Male Narratives from the Margins of the Country of Immigrants: Two Norwegians in Argentina in the 1920s

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This chapter analyzes the personal narratives of two Norwegian immigrants who arrived in Argentina at the end of the 1920s, namely, the diaries of Ole Viborg Høiby and of his friend and fellow traveler, Ottar Enger, who also wrote a series of twenty-six letters addressed to his parents.¹ At the beginning of their stay, the authors of those narratives worked for over half a year as hired laborers on a farm in the west of Buenos Aires province, and later they set out on a long journey to the *Chaco salteño*, a wooded area in Salta province in the far north of the country, where they found employment at the Standard Oil refinery.

In different registers, the accounts of Ole and Ottar describe the same migration but two different experiences; they enable a complementary reading as well as an independent one, and through both a “public” narrative (the letters) and an intimate one (the diaries)² they provide access to the authors’

- 1 Ole Viborg Høiby's diary from September 24, 1927, to March 29, 1928; the letters written by Ottar Enger to his mother from January 1, 1927, to March 3, 1938; and Ottar Enger's diary from September 24, 1927, to March 31, 1928, are found in the HULA II database at the University of Oslo.
- 2 Letters in particular and personal narratives of migrants in general have enjoyed a surge in interest by scholars since the publication in 1918–1920 of the sociological analysis, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* by William Thomas and Florian Znaniecki. Among the several historical studies based on immigrants' letters, see Eduardo Ciafardo, “Cadenas migratorias e inmigración italiana. Reflexiones a partir de la correspondencia de dos inmigrantes italianos en la Argentina, 1921–1938,” *Studi Emigrazione* 38, 102 (June 1991): 233–56; Sonia Cancian, *Families, Lovers and their Letters. Italian Postwar Migration to Canada* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2003); María L. Da Orden, *Una familia y un océano de por medio. La emigración gallega a la Argentina: una historia a través de la memoria epistolar* (Barcelona: Anthropos, 2010); Bruce S. Elliot, David A. Gerber and Suzanne M. Sinke, *Letters Across Borders. The Epistolary Practice of International Migrants* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); David A. Gerber, *Authors of their lives The personal correspondence of British Immigrants to North America in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2006); Walter Kamphoefner, Helbich Wolfgang and Ulrike Sommereds, *News from the Land of Freedom: German Immigrants Write Home* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991). Some

representations and subjectivity.³ Thus, the analysis of this migratory experience will address two interrelated dimensions. In the first narrative, the route of the migrants will be rebuilt so as to reflect on the capacity of agency, the role of social networks in market access, and the links between overseas migration and internal and seasonal migrations. The second narrative, focused on subjectivity, will address their motivations and wishes, along with their representations and the way the social and cultural contexts affected their choices and influenced their strategies.

The case of Ole and Ottar has some particulars that make its study interesting. The first one is that their overseas migration was followed by a number of moves within the Argentine territory, one of which was especially relevant. As is widely known, between the 1880s and the 1930 financial crisis the big cities and the rural world of the pampean-coastal area were the geographical spaces of reception and settlement for the majority of immigrants.⁴ Contrarily, other regions in the country, like the *Chaco salteño*, whose population was predominantly indigenous, Creole, and Bolivian, received only small contingents of European immigrants, and it was precisely in such a marginal region that Ole and Ottar's journey led them.

Another singularity is the duration of Ole and Ottar's stay. They arrived in Buenos Aires in February of 1927 and returned to Norway at the end of March 1928. Although their diaries and letters say little about why they emigrated, they enlarge upon the reasons for returning and the changing representations of Argentina formed by them at different moments of their stay.

The Argentine migration statistics show both the spectacular number of immigrants and the considerable percentage that returned. For example, in a broad period of time (1857–1914), and considering the whole of the immigration

studies use a combination of immigrants' personal narratives such as letters, diaries, journals, and memoirs. See for example Kerby A. Miller and Patricia Mulholland Miller, *Journey of Hope: The Story of Irish Immigration to America* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2001). Others are based only on diaries. See for example María Bjerg, *El Mundo de Dorothea. La vida cotidiana en un pueblo de la frontera de Buenos Aires en el siglo XIX* (Buenos Aires: Imago Mundi, 2004).

- 3 For an analysis of the uses of personal narratives and the problem of subjectivity, see Mary Jo Maines, Jennifer L. Pierce, and Barbara Laslett, *Telling Stories. The Use of Personal Narratives in the Social Sciences and History* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2008).
- 4 According to the national census in 1914, almost 80 percent of the immigrants lived in the city of Buenos Aires, the eponymous province, and the province of Santa Fe, whereas in the northwest of Argentina percentages fluctuate between 2 percent and 7 percent.

flow, those who returned comprised 44 percent of the entries.⁵ The return migration has attracted little interest among historians, though, and its treatment has been exclusively quantitative. It still awaits a micro-analytical approach that delves into the connection between return and the agency of social actors, and the way in which these latter experienced circumstances that confronted them with the dilemma of staying or leaving.

Finally, another detail is that the accounts of Ole and Ottar allow us to recreate their whole route, from the departure from Norway to the return journey. In his diary, Ole mentions letters written to his family; we do not have these letters available but only those of Ottar, who corresponded with his parents throughout his migration. His first letter was sent during the travel from Norway, and the last one from the northern province of Santiago del Estero, twenty days before his return to Europe. The average regularity was a letter every fifteen days, even if sometimes (during his moves within Argentina, for instance) he went a month without writing.

