

Mexico for the political expatriate: haven or last resort?

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I My parents died a few years ago, before they got around to telling me whether they had ever been Communists, and before I got around to asking. (*Communist* was a word that was never used in my house.) However, the possibility had occurred to me.

Back in 1956, I was not terribly surprised when a fellow student at the American School in Mexico City announced to a group of classmates, as we changed shoes after gym: “My parents say her parents are Communists.” At that time such accusations were not made lightly, and it certainly helped me understand why in 1950 we had suddenly left New York City and a secure, if not prosperous, life in the Bronx for an uncertain future in Mexico.

While estimates vary, we were one of perhaps fifty families from the United States whose hasty arrivals and departures crisscrossed and overlapped throughout the '50s. Despite these comings and goings, a definite sense of community existed among us.

Some of us had been friends in the past or were referred to each other by mutual acquaintances. We offered moral support, loaned each other money, socialized and shared a progressive political outlook. Understandably, we were generally discreet, rarely disclosing—even to each other—too much about our political pasts. We shared a certain distrust of strangers, which was probably healthy under the circumstances. Some were or had been members of the Communist Party; other had not.

But since then I have learned that in those days American citizens didn't have to be Communists for what happened to us to happen to them. As the flush of good will toward the Soviet Union—our WWII buddy and ally—waned, there was an upsurge of the strident anti-Communism, anti-socialism and anti-labor rhetoric



Meyer Zykojfsky at the age of four.

which had been as much a part of the American scene in the 1920s and '30s as McDonald's and Nintendo are today.

Thousands found themselves persecuted for their political beliefs. By the second half of the 1940s, Southern Democrats and right-wing Republicans were stepping up the pressure on presidents Truman and Eisenhower to quell the “Red Menace.” A world trembling in the wake of the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and just beginning to grasp the destructive potential of atomic power, was all too ready to listen.

Politicians and government officials such as J. Edgar Hoover, Joseph McCarthy and Richard M. Nixon found they could now bring disparate groups together by stirring up

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sentiment against the “Reds” and lashing back against the progressive policies set down during Roosevelt’s New Deal.

Still, seditious behavior is hard to verify. Individuals found themselves harassed for suspect words, thoughts and associations, presumed guilty unless they could prove otherwise. The weapons used against them were the blacklist, the loyalty oath, laws of dubious constitutionality, FBI investigations and the assertions of professional informers.

“Being named” was enough to cost your job, no matter what you did for a living. Long lists of “suspects” were published by “patriotic” organizations, famous columnists, business groups and the like. Once blacklisted, clearing one’s name entailed public recantation and the naming of others to show true repentance. Sometimes even that was not enough. Nothing conquers individual valor more effectively than fear, and fear proved a powerful deterrent to resistance.

And yet, despite the fear, some did resist, often at a great personal price. Some were named but refused to name others, even when jailed for contempt. Others would not sign loyalty oaths, as a matter of principle. Many knew it was only a matter of time before they, too, would be questioned by congressional or state committees. If it were a choice between not finding work and risking imprisonment, or going to Mexico and making do, some chose Mexico.

II

The choice of Mexico over France or England, where a number of self-exiled families also settled, was based on three types of considerations: political, economic and cultural. From a political point of view, options were limited. Since the U.S. government, using its power to issue and revoke passports, frequently refused to grant travel documents to the politically suspect, Mexico and Canada, which American citizens could enter freely without passports, sometimes became the only viable alternatives to remaining in the United States.

Up until June of 1958, when the Supreme Court limited the State Department’s ability to use this sort of bias to restrict individual movement, many political pariahs had nowhere else to go.

At the same time, Mexican President Lázaro Cárdenas’ progressive policies toward Spanish Republican refugees and his highly publicized tolerance of the left wing during the ’30s still shed a powerful aura. For political activists on the run, this image could be comforting, even if it was no longer completely realistic.

There was enormous ignorance about Mexico in the United States, greater even than today’s; but those who chose to come here were usually better informed. Some had visited previously or had friends and acquaintances in the



Meyer and Belle Zykofsky with daughter Diana in 1944.

artistic community or among the Lincoln Brigade¹ vets and Spanish Civil War refugees living here.

Most adored the country and praised Mexico for its temperate weather and generally tolerant political climate, best reflected in the indifferent attitude ordinarily shown them by the government. If a prevailing opinion could be said to exist, it was that Mexico was a country where, “if the heat were on, things could be arranged.” For the undecided, in a crunch the decisive factor could be a lawyer’s recommendation to leave the U.S. and choose Mexico.

