

The image of Mexico in Czechoslovak travel sketches of the 1940s and 1950s

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The points made in this study were inspired by two books from the cultural sphere of the renewed post-war Czechoslovak Republic: *Mexiko (Niekoľko črt)* (Mexico [Several Sketches], 1949) and *Mexiko je v Americe. Črty a snímky z cesty* (Mexico is in America. Sketches and Images from a Journey, 1952). The author of the first book was Ján Boor (1915–2002), at that time an official at the literary-historical department of the Matica slovenská (a Slovak cultural institution). The second book was written by Czech journalist and diplomat Norbert Frýd (1913–1976).¹ While Frýd's trip to Mexico turned into a longer experience, and he worked there as a cultural attaché at least between 1947 and 1948,² Boor spent five weeks there as a member of the Czechoslovak delegation at the second UNESCO conference (held from November 6 to December 3, 1947). As far as their scope is concerned, both books seem to reflect the differing length of time the authors spent in Mexico, and above all, their different personalities and experiences. Both Frýd and Boor dramatize the place with scenes or images of life there, in conjunction with a “reflexive layer of imagination” (the term used by P. Valček; 2006, 122), which enables us to interpret both works in the context of the mental representation of another person. It should be emphasized that this is not the only travelogue that provides readers in Czechoslovakia with a look at Mexico. Other sources of the image of Mexico included reports from the motorist and promoter of the Czechoslovak automobile industry František A. Elstner (1902–1974) in the second half of the 1940s, the famous travellers Jiří Hanzelka (1920–2003) and Miloslav Zikmund (born 1919) in the 1950s, ethnographer Miroslav Stingl (b. 1930) and sports journalist Imrich Hornáček (1925–1977) in the 1960s, the editor and permanent correspondent of Czechoslovak Radio in Latin America Valentín Benčat (1941–2019) and the ethnographer and director of the Náprstek Museum in Prague, Václav Šolc (1919–1995) in the 1980s.³

In particular, the Czech botanist and ethnographer Alberto Vojtěch Frič (1882–1944), visited Mexico on the sixth of his eight expeditions to the Americas (1923–1924). He performed “great botanical-collector's journeys” (Frič [1942] 1977, 9), as

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part of his life objective of “looking through the great book of nature and searching for the hidden truth within” (5). He is known in European botanical history as an expert in cacti and other tropical plants. He was fascinated by “their mysterious, magical qualities – whether they were poisons or medicines (which is always possible)” (9). During the first Czechoslovak Republic, he published the results of his research, which also drew on a visit to the Amerindian Tarahumara tribe of northern Mexico, in his book *O kaktech a jejich narkotických účincích* (On Cacti and Their Narcotic Effects, 1924, reissued 1995).⁴ In the preface to his ethnographically focused travel sketches *Indians of South America*, A. V. Frič reveals that his expeditions to the American continent became the source of unexpected discoveries among the Indian tribes, which he felt the need to record in order for them not to disappear completely in the face of the civilization process. His image of the Indians presented their “special ancient beauty”, “wonderful thoughts”, “the spiritual wealth of a healthy natural person”, “auto-suggestive and suggestive superstitions, embodied in gentle singing and poetic myths”, their habits and opinions, as well as their purity and morality in forms, and many of them (and A. V. Frič writes from his own experience) did not make it through the moral or puritanical censorship of the European scientific community, or of “civilized” Europe (11–12). The professional community of Frič’s time refused to accept his description of otherness, although paradoxically it was the author who basically naturalized himself into the native environment (he lived longest with the Paraguayan tribe of Chamacoco, where his descendants still live now), and from this base he sought to penetrate their mentality. That is why this experience closely evokes the cultural tension between the Old and the New World which finds fertile ground for various discourses about the exoticization of the relationship between civilization and barbarism, the myth of the land of well-being and the noble savages, drawing on an idealized image of the native in the first travel-related texts from the other side of the Atlantic.

It took a long time for A. V. Frič to write a text that would have the attributes of a travelogue – the preface to the aforementioned travelogue about Indians is dated 1942, therefore he wrote it as a sixty-year-old, with both the human and professional knowledge that belonged to that age. He clearly stated his reasons for the “delay”: he did not want to copy (as was usual in his time) from other travel books, handbooks or tourist guides, and he did not know how to avoid it. In addition, he was sure that “even the most careful observer who lived for years among natives in the wild will find barely five percent of the observations that had not been made and described before him. Then there is perhaps about twenty percent which has been known and described by others, but in a false or distorted manner” (7), and it would therefore start a debate, the energy for which he only gained at the end of his life, aware of the cultural riches that he had accumulated on his repeated journeys to the Americas.

As this study is focused on literary travel material, a term which applies to the works of Norbert Frýd and Ján Boor, I will not examine the extent of the originality of the observations and information presented to the readers of their journeys to Mexico, although it is very unlikely to reach Frič’s five percent. And what that remarkable traveller would describe as simplified, with shifted meaning or in a false context

serves as a valuable source of exploring the difference represented by Mexico and reflected in Central Europe, where the imagological potential of travel literature in the Central European area has been brilliantly revealed by several recent works (e. g. Gáfrik 2018; Hrabal, ed., 2015). They show that literature as such “plays an important role in the study of mental representations, although [...] it is far from exhausting the possibilities of exploring the image of another culture” (Gáfrik 2018, 19–20).