The diaries cover a briefer period. They both start on September 24, 1927, when Ole and Ottar departed by train from Buenos Aires to Salta, and culminate at the end of March 1928, during their return journey. But they differ in their narrative density and their regularity. Ottar is very concise, and he doesn't write daily, often summarizing a number of days in a single entry. Besides, he interrupts his writing in early November 1927, to resume it only in March of the following year. On the contrary, Ole writes regularly, and though some entries are succinct, in general his accounting is quite scrupulous. Beyond the contrasts, both diaries open a window to the daily life of a region at the margins of the Argentina of mass immigration and cast light on the way in which the authors cognitively and emotionally perceived that stage in their lives.

Jumping without a Net

Ole Viborg Høiby was thirty years old and single when he left Norway. According to the emigration record, he was an office worker in a margarine manufacturing company in Oslo, whereas his friend, Ottar Enger, stated to be a twenty-three-year-old carpenter born in Rjukan, a town in the south of the country. Although we lack data as to how they met, we think it is possible that Ottar was

5 The percentage includes those who migrated a number of times in their lives, as in the case of the so-called swallow workers. On the topic, see Fernando Devoto, *Historia de la inmigración en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2003), 73–74.

an internal migrant in Norway who, in search of a job opportunity, had arrived to the capital city, Oslo, where his path crossed with that of Høiby.

As we have already mentioned, Ottar's letters begin with the account of the transatlantic journey, and give few hints to the reasons for the migration and its planning. But they provide valuable information about their arrival in Buenos Aires and about how the Norwegian emigrants deployed their capacity of agency and how they subjectively experienced an economic context that had not succeeded in maintaining the spectacular growth rates of the years prior to the Great War.⁶

When studying the connection among immigration, work and information availability, Argentine historiography has paid much attention to relational capital. The reconstruction of dense pre-migratory networks has been useful to explain the composition and variation in the flows throughout time, along with the relevance of contacts with relatives, friends, and acquaintances to the transatlantic migration as well as to the formation of ethnic communities. The analysis of the interpersonal mechanisms in migration has shed light on the operation of processes of linking that facilitated the access to opportunities (information) and provided the assistance to emigrate and find employment.⁷ Nevertheless, it has underestimated the weight of the migration occurring outside this system of links, that of those who migrated with no network but only information obtained from impersonal channels (e.g., travel agents, ocean liner brochures, press articles, and rumors), and who would build their relationships after arriving in the country.

The first thing that attracts attention in Ole and Ottar's migration is the weakness of the pre-migratory networks. Their accounts show the conditions of uncertainty and the exiguity and inaccuracy of the information they had at their arrival in Buenos Aires. In Norway, Ottar had read a newspaper article on Argentina that advised people to emigrate in February since the start of the harvest season increased the demand of workers. But in a letter written a few

6 On the economic history of the period, see Barbero María Inés and Fernando Rocchi, "La industria argentina en el período de entreguerras" in *Academia Nacional de la Historia, Nueva Historia de la Nación Argentina* Vol. IX (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 2002); Mariano Berroetaveña, Guillermo Parson, Liliana Román and Hernán Rosal, *Ideas, política, economía y sociedad en la Argentina, 1880–1955* (Buenos Aires: Biblos, 2007); Pablo Gerchunoff and Lucas Llach, *El ciclo de la ilusión y el desencanto. Un siglo de políticas económicas argentinas* (Buenos Aires: Ariel, 2003); Mario Rapaport, *Historia económica, social y política de la Argentina, 1880–2003* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 2007).

7 The problem of social networks and immigration in Argentina has been intensively studied by scholars. For a comprehensive analysis of the different historiographical approaches to the issue, see Devoto, *Historia de la inmigración*, Ch. 3.

days after his arrival, he regretted having trusted such wrong information because, far from starting, the harvest season was already finishing. Nevertheless, other data turned out to be true (and useful), although it is not clear if they were collected from the same source. For example, both friends knew about the existence of the Norwegian church and the Norwegian Sailors' Home in Buenos Aires, and were informed about the possibility of free lodging at the Immigrants' Hotel in the port of the city.⁸

With inaccurate information, and lacking strong pre-migratory links, Ole and Ottar began to create a network after their arrival. The Norwegian pastor helped them to get their first job, and put them in contact with the Danish community in the town. During the first week in Buenos Aires, they deployed all their skills to build up a meager social capital. Their days were passed in a geographically confined setting near the port, in the neighborhood of San Telmo. There were located the Danish and Norwegian churches, the Skandinavien hotel where they stayed, and the Norwegian and German Sailors' Homes,⁹ places that they frequented at different moments of their stay in Argentina. In those places they heard about salaries and areas of the country that offered more work opportunities, but they did not manage to establish any firm contact. So the pastor wrote a recommendation letter to the Norwegian foreman of El Mate, a ranch close to the village of La Zanja in the district of Trenque-Lauquen, 445 kilometers west of Buenos Aires city (See map 7.1).

At the end of February 1927, Ole and Ottar started the first stage of their migratory route in Argentina. Among descriptions of the pampean landscape and working days shared with Italian, Spanish, and local laborers, Ottar's letters reveal the change in his image of Argentina throughout the almost seven months they remained in El Mate. The land of opportunities gradually turned into a chimera, and the reality of the situation was far less enticing than the one he expected to find when emigrating from Norway. In the transition between these two representations of the country, Ottar begins to conceive the idea of returning home.

