country and its potentials for work and immigration. The

Conference on Housing and Urbanism served as a pretext for that. While Meyer did not write then about his experiences on the trip, he later gave an account of his journey in a statement requested by the US Immigration and Naturalization Service:

I should like to mention that I did not arrive in New York aboard the SS SAMARIA on August 8, 1939, as is stated in your letter, but I actually did land there on August 8, 1938. I was then in transit to Mexico City (...). Though I was permitted to stay two months in the United States, I left New York already on August 9 aboard the Sunrise Express for Mexico City. In a special coach and under the guidance of the American Express Company together with the US delegates I crossed the border at LAREDO (Texas), on Aug. 11, 1938.³

Meyer returned by train to New York on November 30 and boarded the *RMS Queen Mary* on December 2, 1938⁴ to immediately prepare for his next travel, now with his family and for an undetermined period to work at the Polytechnic Institute. They had to confront some complications regarding the voyage, as he wrote to Erwin Friedeberg: “Our travel problems are growing since we cannot use a German ship and, during winter, there is no other direct contact. The Holland-America line vessels are scheduled only until June and even in December I was told I should secure a space. Thus, it remains only the expensive way via New York-Veracruz.”⁵

As much as he wanted to be on time for the beginning of the winter semester at the Polytechnic, they still had to wait until summer to sail. This time, Meyer gave John Torcapel a complete description of the travel, first on board the *SS Normandie* to New York and then, on the *SS Siboney* to Veracruz through Cuba. In New York they visited the World’s Fair and in Cuba they coincided with the unfortunate *SS Saint Louis*: “In the port of La Habana we met the German ship St. Louis with more than 900 Jews on board that were denied to descend.”⁶ On June 2, 1939 they finally arrived in Mexico.

MEXICO, A SOCIALLY PROGRESSIVE COUNTRY

Meyer barely wrote any personal letters during his first trip, instead, he was occupied preparing an academic proposal for the Institute of Planning and Urbanism. The communications with the authorities of the National Polytechnic Institute dealt with his introduction as a world specialist, his vision of the school, the conditions of his appointment and the motives that inclined him to accept it. He wrote to Gonzalo Vazquez Vela: “The reasons that motivate me and my wife, whose biography I allow myself to attach, towards Mexico, dwell in our desire (already expressed to you verbally) to work in a socially progressive country where we could take advantage of our professional experience, especially the one acquired in the Soviet Union”.⁷

This was not the only occasion when Meyer referred to Mexico as a progressive nation. In fact, the political atmosphere surrounding President Cardenas’ leftist government was possibly the most appealing factor in his decision. However, this impression lasted too little; the bureaucracy that delayed his appointment at the Institute and the struggle among the different political forces, altered not only his opinion but his possibilities to succeed, as he wrote repeatedly:

I cannot begin my professorship yet, since, once again, all kind of formal-bureaucratic tricks are in the way (...). Luckily I had sniffed the Soviet bureaucracy for six years, hence, in comparison, the present and the years between 1930 and 1936 are even.⁸

Here everything is ‘volcanic’. The insecurity is huge. The struggle between right and left closed many opportunities and with the war it only got worse.⁹

In your life you have never experienced a country where so many and so big vagabonds live, neither so many fraudsters, swindlers, spies, etc. This begins with the Minister and ends at the lowest. Such frauds can be found in some jokes, but here they are for real. And one is the victim of these dogs. Economically I am still miserable because the government cannot hold its word.¹⁰

Politics always interfered with his plans. Since the early stages of his Mexican experience Meyer aligned himself with the leftist group of Vicente Lombardo, a committed supporter of the Soviet Union, at least during those years. While he never took part in any Mexican political organization and declared that, as a foreigner, he had to abstain from any official involvement; he was always well informed and influenced the circle around him. More than once, Meyer complained of xenophobia and of being targeted by “the reaction” that hindered his professional stability, as in the Institute for Social Security: “when the Reaction moves perceptibly to me, something completely different has to be undertaken”¹¹. Most of it, according to him, was motivated by the intrigues held by his former friend Fritz Schulbachner against him.