The aim of this study is not to give a comprehensive view of Central European, or more precisely Czechoslovak literature, which found creative impetus in travelling to Mexico. Through selected travel texts I would like to try to reconstruct the image of Mexico as it was shaped by the Czechoslovak cultural discourse at the turn of the 1940s and 1950s. I have narrowed the space for interpretation to the travel sketches of Frýd and Boor, as they were written during a period with stronger influence from the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, the authors represent the same generation and represent the distinctive form of coexistence of Czech and Slovak culture in one state.

FRÝD’S MEXICO: CORNUCOPIA OR EMPTY POCKET

“Mexico is in America” the name of Norbert Frýd’s travelogue appears to be a suitable contextualization of the subject, but it is also a leitmotif of the artist’s own interpretation of the country. Indeed, Mexico’s geographic location in North America, where it borders the US, has influenced its situation for centuries, but the south-eastern borders with Guatemala and Belize are already in the Central American region, and it has a Pacific coast in the west while to the east lies the Gulf of Mexico. This is a well-known fact, but it is important to remember that it is a strategic location, both geopolitically and culturally, which has affected the country and continues to do so. This is exemplified by the complex political and economic relations of Mexico with the United States, as well as with the consciousness of the essential cultural penetration with the other side of the American continent, with which Mexico, in addition to its natural wealth, also shares its pre-Columbian heritage, three centuries of European colonization, the urban phenomenon, cultural and religious syncretisms, struggles for independence or experience of dictatorship and, from the point of view of literature and art, also some sort of Hispano-American, or Latin American imagination.

Finally, Frýd also used the title for the whole book, anchoring the centre of gravity of his narrative towards North America, accentuating that Mexico’s immediate neighbour is the US, the “leading force” of the continent. This geographical constellation is, in his view, a prerequisite for understanding the “peculiarities of life, work and revolutionary struggles of the Mexicans” (1952, 44). Already in this short quotation, Frýd’s ideological basis and prism, which determines his interpretation, easily resonate. In two places, it also points out the importance of the country’s “northernmost” position among other Latin American countries, and the roots (Spanish language and cultural heritage) of this community are described as a “fundamental truth” by means of comparison with Czechoslovakia (“you cannot explain its past well if you omit that [...] it is the part of the Slavic family which is the most westerly and has

a particularly long border with Germany”, 45), but the book is dominated by the paradoxes of Mexico presented as if the results of geopolitics. The way he portrays the Mexican situation in the whole book is represented by two images – the cornucopia (horn of plenty) and an empty pocket:

In terms of its shape on the map, Mexico has often been compared to the cornucopia. Indeed, it has always been a cornucopia, at least for those who reached it from Spain or the USA. The empty pocket, in turn, seems to evoke its own inhabitants, who have so far never been able to eke out more than a very modest, even poor, living from all the richness of the land (45).

Frýd came to Mexico in 1947, only two years after World War II. His image of the country, however, was also formed over the following period when he was working in the US, and until he handed in the manuscript (around the first half of 1952). Unlike Boor, whom he met in Mexico in 1947, and whose experience – as follows from the postscript dated “in the summer of 1948” – was captured almost immediately, Frýd’s view of Mexico is strongly influenced by developments on the domestic political scene. In the post-war period, Czechoslovakia sought to build on the extraordinary economic and cultural cooperation with Mexico from the second half of the 1930s, which was not so easy, as both countries found themselves on different sides of the divided world and especially after 1948 there was a limitation of mutual contacts (see Opatrný 2011, 59).⁵ Paradoxically, World War II, as contemporary historians argue in apparent discrepancy with Frýd’s well-known views, brought several benefits to Mexico; in particular, it stimulated economic growth. Relations with the US had never been so good before, as the world superpower needed Mexican help in both natural products and its workforce. And since Mexico could no longer count on business relations with Europe, it was forced to set up factories and workshops to meet its own needs, producing and exporting more goods by the end of the war and changing the country’s character from rural to urban and industrial (Meyer 2014, 359).

Although customers of Czechoslovak business associates in the period after 1945 renewed their demand and Mexico itself took steps to free itself from dominating US economic influence by opening up cooperation with other countries (e. g., in 1950 under Miguel Aleman’s government a commercial cooperation agreement was signed with Czechoslovakia); the political events in Central Europe complicated relations. After the Communist takeover in February 1948, the influence of the Soviet Union was stronger in Czechoslovakia and the country eventually became part of the Eastern Bloc. US foreign policy, which was dominated by the atmosphere of the Cold War, saw danger in the ideological harmony between the countries of the so-called socialist camp and the political tendencies spreading in Latin America, as well as the interest of the reformist governments there in cooperating with the socialist countries in arms production. The US tried to break the contacts in the first half of the 1950s with strong anti-communist propaganda, especially in Mexico. Finally, the East-West conflict marked Czechoslovak politics in this Latin American country: in 1948, politically undesirable persons were dismissed from diplomatic posts, over time they focused on “reactionary” forces (monitoring and control of Czechoslovak citizens living in Mexico, anti-Communist activities of the USA, the relationship between the

Catholic Church and the state, etc.) and espionage increased (see Opatrný – Zourek – Majlátová – Pelant 2015, 124).