After two months working at the ranch, he writes: "Argentina is not Eldorado as we thought and as so many others still think." At the beginning of winter, in

8 The Immigration and Colonization Law of 1876 granted five days of free lodging at the Immigrants Hotel, as well as state aid to place the immigrant in the work and transfer him to the residence place at expense of the state.

9 It is possible that they obtained the information about the sailors' homes (directly or indirectly) from the crews of the whalers that sailed from Norway to the ports of Buenos Aires and Santos, Brazil. As we will see further on, in Buenos Aires Ole and Ottar met with sailors from Norwegian whalers with whom they established casual relationships.

response to a letter in which his parents had told him about the plans some youths from Rjukan had of emigrating, Ottar says: "Argentina is the last place a Norwegian should go to."

As a corollary to that, he expresses his intention of going back to Norway (he will reiterate this in subsequent letters), and, at least in the rhetorical dimension, he starts outlining his return. But in reality, the lack of money alters the return into an unattainable goal he perhaps writes about to relieve homesickness. It is significant that in his letters from May and June he talks less and less about himself and the context that surrounded him. Instead, his account focuses on Norway, whether it is by responding to family matters that his parents write about, or by asking them to send him magazines and papers, to whose contents he often refers in his correspondence.

The inclusion of the return in his account was surely also due to his precarious position in El Mate. Ottar often expressed his discontent with his salary, claiming that it was much lower than what he had heard while staying at the Skandinavien hotel, and than the one earned by laborers in the south of the province, where some colonies of Danish farmers had settled since the late 1800s. The letters written towards the end of winter show how the precariousness of his position transformed El Mate into a passing place while at the same time the "Danish district" became a goal.

It has often been said that in letters the author represents himself while simultaneously configuring the recipient, and that the sender-recipient relationship determines both the form and the content of what is written: what is said and what is unsaid, and the way in which truth is masked or in which emotions are expressed. The sender's representations may also establish a dynamic on that long-distance dialogue as well as a priority order for the topics. In Ottar's correspondence, the idea of returning was for several months the commonplace of the account and ended up by colonizing the writing of his parents, who passed from being passive recipients of the disappointed and pessimistic images with which Ottar represented Argentina to appropriating to themselves the topic and assuming a discursively active role by urging their son to come back home. But while the family situation in Rjukan was relatively stable, that of Ottar changed from one letter to the next, and surely his parents would read with bewilderment this passage of a letter from July 24, 1927:

I know you think I have to come back home as soon as possible, and I am of the same opinion, but I think that, having come here, it is better for me to stay some time longer and try.

MAP 7.1 *Train journey from Buenos Aires to La Zanja (Trenque Lauquen)*
BASED ON “MAPA DE LA PROVINCIA DE BUENOS AIRES” BY INSTITUTO
GEOGRÁFICO NACIONAL ([HTTP://WWW.IGN.GOB.AR/IMAGES/MAPASFISICOS/BUENOSAIRESA4.JPG](http://www.ign.gob.ar/images/mapasfisicos/BUENOSAIRESA4.JPG))

Ole had been exchanging letters for over a month with Dansk Hjelpeforening, a mutual aid society established in 1892 by the Danish congregation in Buenos Aires. This association, whose existence he had learned of at the Norwegian church, worked as a job bank for the numerous immigrants who arrived in Argentina without a net to support them. The society, whose visible face was the pastor, accommodated immigrants in the same boarding house of San Telmo where Ole and Ottar had stayed during their first days in Argentina, and got them jobs in the rural settlements of the Danish community.¹⁰

In early September, Ole received a letter from the Dansk Hjelpeforening with a dozen of names of Danish farmers to whom ask for a job. A few days later, the Norwegians left El Mate and spent some days in Buenos Aires on their way from the rural world of the west to that of the south of the province. But fate would change that course.

During their stay in the city, they were doing some paperwork at the consulate when a casual encounter with a Norwegian engineer who worked for a British railroad company opened a new work perspective for them. Without dwelling on thoughts or calculations, Ole and Ottar decided to go to Salta, a city about 500 kilometers north of Buenos Aires, and follow the advice of their fellow countryman to ask for a job at the works of the Central Norte railroad, a line that would connect Argentina with Bolivia and that was in full expansion in the 1920s.

After a month of silence, Ole writes again before the departure. The letter in which he describes the change of plans shows him to be euphoric. The downcast tone and the money anxiety that tinged his representations of Argentina with pessimism give way to a lively and excited account. With the certainty that a good job was waiting for them (with a better salary than the one they expected to get in the Danish colonies), with their tickets already bought, and about to set out on the journey, Ole and Ottar now had the opportunity to go all over Buenos Aires and look at it with travelers' eyes for the first time. Ottar tells they interspersed their social life at the Norwegian church and the German Sailor's Home with long walks through the modern urban pattern of the "Paris of the South." They wandered through the elegant avenues, visited the zoo, and stayed in cafes observing the locals. Once again the city is a departure point, not now to a precarious rural job but to a company that carries out "a monumental work of thousands of kilometers of tracks and millions of pesos in cost,"

10 On the Danish mutual aid society, see María Bjerg, "The Danes in the Argentine Pampa: The Role of Ethnic Leader in the Creation of an Ethnic Community" in *Mass Migration to Modern Latin America* ed. Samuel Baily and Eduardo Míguez (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, 2003), 147–66.

as he proudly told his parents. The optimism of the account leaves no place for the return. The journey to the north is a turning point and a promise of a new beginning.

