CHAPTER 8

Three Norwegian Experiences in Post-Revolutionary Mexico: Per Imerslund, Halfdan Jebe and Ola Apenes

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Introduction

At the beginning of the 1940s, Mexico's Migration Service had in its registry of foreigners about 120 Norwegians. Most arrived in the country in the early 1920s and a smaller percentage did so during the following decade.¹ The 1930 census recorded only seventy-one nationwide, so generally speaking, in a country with approximately 16.5 million inhabitants, the number of Norwegian immigrants was truly insignificant.² Indeed, it appears that Mexico was rarely considered as a destination for Norwegians in the early twentieth century, if we compare it with the United States of America or other countries on the American continent, such as Argentina or Chile.

The three Norwegians described in this chapter were very different individuals who had very diverse experiences and adventures in a country that was emerging from a revolution and entering its first stage of modernization in the twentieth century. For Mexico, the post-revolutionary years from 1920 to 1940 represented a complex process of establishing peace and entering into a world involved in a debate over socialist and capitalist currents, each with particular hints of pure nationalism. Between outbreaks of violence and recognition of a national art and a vigorous past, which was no less exotic, modern, and eager for discoveries, the three Norwegians knew how to assimilate effectively during those twenty years. Despite their dissimilarities, their Mexican experience

¹ I owe this information to Delia Salazar, who was kind enough to send me a list of Norwegian citizens found in the National Registry of Foreigners of the Ministry of the Interior 1917–47 kept in the National Archives, and to the detailed work of Steinar Sæther, coordinator of the research project “ Desired Immigrants – Frustrated Adventurers? Norwegians in Latin America (1820–1940),” who also provided me with valuable information on the other Norwegians mentioned in these pages. I would also like to thank Dr. John Dagfinn Bergsagel for his accurate suggestions and corrections on Halfdan Jebe’s story.

was decisive in the paths of their lives. All three contributed to the knowledge and art of their time, although each was recognized independently since their spheres of action could not be more distant.

First, we will follow the adventures of Nils Per Imerslund, a restless young man who after visiting Mexico and publishing a pair of fictionalized autobiographical accounts, would become an important figure within Norwegian Nazism until he died during World War II. Second, we will review the life and work of musician Halfdan Jebe, who would end his long and eventful experience on Mexican soil after a troubled stay in Yucatán full of teaching and creating music. Finally, we will recount the experiences and contributions of the engineer and mathematician Ola Apenes amid the reconstruction of the Mexican past during the 1930s. Like Imerslund, Apenes died unexpectedly during World War II, although his political sympathies were clearly the opposite of his compatriot.

The regions in Mexico where the three spent their time were equally contrasting: Imerslund’s experiences took place mainly in the state of Colima, in the country’s midwestern region; Halfdan Jebe was active in Mérida, capital of the state of Yucatán, in the far southeast corner of the country; and Ola Apenes did his research and made his contributions in Mexico City and the surrounding area. The trio’s activities were also very different, as they ranged from teaching, artistic research, and technical service to commerce, plunder, and war. Therefore, their adventures in Mexico are particularly interesting and to some degree atypical, if one thinks about migration as a phenomenon that is strictly about adventure or work.

Imerslund, Jebe, and Apenes all developed a particular interest in the exotic and mythical pre-Hispanic world. While the former saw it as a possible source of wealth and adventure, the latter two viewed it as an inspiration, and an area of knowledge and research.

Mexico – during these post-revolutionary years and in the process of modernizing – was a key influence on the lives and works of these three Norwegians.

Nils Per Imerslund and His Family in Mexico

Also called the “Aryan Idol” (Det ariske idol), Nils Per Imerslund was born on May 9, 1912, in Kristiania and died on December 7, 1943, at Aker University Hospital in Oslo. Tall, blond, and athletic, an adventurer and reputed homosexual, he was a prominent figure in the Norwegian Nazi scene shortly before and during World War II. As a promoter of certain ideas linked to ethnic purity, racial superiority, and anti-communism, he was well known from the second