The political atmosphere that Frýd and Boor describe is reflected in their work in a certain way. Their efforts to depict or describe Mexico in another category are manifested in the remarkable potential of travel literature: “It shows and affirms the direction in which societal interest is heading in the future. It has the ability to legitimize knowledge but also to question it. It becomes the bearer of ideological schemes and noetic confessions” (Hrabal 2015, 6). An important starting point for understanding the ideological values and ideological positions of both authors is their life stories. As noted, this can be read in particular from the story of Norbert Frýd and the events of the time. Frýd was already left-wing when he was a high school student. From 1930 he was a member of the Communist Student Group, in the mid-1930s he became actively involved in the political and cultural activities of the Left Front, and after 1945, he became involved in the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. Frýd’s life philosophy, which is visible from his travelogue of Mexico, takes on more comprehensible contours in the light of his tragic experience in a concentration camp (1942/43–1945), from which he managed to escape, but where he lost his closest relatives. This tragedy was preceded by another difficult experience – the exclusion of the Jewish population from the public sphere. While in the years 1936–1939 he worked as a writer in the Czechoslovak branch of the American film company Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and later as a dramaturge for RKO Radiofilm, from autumn 1939 he worked only in the Prague Jewish community as an archivist and later an assistant labourer.⁶ It is indisputable that after the radical political changes in Czechoslovakia in 1948, Frýd’s communist profile must have been satisfactory as he remained on his foreign missions in Mexico and the United States until 1951 and later, when he was working as a career writer until the early 1970s, so also during the normalization period, he was a UNESCO delegate.⁷

The author portrays Mexico primarily as a country with enormous natural wealth and at the same time extremely poor, even starving. It is most explicit in naming the reasons for this situation: nothing can be protected from the US’s miserable, dishonest, manipulative intervention, neither agriculture, industry, market prices, or the training of young officers in the Mexican army. The tentacles of North American diplomacy penetrate “to all the levers of the state” (47). The credibility of his testimonies about the impoverishment and exploitation of Mexico by foreigners, especially by the United States, which he presents as an imperialist power and a modern colonizer, and even in several places as an exponent of fascism, is backed up with concrete data (percentages, years, figures). He does not conceal the fact that his relationship with the United States is hostile, he reveals it with indignant, in places hateful tones that, in his authorial style, balance the affectionate depiction of the Mexican people approaching an ode. The Mexican people, who experience the greatest degree of oppression from the United States, become the collective hero of these travel features: “Long ago, they built pyramids larger than those of Egypt with their bare hands, without iron chisels, wheels, pulleys, and hauling animals”, and even today they “believe only in the strength of all” (7). For Frýd, this strength is represented by ordinary

people, the miners, the workers, the poor peasants, the impoverished and murdered citizens of the regions. Their moral values are opposed to the greed, hypocrisy, and indifference of the wealthy, the coal barons, mine-owners, bourgeois leeches, bourgeois journalists, or sold-out trade union officials. He considers the Indians to be the strongest “cell” of the Mexican people; they survived despite the ruthless looting and oppression by the Spaniards. “In Mexico, however, the Indian not only survived, but is also the bearer of the best revolutionary traditions. In the course of history, the Indians have provided almost all the figures whom the people today regard as their true leaders.” So Frýd not only considers the ability of the indigenous population for self-preservation, he appreciates the added value of their fiery temperament, which mobilizes hunger marches, strikes and demonstrations. In the author’s vision, it is precisely “the flash that will eventually burst out of the brown eyes of the Indians” (21), which will awaken this force, as during the struggles for independence in the early 19th century or during the 1910–1929 revolution, and will provide the definitive victory over imperialism.

At the same time, the image of the simple Mexican man is an image of misery – the author seeks to show the large gaps between the social classes. They are individuals and whole families, people who have no more than a straw mat on which they can lie anywhere. They are used to travelling tens of kilometres even with large uphill sections or keep eating the same, non-nutritious foods; illiterate; without social security and health security and so on. Frýd refers to the Mexican people as easy prey for the “reaction” he defines in the opposition to world-wide progress (he considered this to be Marxism) and, in his critical view of Mexico, this is mainly represented by the political right linked to the US and the Catholic Church, as well as in the strong support from its northern neighbour. The author expresses his fundamental concern in relation to Mexican youth, which even here is not a neutral assessment of the situation. In the background is one of many comparisons which in the travel sketches are generally applied for better plasticity and which stem from associations to the Czechoslovak context – political, social or even geographical or natural. In this particular case, he compares the possibilities for education and success for young people, emphasizing the benefits of the educational system and social policy in Czechoslovakia against its permanent failure in capitalist Mexico, where young people do not have the means to study, are exposed to the pitfalls of delinquency and American propaganda in the form of Hollywood films and various types of propaganda. These, according to Frýd, deliberately divert young people’s attention from objectives “for which it would be worthwhile to struggle and possibly bring to life” (35). He blames the social order and its inability to direct the “joyful power of young people and give them healthy fulfilment” (35), apparently unlike the Czechoslovak Union of Youth (founded in 1949), which shaped its cultural officers and exercise group leaders using dialectical materialism. The fanciful example of Frýd’s empathetic focus on young Mexican people, personifying the future hope of the country and at the same time the tragic, bleak present, is the story from “Naked on an Aeroplane”, where a young Indian boy, eager to fly, climbs onto a transport plane and miraculously survives an hour of flight at three thousand metres. “He was naked, except for the cuffs of the