Once in Salta, following the coordinates given by their contact in Buenos Aires, Ole and Ottar met an engineer from the company who hired workers for the building of a bridge in the outskirts of the city. But those works were coming to an end and the company was not hiring anymore. So, the engineer suggested they continue on to Embarcación, a town on the borders of the subtropical region of the *Chaco salteño*, 260 kilometers northeast of Salta. Several branch lines of the Central Norte converged at that point, and the railway's repair shops and warehouses were there. Different works were being carried out in the place, and they would probably get a job at some of them.

The Way to Tartagal

In Salta, a new course began for Ole and Ottar, who recorded it in their diaries. Two accounts that, oscillating between detailed description and laconic narrative, offer information about the capacity of agency, work opportunities, money, networks, sociability, and rituals that regulated the time for work and for leisure.

The dominant topic in the diaries is work. The search for it organizes the route from Buenos Aires to the north of the country. The course of the travelers follows the railroad line and takes them into the *Chaco salteño*, where the forest exploitation, the sugar mills, and the brand-new oil drillings demanded a workforce. But before addressing the pilgrimage of the two friends, let us delve briefly into the features that characterized the economy of this region of the Salta province.

In the 1920s the region had four productive niches, which hired mostly indigenous workers and Bolivian migrant workers. The first niche, whose origins date back to the 1700s, was the sugar industry, characterized by a strong seasonality in the workforce demand and by the use of mechanisms of exploitation and coercion such as the debt peonage, or truck system, on which we will return later. Another sector that demanded workforce was the construction of the Central Norte railroad that, in turn, had invigorated the third niche, the forest industry. This latter produced timber for the railway infrastructure and supplied the wood for the locomotives. Finally, in the mid-1920s, the American company Standard Oil started oil extraction in the area and set up its offices in Tartagal (one of the stations of the Central Norte railroad). In parallel with the expansion of the foreign oil company, the Argentine state

launched an aggressive policy of monopoly control of hydrocarbons and started its own oil exploitation in the region through the state company Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales (henceforth YPF). By the end of the 1920s, the official discourse pinned its hopes of prosperity of the nation on the “black gold” and deployed an anti-imperialist campaign whose main target was the American company.¹¹ As we will see, it was in this atmosphere of hostility towards Standard Oil that Ole and Ottar entered the offices in Tartagal searching for a job.

Let's return now to the departure point: the city of Salta. The journey from Buenos Aires had used up their savings. To go on to Embarcación, Ole and Ottar had to sell their watches and the Kodak camera they had used to record their days in El Mate,¹² and with which they probably expected to record their journey through the margins of Argentina.

On September 29, 1927, the Norwegians were again en route. With little money, vague references, and no networks, they groped their way forward, depending on casual encounters and fleeting relationships to get a job. At the end of September 30, they arrived at Betania, a town in the department of General Güemes, some forty kilometers from the city of Salta. Night fell on them there, and according Ottar's diary,

As we were trying to install ourselves in an abandoned coach, the superintendent appeared, and after interrogating us he invited us to spend the night at the police station...and told us that in the next [railroad] station we could get a job paying two *pesos* a day plus food and boarding.

The superintendent was referring to the nearby town of Campo Santo and the San Isidro sugar mill, one of the oldest in the province, where, according to Ole,

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- 11 On the oil policy of the Argentine state and its relation to the Standard Oil Company, see José Daniel Benclowicz, “Aportes para una Historia del Norte de Salta. Conformación y desarrollo de las localidades de Tartagal y General Mosconi en la primera mitad del siglo xx,” *Andes* 22 (2011); Nicolás Gadano, *Historia del petróleo en la Argentina. 1907–1955: Desde los inicios hasta la caída de Perón* (Buenos Aires: Edhasa, 2006); Marcos Kaplan, “Política del petróleo en la primera presidencia de Hipólito Yrigoyen (1916–1922),” *Desarrollo Económico* 45 (Apr.-Jun- 1972): 3–24; Carl Solberg, *Oil and Nationalism in Argentina. A History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1979).
- 12 In several letters, Ottar alludes to the photographs he would send to his family. For his part, Ole bought a new camera with one of his first salary from Standard Oil, and there are references in his diary to the photos he took in Salta.

We waited for a couple of hours, eating sugarcane, and we got a job. We met a Danish electrician who had been working there for fifteen days. He asked the boss if there was work, and he was told yes right away, and that we have to start tomorrow. Ottar as a cart driver, and I as a machine driver.

To Ole and Ottar, San Isidro was just a temporary job to save up for the train tickets to Embarcación. In that place, where they were socially isolated, living almost without communication with a large mass of indigenous workers, Ottar speaks again about returning home. On October 10, 1927, he writes, Homesickness comes back, and if I had the money now I'd probably turn my back on Argentina.

During their stay in San Isidro, the entries in both diaries are brief but revealing as to the work conditions in the factory. The fatigue, the long working days, the variety of tasks, the tiny and dirty hut they shared with two Bolivian workers, and the discontent with the salary do nothing but confirm, from the individual perspective of personal accounts, the work conditions characteristic of the sugar economy of Salta.