The economist Schulbachner, a.k.a. Federico Bach, arrived in Mexico years before Meyer. He held teaching positions at the National University and at the Workers’ University. During Meyer’s first visit, **Bach** served as his reference with the Mexican immigration authorities¹² and even lent him some money¹³. He was probably Meyer’s strongest link to the Mexican left. However, their relationship soon changed; in 1939, **Bach** supported Trotsky’s asylum and got closer to the Trotskyite group of Diego Rivera, as opposed to Meyer who supported Stalinism. Meyer wrote:

In December of 1939, after the outbreak of war, I was inscribed by Diego Rivera, together with other 25 Mexican intellectuals, in a list for the American DIES-Committee that appeared in the whole American press and, of course, also in the Mexican. Professor Bach was not indifferent to this list as he implied through the Trotskyite architect Juan O’Gorman, that I was a GPU agent. – When he saw me then, he was oversweet to me. – When in the spring of 1941 Trotsky was assassinated, this band immediately became suspicious of us, the ‘Stalinists’. On June 21, 1941 I was expelled from my office at the Planning Institute under direct intervention of President A[vila] Camacho due to such intrigues. Bach and his band were also involved in this coup through denunciation. Later, in June 1942, a long article from a special correspondent (Bosshard, now

NZZ) appeared in the *Berner Bund* on the situation in Mexico, in which I was again mentioned in connection with the organization of Trotsky's murder.¹⁴

Meyer's opinion of Mexican politics varied according to the changes in government; one of his main preoccupations was the deterioration of economy, especially during the presidency of Miguel Aleman. He wrote:

Since July 1948 we are living in splendid inflation with all the classic effects: daily prices increase, speculation with all the people's necessities, a bloodiest corruption everywhere, and yet, a 'revolutionary' *Gobierno* [Government] to which the greatest multimillionaires belong. Then, there is the economic influence of the enslavement to Wall Street. The expropriation of the oil fields that Cardenas decreed in the year 1938 was downturned in a veiled form. The disintegration of the trade-unions took an outrageous form, as proved by their fragmentation in 7 centrals. Toledano's people are attempting at gathering the various progressive masses in the PARTIDO POPULAR, but it is expensive to nominate candidates able to arise from the influence of the official party, the PRI (...)¹⁵.

This economic crisis had a direct impact on their plans to return to Europe. In March on 1949 he wrote to Ernst and Ethel Mittag: "Our own situation here has turned to bad a perspective: Since July – 22 we live in full-speed inflation. Today the Mexican Peso needs 7.25 for ONE Dollar USA, while in spring it was still 4.85 Pesos. – We lost all the money which we had spared for our back-again-trip to Europe."¹⁶ Having no money left, they had to rely on the support of their European friends to complete the travel.

THE MEXICAN LANDSCAPE

One cannot imagine the wealth of impressions we encountered while climbing and crossing the mountains, from the sea to the plain of Mexico City's district. **At** the beginning [there are] mango and sugar-cane plantations, then, banana forests for hours and hours. (...) **The** PICO DE ORIZABA rises towards the clouds, the highest mountain in South-America. The breeze of snow refreshes us. **The** landscape changes and we see the first cactuses. The plain is surrounded by extinct volcanoes. The mountain landscape is made of volcanic paste. We see the old Cortés path, Mexico's conqueror. **And** here they are! The pyramids of San Juan Teotihuacán appear.¹⁷

This is how Meyer described their arrival to Mexico City after docking in Veracruz. The amazement the Mexican landscape produced in him remained unaltered through the years. “Here I love our ‘Popo’ (last year I climbed up to around 4600 meters in this volcano); at this height I can vent myself out” he wrote in 1948¹⁸. He also loved hiking with his wife Lena in the mountains of *El Desierto de los Leones*, and touring in the banks of *Los Remedios River*, which became his favorite place to spend their spare-time. The colors of the place and the richness of the vegetation also impressed him: “Each day, when the sun rises in this exotic land, I really think of my friend the Swiss painter [Otto Roos]; here he could get unpaired sensations from a new colorfulness. The clouding, the rhythm of the mountains, the thorns of the agave and the cactus-world (...).”¹⁹ Yet, it was not only the rural landscape that he recounted; Meyer described the city almost in the same way, where color was always present. From his balcony,

We see a typical cityscape in Mexico: one and two-story houses with colorful tiles and afar, the blue volcano ranges. In front of the house, which is on an old heavy-traffic road, stand 25 meters-high trees, unknown to me, something like elms, but flakier and sheerer. Couples, workers and children in all poses, self-conscious of their vital lifestyle, lay on the neat and clean green lawn. All kinds of red, from carmine to pink, Nile-green and a strange light-blue, spot the lawn. Coffee-brown, white-blue and orange colored buses run on the borders of the park across the street while Lilo sits on the balcony and rejoices for the unknown movement behind. The sun shines with implacable tenacity from the zenith producing small shadow-stains, and round-clouds navigate over the window on the horizon.²⁰