shirt that remained around his wrists. His other clothes were torn from his body by the icy vortex up there. [...] Nobody understood how he could have endured stretched out on the surface, holding only the front edge of the wing with his hands. But it seemed to have been the truth.” (32). In the composition of the travelogue, the author uses this plastic description of the “adventure” of one of the many representatives of the Mexican people as a starting point for criticizing the capitalist system and the associated iniquities that make certain geographical areas a place of misery and increase the already large differences between the world of the poor and the rich: “The whole story only shows sadly what happens, when in a capitalist state, a brave boy for example desires to get into an aircraft and never does it simply because he is poor” (33).

The portrayal of the Catholic Church is a special case in the alternative imagination of Norbert Frýd’s work. In principle, it depicts it exclusively as greedy, corrupt, full of intrigue, responsible for maintaining the feudal system and destroying the pre-conquest cultural heritage, guiding people to humble acceptance of life on earth in the hope of an afterlife. He therefore shares the attitudes of the Mexican revolutionary leaders of the first decade of the 20th century, who saw the church as a real obstacle in the attempt to establish a socialist state. The Catholic Church in Frýd’s perception builds stereotypical images of the clergy or bigoted Mexican women; he characterizes the Vatican’s politics as reactionary and anti-peace, as an “instrument of a small but rich group of imperialists and warlords”. His fierce criticism is built on irony and sarcasm, especially in the context where the Catholic Church enters into a relationship with a dictatorship (in Mexico or Spain) or when it receives the aforementioned North American support. Frýd’s opinion is rooted in social criticism, therefore he does not problematize the situation by considering the significance of the missionary activity in order to defend the indigenous peoples in the first centuries of the colony or to preserve the original oral tradition, nor the role of the Catholic Church in the spread of art and culture, or even the part of its representatives who participated in the struggle for independence and were suspended for it, etc.⁸ His approach to the subject can be unambiguously characterized as anti-clerical: it reflects the ideological background of both the Czechoslovak Republic and the Mexican political elites, who since the 19th century manifested this in radical legislative decisions in various historical situations (see Krupa 2016). The author’s sense of satisfaction in this context is reinforced by the created image of the Mexican people that hate the church, just as they hate the Americans. Indeed, “the people have hatred of overlords in their blood” (12).

Frýd’s attitude towards the United States is expressed in the form of harsh condemnation, culminating in his last sketches, the names of which explicitly signal the political view of his narrative. The sketch “The Enslaved Continent” begins with Stalin’s words about how the grimness and blind obedience of Latin American countries in the UN to the United States is a threat to world peace. He then describes the “dependent countries of the continent” as US economic vassals trying to “turn them into direct colonies of their imperialist empire” (151).

And it is harder serfdom [...] that rises directly from the centuries-old tradition of the colonial empire of the Spanish conquistadors. To see how far some countries have gone,

we can look at the nice confession that the Americans let slip. It was in the days when they wanted to prove to the world that they had no interest in attacking China. “Why would we risk war for a country,” shouted *Time* magazine, “in which we have almost no investment at all? Just in Mexico we have four times the investment!” (151–152)

In the light of the political and economic strategies of the Spanish colonial system, which he blames, among other things, for the deliberate economic ostracism of Latin American countries and the shameless looting, the author draws attention to the current state of the economy: the constant flow of foreign capital, as well as the continued efforts to “rapidly get money and get it overseas”, knowingly hindering industrialization, exporting raw materials at low prices, importing for high etc. This is information that is spoken about in various ways through Frýd’s book, but here it comes in a condensed form to conclude in an open indictment of the official activities of the United States government and the private sector.

They break progressive movements, support reactionary dictatorships, and military coups [...]. They sell old weapons to dictators and do not forget the fat commissions for their generals and ministers. They bribe the press, spend millions on direct propaganda through libraries, language courses, competitions, exhibitions and so on. [...] The North Americans have taken over the Spaniards’ dominion over the natives and continue their slaver’s ways. [...] For their economic achievements in Latin America, they often owe the brutal intervention of the armed forces, the landing of the navy, bombing and the full wars of intervention. The *New York Herald* itself compared the “police” action of the United States in Korea with a similar advance against Mexico in 1914 (the Veracruz attack). It is also hard to forget that some of the most important territories of the US today, such as Texas or the Panama Canal Zone, are the results of the robbery against Latin America (154–155).