In the indigenous communities, the sugar mills had been an inexhaustible source of cheap workforce, since thousands of indigenous workers were brought by force from their communities, especially for the sugar cane crop. While the "white"¹³ laborers worked in the production and transport of sugar and in the maintenance of the mill, the indigenous worked in the cane field. Their pay was lower than that of the "whites" and consisted of a combination of provisions and a private currency issued by the sugar factory (vouchers) usable only at the company-owned store. There the food, tobacco, and alcohol were very expensive, so they often got into debt with the employers, who forbade them to abandon the mill. For their part, the "white" employees, better remunerated and with shorter working days, were paid in cash but, just like the cane field laborers, they could not evade the truck system, since a considerable part of their weekly salary was paid in the form of credit to purchase at the company store.¹⁴

13 For the most part the so-called white population comprised Creole people, though this denomination also included Syrian-Lebanese and Europeans immigrants.

14 For the organization of work in sugar plantations of Northern Argentina, see Daniel Campi and Marcelo Lagos, "Auge azucarero y mercado de trabajo en el Noroeste argentino, 1850–1930," in *Circuitos mercantiles y mercados en Latinoamérica. Siglos XVIII y XIX* ed. Jorge Silva Riquer, Juan Carlos Grosso and Carmen Yuste (México, Instituto Mora/UNAM, 1995); Ana Teruel, "El Bordo Occidental del Chaco Argentino. Políticas de sometimiento indígena e integración al Estado Nación. Segunda mitad del siglo XIX" in *La nacionalización de la Amazonía* ed. Pilar García Jordán and Nuria Sala i Vila (Barcelona: Universitat de Barcelona, 1998).

In spite of these unfavorable conditions, with two weeks' work Ole and Ottar saved up the money for the tickets and left Campo Santo. They arrived in Embarcación on the evening of October 16. But there were no jobs, because the start of the railroad works was delayed. Then an employee of the train station told them that in General Ballivián, forty kilometers to the northeast, the Standard Oil company was recruiting workers (See map 7.2).

The diaries and letters reveal the discrepancy between the times of the journey and the work opportunities. Ole and Ottar arrived in Argentina when the harvest was coming to an end, in Salta when the construction of the railway bridge was completed, and in Embarcación when it was too early, because the works had not started yet. The vagueness of information prevented them from getting a job, but at the same time the casual encounters and the fleeting relationships influenced them to refocus their search and change the route. Wandering around unknown places, asking in bars and hotels, railway, and police stations, they acquired approximate, but ultimately effective information.

On October 17, their first day in General Ballivián, Ole writes:

While we are drinking, a Norwegian approaches; his name is Ødegaard, and he asks us if we are Norwegians too. He tells us that he's been working at the Standard Oil offices for a year. He invites us and we go to the hotel, drink more beer and chat. Tomorrow he will help us get a job.

This casual encounter with a compatriot becomes the first rope of a net. With Ødegaard's help, Ole and Ottar go to the oil company offices and get a job. Ole is sent to a camp in Lomitas, ten kilometers from Tartagal, where he will work as an administrative assistant, while Ottar is employed as a cook assistant in Cerro Tartagal, an oil well three kilometers north of Lomitas.

Writing the Experience

When Ole and Ottar settle on their respective jobs, their writings show a change in subjectivity. Food, generous drink, frequent social intercourse, and modest welfare replace anxiety, frugality, social isolation, scarcity, and untidiness. The improvement in their material condition produces a change in mood that is reflected in the larger density and the different tone of their writings.

MAP 7.2 *The journey from the city of Salta to Tartagal*
 BASED ON "MAPA DE LA PROVINCIA DE SALTA" BY INSTITUTO GEOGRÁFICO
 NACIONAL ([HTTP://WWW.IGN.GOB.AR/IMAGES/MAPASFISICOS/SALTA4.JPG](http://www.ign.gob.ar/images/mapasfisicos/saltaa4.jpg))

The generosity and details of food are minutely described. Ole writes in his diary: "We had the best meal since we've been in Argentina. A soup, three dishes, chocolate cake, and coffee."

Ottar, in turn, tells his parents of the change in situation. The following passage of a letter written during his first weeks in Cerro Tartagal shows a new shift in the fluctuating image he has of Argentina: "Now I am better than I ever thought I could be in Argentina, I earn \$90 a month, good food."

The diaries and letters allow us also to delve into their authors' relationship with the social and cultural contexts at different moments in their journey through the north of the country. As we have already mentioned, Ottar's diary is laconic and discontinuous, two traits that become more accentuated with his settling in Cerro Tartagal, where he spends his days in relative social isolation. As for Ole, he is a scrupulous diarist, but focusing his eye on the familiar rather than the alterity. He is a walker whose path (transformed into daily writing) is roughly sketched. The strangeness of the quotidian and the observation of the variety of social and cultural textures (where the extremes of ambitious and modern projects such as the oil extraction at the Standard Oil sites coincide with old-time practices such as the debt peonage in the sugar mills) are often left out of his frame.

For example, it is suggestive that all through the fifteen days he spent at San Isidro he did not speak about the indigenous laborers. A brief sentence that shows a certain annoyance puts them marginally in the final scene of his stay in Campo Santo. While waiting for a train to take him to Embarcación, he writes, "there are many indigenous people screaming and howling monotonous songs."

The same scene appears in the diary of Ottar, who presents a more conscious view of the details that show the distance between himself and the social context in which he was immersed. And this distance was expressed in the use of two diacritics, the indigenous and the Catholic:

The train runs through sugarcane plantations, and almost all the passengers are indigenous, with their bowed heads, their slanted eyes, broad nose, and a large mouth with thick lips. Women are barefoot, dressed in flashy clothes, and with collars covering their entire neck. We saw many priests, but I find them disagreeable, with their beer belly, their pig face, and their saintly appearance.