THE WAY BACK

After many inconveniences that delayed them, the Meyers were finally able to go back home. “The reason I answer so soon is that we decided definitively to leave Mexico and go back to Europe on 1 September by an Italian boat, from Veracruz to Genoa. We shall stay in Italy first, near to Milano and afterwards go to Geneva-Switzerland. I then would travel through Europe, just to have a look at the situation there and then fix us somewhere.”²¹

Meyer and his family boarded the Andrea Gritti as planned and traveled to Italy through “Puerto Cardenas, La Habana, La Guairá, Tenerife, Barcelona and Marseille”. His impressions were again vivid and colorful:

Crossing the Caribbean has been surprising: a thousand-color sky and of a continuous change of impressions. The heat in La Guairá was too much, and for the first time in my life I saw in the distance a city without glass-windows, but wooden bars with traditional Hispano-Venezuelan ornaments instead (...). We had arrived in Tenerife, free-port under Spanish tutelage. Eight hours were enough to demonstrate the people the fascist way to govern, but the landscape was extraordinary: the volcanic colors from black to red, earth from Sienna and Pozzuoli (...). In Genoa our old friends from Mexico, Carlos Contreras and Mario Montagnana greeted us and we were surrounded by our people that (for the first time in five years) treated us as partners.²²

Lastly, after some months staying in Italy, in January, 1950, they established in a rural house near Lugano, “The landscape is white and snowy. In front of us the mountains of 2000 meters-height shine in the sun and 25 km away we see the Italian border. We are finally in the homeland (...)”²³

Endnotes

¹ Meyer wrote indeed a comprehensive curriculum vitae where he described his origins, especially his family links to architecture, youth and training.

² All the translations are mine. I preserved the texts written originally in English as found.

³ Hannes Meyer to Byron Uhl, 14 June 1940, Hannes Meyer Collection, 82/1-921, Deutsches Architektur Museum, Frankfurt am Main (hereafter cited as HM Collection, DAM)

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Hannes Meyer to Erwin Friedeberg, 11 February 1939, HM Collection, 82/1-888a, DAM, Frankfurt am Main

⁶ Hannes Meyer to John Torcapel, 6 June 1939, HM Collection, 82/1-919(13)a, DAM, Frankfurt am Main

⁷ Hannes Meyer to Gonzalo Vázquez Vela, 17 October 1938, HM Collection, 82/1-411(1), DAM, Frankfurt am Main

⁸ Hannes Meyer to Otto Nathan, 30 July 1939, HM Collection, 82/1-910(4), DAM, Frankfurt am Main

⁹ Hannes Meyer to Hans Schmidt, 20 April 1940, HM Collection, 82/1-798(1), DAM, Frankfurt am Main

¹⁰ Hannes Meyer to Paul Artaria, 16 December 1939, HM Collection, 82/1-784(31), DAM, Frankfurt am Main

¹¹ Hannes Meyer to Paul Artaria, 2 October 1945, HM Collection, 82/1-784(26), DAM, Frankfurt am Main

¹² Departamento de Migración (201)/Suizos/caja 3 #117, Archivo General de la Nación, México

¹³ Hannes Meyer to Federico Bach, 11 January 1939, HM Collection, 82/1-884(2), DAM, Frankfurt am Main

¹⁴ Hannes Meyer to Paul Artaria, undated, HM Collection, 82/1-784(17), DAM, Frankfurt am Main

¹⁵ Hannes Meyer to Paul Artaria, 14 April 1949, HM Collection, 82/1-784(23), DAM, Frankfurt am Main

¹⁶ Hannes Meyer to Ernst and Ethel Mittag, 8 March 1949, HM Collection, 82/1-848(6)a, DAM, Frankfurt am Main

¹⁷ Hannes Meyer to Paul Artaria, December 16, 1939, HM Collection, 82/1-784(31), DAM, Frankfurt am Main

¹⁸ Hannes Meyer to Ernst Morgenthaler, April 10, 1948, HM Collection, 82/1-870(17)a , DAM, Frankfurt am Main

¹⁹ Hannes Meyer to Otto Roos, February 1, 1940, HM Collection, 82/1-877(6), DAM, Frankfurt am Main

²⁰ Hannes Meyer to Hans, Melie and Jean Berger, July 23, 1939, HM Collection, 82/1-864(10)a, DAM, Frankfurt am Main

²¹ Hannes Meyer to Brigitte Youngday, 17 May 1949, HM Collection, 82/1-841(33), DAM, Frankfurt am Main

²² Hannes Meyer to Alfredo and Francis Zalce, 4 February 1950, HM Collection, 82/1-880(25), DAM, Frankfurt am Main

²³ *Ibíd.*

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Department of Immigration Collection, Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City