In Frýd’s discursive tone, ostentatiously directed against the northern neighbour of Mexico, is embodied the determined attitude of a committed fighter for class justice and women’s equality in the way that he raised socialist ideology with Marxism-Leninism to the level of a scientific platform. Since Frýd’s travel stories were published in Czechoslovakia during the period strongly affected by the political influence of the Communist Party, there was no reason for self-censorship. In addition to the aforementioned attitudes, evidence that this was more than the compulsory ideological nod in his case, we can present his obvious sympathy for the political exponents of the ideology of the regime at both poles of a world divided by the Cold War. Frýd’s style was created by his political and civic engagement, personal beliefs about the truth and the sole correctness of the values declared by socialist doctrine, which seemed to him to be a firm refuge from his own experiences of persecution and violence emerging from the extremist right-wing political spectrum. Frýd’s imagination of them works using association, which particularly comes out of the inner analogy he finds between the situation of the working but wounded Mexican people and a concentration camp: “Dirt, sweat, and the true concentration camp smell of malnourished workers. All of a sudden it was like a black cloud around the bright glitter of the palace” (9). Through the repeated labelling of North American monopolistic practices in Mexico as fascist, coming from his own ideological convictions, he brings the Mexican people’s experience into the literary text: the people become

a working class, which leads to the realization that misery stems from capitalism and that the only way to national independence and fairer order is to eliminate the “foreign and domestic rich” (12). So Frýd’s political and social perspective is allied with the left-wing affiliation of a broad strata of Latin America. The left-wing reform policy – focusing (especially during the governments of Cárdenas and later Ávila Camacho) on the redistribution of land owned by the state and the landowners for the benefit of peasant cooperatives, the nationalization of the oil industry, and gradually the literacy of the population and its social and medical security – undeniably meant a hope for a better future.

Despite the many valuable detailed sketches about the life of Mexicans and a wealth of factual information, *Mexico is in America* enters the Czechoslovak cultural space as an ideological appeal, invoking the attention of readers in the spirit of contemporary propaganda: the struggle of Latin America for economic independence and genuine national independence can only reach a successful outcome if all the workers are united on a single battlefield with defenders of peace around the world, and the Americas are freed from the exploiters – only then will there be equality and the other countries can “live in sincere friendship” with it (156). He sees the free future of the continent in his “Leaving America,” as the author describes the Statue of Liberty – with its back to dry land and its torch to the east: “If it were not a riveted statue but a woman, she would have long abandoned her quarantined island and she would have gone to a better home somewhere across the Atlantic, with us” (168). The literary point of Frýd’s reflections on Mexico’s geopolitical position is revealed at the end of the sketch of the same name when the author gives its proximity to the imperialist, reactionary power a new, positive meaning in the form of an implicit challenge: “The [anti-imperialist peaceful forces of Mexico], are right at the borders of the United States, right in the heart of the continent and in sight of all Latin American republics” (48).

BOOR’S “MISSION” OF “INTERNATIONAL UNDERSTANDING”

Boor’s work *Mexico* is described by the *History of Slovak Literature III* as a “book of non-ideological travel sketches” (Marčok 2006, 348). Ján Boor’s ideological beliefs are not unambiguously attested in the sources. Something perhaps in this connection is perhaps suggested by the words of his friends: “Around himself and among his students, always, even in the dull years of totalitarianism and normalization, he spread the spirit of European education and a free-minded view of the issues of European culture, regardless of ‘class’ boundaries” (Baláž 2002). The thirty-year-old Boor’s text about his journey to Mexico is somewhat suggestive of these personality qualities, but also of youthful passion in the ideological plane that can be interpreted as a personal adherence to left-wing values, as well as a “compulsory” response to the expansion of communist ideology in Czechoslovakia. From his soulful and information-rich authorial style to a certain extent, his previous experience as a secondary school teacher also brought him a new job in the major cultural, museum and scientific institution Matica slovenská, whose aim was to build on the “traditions of learned societies and national-revival societies” (Mikula et al. 1999, 296). From Boor’s description

of Mexico, especially in the second chapter, “Presence – a colourful adventure”, what stands out is the artist’s astonishment, similar to the amazement of the first chroniclers. He wants to become a “devout knightly herald” of Mexican beauty and arouse “interest in that far world” (7). In this mission, which he presents as a modest contribution to the great mission of UNESCO (“international understanding with the help of culture”), he clearly sees the need for his own country: “The people of Mexico and Latin America could perhaps be much closer to us than they are now. The basis for this is stronger than we think. Mutual knowledge will lead to sympathies that could develop on the basis of many common qualities, traditions and aspirations” (8). Certainly, this reasoning can also be interpreted explicitly as an effort to satisfy the institutions that arranged Boor’s travel experience. However, the manner of narrating an experienced event afterwards, which we do not have space in this study to analyse, reveals that the atmosphere of the environment persisted – using expressive means to highlight this experience in its various observational and observed nuances, and suggestively capture it. In the author, the experience of the journey, the atmosphere of liveliness and the uniqueness of the environment (cultural-historical, social, artistic, linguistic, etc.) resonate, which also influences the exoticizing image of Mexico he brings to Czechoslovak readers: it is picturesque and romantic, with “amazing country scenery” and “valleys like Eden” (42, 60), with the enviable heritage of the most cultured of the ancient nations of the Americas (10) and at the same time linked to the oldest cultures of the Old World (11). As Boor’s journey across the Atlantic Ocean takes place shortly after World War II, his understanding of the historical struggles for peace and independence is even more striking, as well as the belief that “it is the country of the future” (70) as are his personal wishes for the needed democracy and new age of prosperity (21).