The relief experienced by Ole at the Standard Oil with regard to his material condition results in a greater narrative density and a more conscious view of the context. His account intersperses abundant references to the work routine with descriptions of the social life at the camp, an eminently masculine world in which local and foreign workers lived together.

It is obvious that Ole must have had daily interactions with the Argentine and Bolivian workers of Lomitas, but his account does not linger on them. During the first weeks in the camp, he shared lodgings with two Salta laborers whom he mentions only incidentally, whether it is because he had no interaction with them other than the casual living together, or because there was nothing extraordinary in the experience so as to put it in writing. So, in Ole's narrative the locals appear as actors of a compact supporting cast, amorphous, and silent, and only occasionally do they gain attention:

In the afternoon Carlstrøm was ready to pay the wages. He was at a table with the payments, and the niggers came and stamped their thumbs because most of them cannot write their name.

This is one of the few episodes in which Ole's conceptual world incorporates the experience of estrangement and tells of the articulations of meaning stemmed from the contrast between the known and the different.

For his part, Ottar does not dedicate a single line of his diary to the social life in the Cerro Tartagal camp. And in his letters he complained about his isolation, saying that “young men who work here are not good company to me. Most of them are indigenous and a vile race in my opinion.” The language was possibly influential on the images of the locals that Ole and Ottar constructed in their own mind, and on the distance they took from them. To their poor knowledge of Spanish was added the fact that the Bolivian workers (and some of the locals of indigenous origin) spoke in their native tongues.¹⁵ This double language barrier was undoubtedly difficult to escape. But it is also true, as is demonstrated by the personal narratives of other European immigrants, that the ignorance (or the poor knowledge) of language and the lack of verbal communication are not always obstacles for describing what is physically near even if culturally distant.¹⁶ Instead, Ole and Ottar kept themselves distant from the otherness embodied in the local society and, as we will see next, they limited their account to what happened in the narrow circle of European and American employees of the camp.

Drinking and Hunting: Repertories of Masculinity

Ole's diary reveals that in the oil enclave, the culture of work was accompanied by forms of sociability identified with places and practices. The pleasures of the table and conversation regulated leisure time. The working day did not end without the diarist going to the camp mess hall to feast on great dishes. Dinner was one of the moments of encounter that allowed the pastime of conversation. But in matters of recreation, the most common practice was the alcohol consumption that followed from sudden invitations (thus prolonging the chat), from occasional visits to the city of Tartagal, and from social reunions with beer, wine, and whisky in abundance.

It is well known that work and alcohol have always had a conflictive relationship. Ever since the early concern of the industrial economy about

15 The northeast area of the province of Salta is divided, by its language variety, into two large linguistic families characteristic of the Big Chaco: the *tupí-guaraní*, and the *mataco-mataguaya*, among which are included the original languages of the Bolivian migrants who crossed the border in search of work.

16 That was the case of two European female immigrants whose cases I have studied: Dorothea Fugl and Ella Brunswig. See María Bjerg, *El mundo de Dorothea. La vida en un pueblo de la frontera de Buenos Aires en el siglo XIX* (Buenos Aires: Imago Mundi, 2004); idem. *Historias de la Inmigración en Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Edhasa, 2009) Chap.6.

disciplining the workforce, working and drinking became antagonistic practices. Alcohol and alcoholism were, in turn, cause and consequence of the so-called social question and of the construction of hegemonic discourses by which to represent both the drunkenly, lazy, disorderly, and unproductive worker, and his virtuous opposite: the sober, responsible, and productive worker. However, despite the effort to make work into a virtue and alcohol into a vice, the consumption of alcohol has been part of the popular sectors and working-class identities. Rituals of conviviality and *languages* of class and of masculinity have been developed around alcohol.¹⁷

As Sandra Gayol points out in her work on masculine sociability in Buenos Aires cafes during the period of massive immigration, inviting to drink was a legitimate excuse for starting the dialogue, a form of mediation between solitude and company, between the lack of referents and the point of support that might allow networks to expand.¹⁸ The rituals of drinking demand reciprocity, in which ties gradually develop; they embody notions of masculine honor (knowing how to drink, the good drinker), and incidentally lessen the social differences.

A good deal of those dimensions encompassed by rituality and the morals of drinking are present in Ole's diary. The following entries are just a few examples of his many references to alcohol:

I came across Olsen at the warehouse and we drank some beers!

George has a hangover today. ...He invited me for a drink of Black Label before dinner, it warms you up.

Carlstrøm and I went to Herman's place after dinner. ...They gave us beer. Olsen was there, really drunk.

Drinking was not only a brief opportunity to construct artificial paradises. The frequency and routine of the practice reveal the cultural conception of alcohol as a symbol around which workers regulated sociability and represented hierarchies. Minor employees like Ole and the German carpenter Herman would share the drink with their superiors, Carlstrøm and George, the chief of the camp and responsible for the warehouse. While drinking together, differences were put aside, but this interruption was more apparent than real, because it

17 Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of class. Studies in English working class history, 1832–1982* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

18 Sandra Gayol, "Conversaciones y desafíos en los cafés de Buenos Aires, 1870–1910" in *Historia de la vida privada en la Argentina* ed. Fernando Devoto and Marta Madero (Buenos Aires: Taurus, 1999), 58.

was the superiors who usually paid the first round of drinks, and those drinks were expensive (rum or whisky). Standing the round implied a reciprocity that forced the employees to treat their bosses to another one. But workers could only pay for cheap beverages like beer. So, in that second round hierarchies would re-appear.

