Migrants on Skis: Norwegian-Latin American Return Migration in the 1890s

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But I reached the conclusion that the best thing I could do was to get out of South America as soon as possible.¹

Introduction

On January 18, 1890, about two months after having read a highly unusual job advertisement, twelve young men left Norway for Argentina.² The Chilean railway company Clark & Co. had employed them to ski with letters and telegrams over the Andes. The top tunnel of the Transandine Railway was under construction, and postal service between the Argentinean and the Chilean sides of La Cordillera was therefore necessary, also during the winter months. The Norwegians were contracted in order to solve this problem. Less than two years later, only one of the Norwegians was still in Latin America; he had married a Chilean woman, and they were expecting their first of four children.³ Eight of the twelve Norwegian skiers had returned to Norway, two had continued to the United States, and one was deceased.

The aim of the present book is to shed light on why so few of the Norwegians who went to Latin America from 1820 to 1940 decided to stay. This chapter will exemplify the issue through the decision of the twelve Norwegian skiers to stay, move on, or return. The skiers were employed to do manual work in Argentina right in the middle of this period. Their motivations for leaving Norway, as I will develop further on, seem to have been predominantly economic. Their case presents the typical combination of an adverse condition

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¹ "Men jeg kom til den slutning at det bedste jeg kunde gøre var at se og komme mig fra Sydamerika snarest mulig." K.J. Johansen, Norske Skiløbere i Sydamerika. Reiseskildringer (Chicago: John Anderson Publishing, 1892), 129.
² Ole Hannibal Lie to father, Liverpool, England, January 28, 1890; Johansen, Norske Skiløbere i Sydamerika, 14.
³ Anne Heidi Røstad, e-mail message, November 21, 2013. Røstad is a relative of Gert/Gerardo Lindh and gives this information based on family searches in birth and church registers.
(economic distress) that pushed them to leave the old country and an attraction (the work contract) that pulled them to the new country, described by for example Loken as typical for Norwegian migration to Canada and the United States. Nevertheless, when it comes to their decision to stay, move on, or return to Norway, there seem to be two additional sets of factors that influence their decision-making: networks and the conditions at the venue. The network factor relates to the quality of the contacts with other Norwegians they meet, their interaction with other immigrants as well as with the local population. The second factor relates to their material working and living conditions and how historical events may have influenced these. The early 1890s was a turbulent era in both Argentina and Chile, and the narratives that I will analyze further on tell both about the 1890 civil war in Chile and about political and economic instability in Argentina.

The case of the Norwegian skiers in the Andes is very well documented. Not only has the advertisement for the skiers, published in several Norwegian newspapers such as Verdens Gang, been conserved, so have several related articles published in Aftenposten in 1889–91. The Norwegian consul general in Buenos Aires either authored or provided information for some of these articles. The skiers themselves also wrote about the event. Theodor Østgaard published five articles in Aftenposten written in Argentina and Chile about the construction of the railway and the experiences of the skiers. Another of the skiers, K.J. Johansen, who left Norway as Kristen J. Knygg, published the book-length travel account Norske skiløbere i Sydamerika (Norwegian skiers in

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5 The advertisement, entitled “God fortjeneste” (Good earnings), appears in Verdens Gang, November 28, 1889, 4. From what others write it seems to have been published more widely, for example in Aftenposten, but I have not found it there. Related articles are “Skiløbere til Argentinien. En Advarsel,” Aftenposten, December 18, 1889, morning edition, 1; “Skiløbere til Argentinien,” Aftenposten, December 19, 1889, morning edition, 1; “Norske Skiløbere til Argentina,” Aftenposten, January 17, 1890, evening edition, 2; “De norske Skiløbere i Sydamerika. Svar fra den norske Generalkonsul,” Aftenposten, August 25, 1891, morning edition, 1; “De norske Skiløbere i Argentina,” Aftenposten, October 15, 1891, morning edition, 2. See also note 6.
6 Østgaard’s articles were published in Aftenposten on April 10, 1890 (evening edition), May 24, 1890 (evening edition), July 15, 1890 (evening edition), June 2, 1891 (evening edition), and August 16, 1891 (morning edition). Three of the articles are signed T.O. (April 10, 1890, July 15, 1890 and June 2, 1891). The article of May 24, 1890, is presented as “from Aftenpostens correspondent in Argentine,” and the one of August 16, 1891, is not signed. It is possible that Østgaard wrote more articles. I have found these five searching relevant key words in the digitized edition available from the national library.