In the work of Ján Boor, we can see traces of the efforts for enlightenment of the new age – motivated by the post-war atmosphere – to spread knowledge and understanding through culture. The fact that the Matica slovenská published the book in its series “Na cestách” (“On Journeys”), would further strengthen the “great mission” (1949, 8). It should be stressed, however, that this institution was also affected by totalitarian tendencies during World War II and in the 1950s (Mikula et al. 1999, 296), and it is therefore likely that the intervening period when the sketches from Boor’s trip to Mexico were published was merely a sort of initial stage in the building of ideological positions. Similarly, we can only guess to what extent Frýd himself influenced Boor’s view of Mexico’s reality, as he also showed him Mexico. Boor mentions him as one of the guides of the delegation in several places. At the beginning of the book, he expresses explicit gratitude for his comfortable travel around Mexico to “countrymen, whether in the embassy or in the Czechoslovak colony of Mexico City” (1949, 7).

Boor’s travelogue still reflects the cosmopolitan atmosphere of Czechoslovakia during the interwar First Republic and in a way also a traditionally closer relationship between Slovakia and the Catholic Church. Naturally, in his historical reflections in the first of the three chapters of the book, he uses the phrases “pred Kristom” (“before Christ”) or “po Kristovi” (“after Christ”) with dates.⁹ His refined authorial

style is interwoven with Latin phrases, and in the passage where he captures his literally meditative mood when looking at the Pacific Ocean and the surrounding nature does not hesitate to use the introduction of the medieval Marian anthem “Ave Maris Stella” as a way of thankful and worshipful prayer associated with the bright star in the sky (66). His manner of describing Mexican history and culture, especially the impressive heritage of pre-Columbian civilizations, does not, unlike Frýd’s interpretation, imply practical intentions that should be realized, for example, in the field of economic and cultural cooperation. He condemns the destructiveness of the Spanish colonial system, the rage and ruthlessness of the conquerors, while describing the ritual murder of some of them at the hands of the Aztecs – surprisingly inhumanly – as being in the interests of justice: “At least they have suffered for all the atrocities of the white conquerors” (13). His admiring European look at the magnificent and at the same time subtle artefacts of the pre-conquest world shatters doubts about the barbarism or the primitivism of these cultures. The author’s upbringing in the Christian worldview, as may be presumed from the time in which he lived his formative years, provokes in him reservations about the actual ways of Christianity (Cortes “wanted to save the pagans with the sword”, 15; “to the eternal shame of European and Christian rulers”, 16). His criticism of the Catholic Church in the context of the return of the struggle between religious influence and laity, and its power over Mexican history, is equally clear: “it inherited powerful positions from the Spanish dominion in Mexico; unfortunately, as almost always with a powerful aristocracy it often stood as a bastion of reaction against social progress. Its influence is still powerful today” (19). He perceives the Church, along with wealthy landowners or foreigners, as an obstacle to social reforms, depicting it with a negatively accented attitude as a barrier to progress or a builder of missionary fortresses. Spanish culture represented Christian culture as such. In this sense, he interprets religious architecture as a symbol of colonial power. In these criticisms, he concurs with Frýd, although his tone is much more relaxed and he is rather neutral in connection with the same subject. Certain thought-related, if not ideological, affinities of both authors can be seen in the depiction of the USA. Boor refers to Americans as both exploiters and bandits (18–19), and it is not clear whether this is his personal view or a hint of the ideological pressures from the beginning of the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia. At the end of the first part of his travel sketches, however, he presents himself as a supporter of collectivization and socialism, which he perceives as a means of achieving prosperity, progress, peace and democracy (21). However, private ownership of capital, as it turns out, is perceived negatively regardless of whether it is owned by Americans or by Mexicans (75).

As it appears in the composition of the first chapter and in the final passages of the travelogue, the Mexican people are interpreted by the author as creative, cultural and spiritual (in the sense of pre-Christian spirituality), but oppressed and exploited for centuries. This thought base then allows him to emphasize their regenerative power, ability to be awakened, to free themselves and to achieve great things in the future:

One day however, these gifted people will be freed from all their bonds. As soon as the social system in the country is awakened – or overturned. We often like to judge the future

of a people according to their art. Although this view is burdened with old romanticism, if we take it carefully and critically, we can come up with many valuable and correct conclusions with its help. Accordingly, the Mexican people really still have their future ahead of them, because their art is rich and fresh (77).

The introduction to the third chapter (with the title “Looking to the Future”) evokes in the reader the impression that the author will develop the above-mentioned ideological positions in the question of the role of socialism. However, compared to Frýd’s sharply anti-capitalist attitudes, it is more of a human manifestation of compassion for the pain of the simple Mexican man, a natural disapproval of suffering rather than an explicit expression of pro-regime motivated attitudes, although sporadic use of terms such as proletarian, slave, repression, serfdom, or references to the Soviet context might suggest this: the average American cannot be without chewing gum, while the poor Mexicans collecting resin must slave away in the forests and are among the most pitiable proletarians in the world (72); the “Mexican government must pull the American cart, willing or not” (75); “One state language is needed, as in the Soviet Union” (74); “The great poet of socialism and the Soviet Union, Vladimir Mayakovsky” (80).