Whether vice, recreation, or equalizing practice, some would drink just to show pleasure and some to get drunk. Without falling into the extreme of saying the people in the camp worked only to drink, we may think that (partially at least) the contrary might be true, that is, that they drank to work, as a part of a rituality related to the creation of social spaces for leisure. Certainly, Ole neither speaks of inveterate drunkards nor alludes to work absenteeism caused by alcohol consumption. He just speaks of “dizzies” and casual drunkards. The drinking mentioned in the diary alludes to a limited social space: that of the European and American employees of the camp. But we know little about this practice among local workers, apart from some episodes of violence fleetingly mentioned (and attributed by Ole to excessive drinking), such as the quarrels of men who fought over the same woman at brothels (episodes that often ended up in murders), or the frequent use of bladed weapons in fights among workers.

Moreover, this violence materialized in quarrels and deeds of blood, there was a ritual violence that, like drinking, regulated the social life and at the same time was a reference of virility. Tartagal was located in an area noted for its rich flora and fauna, with ferocious animals like the jaguar, the hunting of which was a local tradition and one adopted by the European and American employees of the camp. Although there are few references to this hunting, the way in which Ole alludes to it reveals that it was a common practice. The invitation to hunt was possibly part of a language of honor that expressed a challenge to virility:

Captain Delgadillo asks me in front of everyone if we want to go tiger [i.e., jaguar] hunting one of these days, and I answered, “Yes, of course.”

Agile, strong, and with a keen sense of smell, the jaguar constituted the symbol of power and fortitude, qualities that were transferred to its hunter, confirming a physical ideal based on aggressiveness, strength, and masculine sexuality. If drinking exposed a civilized dimension of masculinity, hunting brought into play the fantasy of returning to an authentic and primitive virility.

Despite the several allusions in the diary, the only detailed description of a hunting expedition shows that, as a ritual that summarizes virility, it wasn't part of a plot of meaning with which Ole would fully identify himself:

Advancing through the thicket was very arduous. We walked for a couple of hours to the perforation station number six and continued higher up. We found some water here and there, and noticed that different kinds of animals had been drinking, but the only things we shot at were a partridge and a woodpecker. We had to perform acrobatics to get to many of the places. We climbed up and slid down slopes. Hermansen had a good rifle (small caliber, 22, fifteen shots, an automatic Remington), ...but there were almost no animals.

The anticlimactic end to the hunting party is the expression of a simulacrum in a masculine world where the male had to prove his virility by hunting and his masculinity by drinking. Even if Ole did not seem to share the ritual meanings of hunting, he understood that masculine honor always had to remain safe. So, the failure of the expedition was not attributed to the hunters' inexperience but to the absence of animals.

The Return

The decision of going back to Norway comes up suddenly in Ole's account, in the middle of a routine that combined work with a sociability fluctuating between spontaneity and rituals. We know from Ottar's correspondence that they had been talking about it since their days at El Mate, but the letters show that returning was a priority for Ottar, whereas Ole was more hesitant.

Like his friend, Ole received packages with magazines and books, the reading of which, in the solitude of the nights in Lomitas, possibly took his imagination back to his place of origin. However, Norway was not part of his narrative repertoire, neither as a synthesis of nostalgia nor as a summary of desires of returning. In fact, mentions of his country are few and brief. In early December 1927, he received an unusual letter in which his mother (alluded to only once in the whole diary) informed him about an illness his father had contracted. A couple of weeks of affliction throw him into a state of anxiety, and Norway became the focus of his waiting: "I wish to have news from home soon and to know how everything is with papa."

But this expectation stops when he is told about his father's improvement. Then Norway disappears from the account until he writes, two weeks later, "Today is *Christmas Eve* in Norway, here it is just Saturday 24t/12."¹⁹ Two days

19 Underlined by the diarist. The focal point of Christmas in Norway is Christmas Eve rather than Christmas Day.

later, when Ottar, with whom he had celebrated the Christmas in Tartagal, returns to his camp, Ole writes, "He left with Columdsen, so now we'll only meet again when we go to Norway. I rejoice with the idea of coming back home."

Christmas, and a celebration with plenty of alcohol, was possibly what triggered Ole's nostalgia. But the routine of Lomitas blurred Norway once again until mid-January, when he received a letter from Ottar saying he had quit the company and was returning to Europe. At the beginning of 1928 the company had reduced its personnel in Cerro Tartagal, leaving Ottar without employment and offering him instead a transfer to a camp in Bolivia. Tired of the isolation and solitude that had accompanied his job at the Standard Oil, Ottar traveled to the province of Santiago del Estero and joined a threshing team at the wheat harvest, a temporary job by which he expected to save up the money for the ticket to Norway.

For his part, in early January 1928 Ole had been promoted to timekeeper and received a salary raise. Why would he give up a good position at the company? Was it perhaps Ottar's leaving that prompted his return? Probably. But the effects of the escalation in the conflict between Standard Oil and the national government also has to be considered. In September 1927 the Argentine Chamber of Deputies had passed a state monopoly of hydrocarbons. But despite the law, YPF faced serious operational difficulties, since the oil areas had been already awarded to the American company. In fact, when YPF's first operations center was established, a few kilometers from Tartagal, the drilling sites overlapped with areas licensed to Standard Oil, and the government had to order the suspension of YPF activities. But when in March 1928 the election results brought a change of government in the province of Salta, the new governor, who supported the nationalization project, ordered the suspension of the Standard Oil operations and cleared the competitors out of the YPF's way.