The focus of the narrative in this final chapter results in the accentuation of Mexicanness as a result of “the interplay and influence of the Spanish and Indian cultures” (76–77). The author anchors the creative fertility of the Mexicans in folk traditions, art and culture, which stems from the distinctive spirit of the Mexican people: “They can enjoy life, from nice and new things, from extraordinary and busy moments” (78). “Mexico is Americanizing, but hopefully only on the surface. It is just a technical-civilization coating, and the ‘spiritus loci’, the spirit of the place, remains immune at its core. There is still an old Spanish and Indian nobleness and knightliness that must save the morals, character and way of life of the Mexican people [...]” (79).

CONCLUSION

Norbert Frýd and Ján Boor’s travel sketches obviously reflect the atmosphere of their time, as well as the discursive means used in them. However, from the point of view of this interpretation, this is not as important as the fact that they arose in the space of rather “small” cultures, which themselves were not favoured in terms of the distribution of power, and also experienced different phases of serfdom or totalitarian pressures to a greater or lesser degree. The aforementioned starting point, on the contrary, made it possible to reveal the ideological platforms of the authors of the chosen narrative, their adherence, or sympathy for certain mental representations and the rejection of others. In this regard, we can present Frýd’s imagination inspired by Mexico, or the image of Mexico as such, considering the already mentioned image of an empty pocket – in a country with significant natural and cultural wealth (“cornucopia”) returns and with a strong emotional charge representing both the poor and dispossessed (above all) as the result of expansive imperialist ambitions and the neo-colonial practices of the USA.)

His view is clearly based on the principle of contrast, the rhetoric of a pro-communist ideology that was essentially close to him. Despite the fact that it also shows

Mexico's richness in other aspects (e. g. historical, artistic), the imprint it leaves on the reader is more political and ideological. Boor's travel prose does not feature similarly obvious and similarly vehement thoughts, though here and there, a certain degree of engagement in the name of social justice is evident as mentioned in the interpretation. But in the author's portrayal of Mexico, the fascination with the abundance, inexhaustibility, diversity and originality of the Mexican spirit and environment is very strongly present, underlined by frequent use of rhetorical questions, exclamations, and epithets as the cornerstone of his poetics. Both travel texts open up space for the reader to begin stimulating and adventurous exploration in the footsteps of a defined historical period, dominated by well-known ideas and value expectations, which, together with the author's subject, created the contemporary atmosphere together.

Translated from Slovak by Richard Swales

NOTES

- ¹ Boor's book was published by Matica slovenská in Turčiansky Sv. Martin (now called Martin). Frýd's book was prepared by the Prague publishing house ROH – Práce, which was the publishing house of the Revolutionary Trade Union (founded in 1946), a monopoly trade union in Czechoslovakia, under the strong influence of the ruling Communist Party after 1948.
- ² I say "at least" because resources diverge regarding this information. *The Dictionary of Czech Literature* states that Frýd began to work in Mexico in 1947, moving to the USA around late 1948–early 1949. Available at: <http://www.slovníkceskeliteratury.cz/showContent.jsp?docId=324> [16. 2. 2019]. Another source gives the years 1947–1951 for his time in Mexico (Opatrný – Zourek – Majlátová – Pelant 2015, 123), while another does not distinguish between the missions in Mexico and the USA for the years 1947–1951. Available at: <https://www.chuchle.cz/100-let-od-narozeni-norberta-fryda.html> [16. 2. 2019].
- ³ The topic of Czech travellers (pursuers of happiness, missionaries, researchers, diplomats, adventurers, etc.) from the 16th century are the focus of Josef Opatrný (31–64), Simona Binková (65–77), and Markéta Křížová (79–93) in the monothematic issue of *Ibero-Americana Pragensia* "Las relaciones checo-mexicanas" (ed. Opatrný 2011). A useful insight into the issue of mutually stimulating relationships – literary, translation, artistic, but also economic – are given by studies by other authors (P. Štěpánek, J. Stískal, V. Rouč, J. Novotný – J. Šouša, L. Majlátová, M. Flores, M. Uličný). After the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Slovakia became part of a common state with the Czech Republic, in 1918–1938 (the First Czechoslovak Republic) and 1945–1992 (the Czechoslovak Republic, the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic), therefore it was also part of these international relations, which is reflected in the publications, for example, by mentioning some Slovak personalities in Mexico. The study of relations between Czechoslovakia and Mexico, as well as between Czechoslovakia and Latin America, was based on the results of research by the team of authors Opatrný – Zourek – Majlátová – Pelant 2015.
- ⁴ The expression "Indian", as used in this study by the authors, is the designation of the indigenous peoples during that period, but it should also be emphasized that this term is being rehabilitated from the environment of indigenous cultures that have been preserved or appear to be close to the present (such as the Mapuci Indians and Guarani Indians) claiming their own cosmogony and cultural identity. The importance of this use is also discussed by A. V. Frič. See e.g. <http://delsectorsocial.org/frase/Indios> [30. 3. 2019] or Serrano, Sebastián: "Indio e indígena." *El País* (opinión), 22 January 2006. https://elpais.com/diario/2006/01/22/opinion/1137884409_850215.html [30. 3. 2019].
- ⁵ Pre-war economic co-operation was developed mainly on the basis of the activities of Ambassador Vlastimil Kybal (1880–1958), with the support of some representatives of industry in the Czecho-

slovakia of the time, and it was initiated based on the belief that Latin America was a region with a future, a good buyer of products (e.g. from the glass, engineering or armaments industries) and a supplier of raw materials. Kybal's efforts resulted in 1937's conclusion of a relatively exclusive Czechoslovak-Mexican trade agreement, which was also helped by the fact that his diplomatic mission overlapped with the government of President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–1940), a supporter of reform policy. Kybal, a historian and connoisseur of Romanesque cultures, had been involved in deepening relations between Mexico and Czechoslovakia at various levels of public and professional life, as well as the Association of Friends of Czechoslovakia established in cooperation with Mexican intellectuals, artists and state officials. During his work, cooperation in the field of culture and art developed considerably. An example of this is the magnificent exhibition of modern Czechoslovak graphic art in Mexico and the exhibition of Mexican archaeological monuments, ethnographic objects and folk art in Prague. Kybal's activities were followed after 1939 by Czechoslovak emigration to Mexico (e. g. E. E. Kisch, L. Reinerová, O. Odložilík, K. Sokol) (Opatrný – Zourek – Majlátová – Pelant 2015, 120–122).

- ⁶ Kučera, Martin, "Frýd Norbert 21. 4. 1913 – 18. 3. 1976". In *Biographical Dictionary of the Czech Lands*. Institute of History, Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic. Available at: http://biography.hiu.cas.cz/Personal/index.php/FR%C3%9DD_Norbert_21.4.1913-18.3.1976 [30. 3. 2019]; In *Dictionary of Czech Literature after 1945*. Available at: <http://www.slovníkceskeliteratury.cz/show-Content.jsp?docId=324> [15. 2. 2019].
- ⁷ This assumption is also supported by the fact that Frýd's name appears on the official lists of collaborators of the State Security, although without the indication of the method of co-operation or any information on monitoring by the StB, there is no date of birth, only the date when his file was put into the archive: 23. 2. 1956, or 1966. Available at: <http://www.upn.gov.sk/regpro/zobraz.php?-typ=centrala&kniha=143&strana=18&zaznam=343> [18. 2. 2019].
- ⁸ It is worth mentioning, for example, that in Mexico during the colonial period, one of the most important figures of Hispano-American (and literary) history was the Dominican father Bartolomé de las Casas (1484–1566), later bishop of the Chiapas diocese. Along with other religious brothers, he initiated a controversy about the legitimacy of the conquest. And although this does not mean, as Roberto Fernández Retamar argues, these men in a minority representation "managed to assert their own criteria, yet they have been able to defend them against the highest authorities, they have been heard and in some way satisfied" ([1976] 2011). Thanks to his influence, according to the French historian P. Villara, in the mid-16th century, the human rights debate moved from a humanitarian level to a legal one (1960, 49; Fernández Retamar 2011). A remarkable reconstruction of the work of Bohemian and Moravian Jesuits in the Mexican province is seen in the study by Markéta Křížová: in addition to the missionary activity, which they understood as a "form of active social criticism", they studied the fauna and flora there, local geography, wrote grammars and dictionaries of native languages, described the habits of indigenous peoples. They were architects and engineers (ed. Opatrný 2011, 79–93). Regarding the intellectual background of the struggle for independence, the development of the canonical chapter at Valladolid (1809), for example, contributed significantly to the development. Many priests responded to the difficult social situation of their believers and were among the vanguard of the rebels, which can be explained by "their influence on the population, priestly sensitivity, unwillingness to accept the situation or their intellectual formation" (Monreal Sotelo 2010). Finally, Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla himself (1753–1811), the leader of the popular uprising against the colonial regime that led to the achievement of Mexican independence (1821), was a Catholic priest who was excommunicated in 1810.
- ⁹ In the period of the socialism the terms "BCE – Before the Common Era" and "CE – Common Era" were used in order to distance from religious coordinates.

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Image. Mexico. America. Czechoslovakia. Travel sketch. Norbert Frýd. Ján Boor.

This study presents literary material that originated in the postwar Czechoslovak Republic in the late 1940s and early 1950s, inspired by the experience of traveling to Mexico. The subject of interpretation is two books of travel sketches: the Slovak literary and theatre scholar Ján Boor's *Mexico* (1949) and the Czech journalist and diplomat Norbert Frýd's *Mexico is in America* (1952). Based on the aforementioned texts, the study seeks to reconstruct the image of Mexico as it was shaped by the Czechoslovak cultural discourse of the period, while at the same time aiming to reveal the ideological platforms of both authors' narratives. The selection of interpreted works was marked by the fact that both were written during a period of stronger influence of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, the authors represent the same generation and represent a distinctive form of coexistence of Czech and Slovak culture in the territory of one state.

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