Ole probably did not comprehend the magnitude of the conflict, but some of the entries in his last two months at the company reveal the effects of an alien political dispute that he could not withdraw from. Discontented with the company's new situation, on February 1928 some of his superiors told him they were leaving the camp. A few weeks later, Ole speaks of a radical change in the personnel in Lomitas. A new warehouse manager, a new foreman, and two engineers were coming from Bolivia to replace those who were quitting and departing to Buenos Aires. The dramatic speed of changes in the camp attracted the attention of Ole, who wrote on 28 February, 1928: "Changes fall like bolts of lightning from the sky here at Standard Oil."²⁰ A few days later, the

20 Underlined by the diarist.

company announced a wage cut for timekeepers. His friend had left the company, and the Swedish foreman and the German warehouse manager, two of Ole's closest co-workers in the camp, were leaving, too. So he decided to hasten his departure. In early March he came back to Buenos Aires, where he would meet Ottar at his return from Santiago del Estero.

The two friends spent two weeks in the city. They divided their time between preparations for the return journey and social life at the Norwegian church and the German and Norwegian Sailors' Homes. While waiting for the departure of the *Bayern*, a German ship that would take them to Europe, they wandered through Buenos Aires like they had done a few months before when they were in transit to Salta. They felt relaxed and safe. They again behaved like travelers who enjoyed the pleasure of movie theaters, chess games at the Skandinavien boarding house, and casual encounters like the one with the sailors of a Norwegian whaler with whom they drank beer at a bar in the port. On 23 March, 1928, they departed Buenos Aires, and a few days later, while the *Bayern* sailed along the coast of Brazil, they ended their diaries.

Conclusion

The experiences of Ole and Ottar reveal the strength of the weak ties²¹ in immigration and in the construction of the relational capital that provides access to the work market, and the way in which a limited amount of information allows people to act, elaborate strategies, and face the costs that result from decisions made under conditions of uncertainty (of extreme uncertainty sometimes).²² In the case of Ole and Ottar, who had practically no pre-migratory networks, the information was not only insufficient but also wrong. However, a handful of precise references allowed them to access a bigger volume of data from which to develop their first post-migratory nets. Thus, the Norwegian church, the Norwegian Sailors' Home, and the Skandinavien boarding house, constituted, each on its way, social spaces that facilitated the introduction of the newcomers into the host society, and indirectly guided and re-guided their path through Argentina.

21 Mark S. Granovetter, "The strength of weak ties" *American Journal of Sociology*, 78, 6 (May 1973): 1360–80.

22 On the decision-making under conditions of uncertainty and limited information, see Giovanni Levi, *L'eredità immateriale. Carriera di un esorcista nel Piemonte del Seicento* (Turin: Giulio Einaudi, 1985).

The absence of pre-migratory social ties made their access to the work market more difficult, placed them in a precarious work situation, and had an influence first on their successive internal migrations and later on their decision to return to Norway. On this point, we could ask about the meaning of return in the representations of migrants. Is it a goal from the beginning of the journey, or is just a rhetorical resource to help maintain an imaginary link with the place of origin? Is return the result of a failure,²³ or is it part of a circuit of temporary migrations?

Even if the accounts of Ole and Ottar say little about why they migrated, we know they arrived with the idea of working in the harvest, a typical employment for the seasonal migrants known as “swallows.” But we cannot thereby conclude that they departed from Norway with the goal of returning. Their personal narratives suggest that the return gradually imposed itself as a response to the failure of their expectations about job availability and wage levels. At the same time, the return was used (especially by Ottar) as a resource to lessen the unease caused by disappointment, and as a rhetorical figure that accompanied the expression of change in his representations of Argentina.

In this case, the return allows reflecting on one of the topics examined in the introduction of this book. As is pointed out there, one of the dominant conceptions in the bibliography on Norwegian emigration was that, unlike what happened with those who went to the United States, the Norwegians who traveled to Latin America were adventurers. Young men, without a family and with a certain level of education who did not expect to live in their places of destination but only to capitalize on experiences, immersed themselves into the unfamiliar and then returned to the Old World. Ole and Ottar did have some of the characteristics supporting this image. Both were young, single, and educated.²⁴ Both took photographs of their experience. And both narrated their passage through the *Chaco salteño*, a stretch of the migration that in their opinion, perhaps on account of the unusual and exotic, deserved to be recorded in a personal diary. However, they did not migrate in search of exotic places and experiences, nor did they imagine Argentina as a sort of last natural frontier and reservoir of alterity.

Ole and Ottar were not adventurers but migrants in search of employment, who through their personal narratives proved to be pretty much resistant to otherness. But they could not completely withdraw from the cultural

23 The opposite could also be true, that is, that the reason for returning is the economic success and the possibility of investing in the purchase of property in Europe.

24 Both of them are fond of reading and take an interest in photography and in symphonic music. Ole was fairly fluent in English and German.

repertoires of their time, and like other travelers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they went to Latin America and, once there, they moved away from the urban and cosmopolitan modernity to go into a farm at the borders of the Humid Pampa, and later in a border and subtropical region inhabited by indigenous people. And although they did so not by choice, but because it was imposed on them by the circumstances of the work market in Buenos Aires, the experience was expressed in their accounts with a combination of resources featuring a certain *flâneurism*, typical of the period: that of the travelers, tourists, and bourgeois adventurers from the capitalist world who recorded in writing and photography the personal perspectives of their transit through the unfamiliar.