And then there was the question of money. Most of the self-exiled had few resources, and some of the previously well-to-do had spent more than they could afford in costly legal battles. The best known among those few who were independently wealthy were probably New York financier Alfred Stern and his wife, Martha Dodd Stern, daughter of William Dodd, President Roosevelt’s ambassador to Nazi Germany during the 1930s.

Fred Vanderbilt Field, an heir to the vast Vanderbilt fortune, would only inherit a small amount of what was due him. He was comfortably well-off but not nearly as rich as people claimed.

Then there were the black-listed writers or disenchanting artists who, on discovering they were unemployable in the United States, figured that given the nature of their work, they could just as easily free-lance in Mexico as anywhere else while living a lot more cheaply.

¹ The Lincoln Brigade was made up of U.S. volunteers on the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War. (Editor’s note.)

Poet George Oppen, who was to win a Pulitzer Prize in 1969, earned a very modest living as a furniture maker. Some owned small stores or businesses, invested in construction, raised chickens, made ice cream, sold screenplays through "fronts," wrote articles and books, opened guest houses, produced films, taught at the American School or Mexico City College, or exercised a profession.

While some did extremely well in this country, they appear to have been in the minority. In his book *The Great Fear*,² David Caute cites a *New York Herald Tribune* article of September 2, 1957: "There [in Mexico City, Cuernavaca and San Miguel de Allende] they tended to launch successful business enterprises and make a lot of money." While Caute's book is extraordinary, his source is mistaken on this point. Most of these expatriates made enough to live comfortably, but not luxuriously.

Before coming to Mexico other determining factors besides money were weighed by those who had the luxury of looking before leaping. (Coming to Mexico was, to a certain extent, a matter of choice. After all, a majority of the politically suspect remained in the U.S. And however unpleasant their experiences, they did survive the witch hunts.) Still, in the majority of these cases, the situation had become—or threatened to become—so difficult that they really had nothing to lose.

For the optimist, Mexico's geographic proximity to the States meant it would be possible to consider going back as soon as the heat was off. Many left behind homes, businesses, elderly parents and college-aged offspring. Those whose youngsters accompanied them were able to send them to the American School, which offered a course of study compatible with programs in the United States, although a good number did not learn this until they arrived.

Then there was the problem of language. Most of the expatriates spoke some Spanish. But finding out that many Mexicans spoke English made the move more feasible.

I don't suppose that feasibility was uppermost in my parents' minds. In their early thirties, as far as I know Belle and Meyer (Mike) Zykofsky had never been out of New York. They arrived with their life savings of one thousand dollars, two daughters aged five and eight, their jazz recordings, and the address of their old friend Eddy.

They also brought their typewriter and two oil paintings by my uncle Herman. My mother, whose culinary efforts rarely went beyond opening a can of tuna fish, insisted on packing her *Settlement Cookbook*. I was allowed to bring my Brownie camera, my ice skates and a gray corduroy jumper with red hearts and flowers on it, of which I was particularly fond.

Although I am still unsure, I imagine that our coming to Mexico was related to my parents' involvement in the

left-wing American Labor Party, their liberal political stance on just about everything, and the fact that they were convinced that it was only a matter of time before the United States became another Nazi Germany.

Although all the politically motivated expatriates who landed in Mexico during the '50s shared a liberal outlook, there was a peculiar blend of backgrounds and personal histories. The early arrivals were connected to the film industry and had been implicated, either directly or marginally, in the trials of the "Hollywood Ten."

In 1947 ten well-known screen writers and directors, when called before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), refused to answer questions about their political affiliations on grounds that such interrogations were unconstitutional. As a result they went to jail.

Movie industry blacklists soon cost hundreds their jobs. Three of the "Hollywood Ten" writers who came to Mexico for varying lengths of time were Albert Maltz, Dalton Trumbo and Ring Lardner Jr., whose wife's career as an actress was seriously affected as well. At least ten other blacklisted and therefore "unemployable" writers, producers and directors arrived in the early '50s, settling mostly in Mexico City and Cuernavaca.

Another group, from the Miami area, arrived in 1954 following a series of investigations into Communist activities in the South. A good number of those called to testify during the virulent, widely publicized trials were



Ray Kiermas and Joseph McCarthy (right) in 1947.

² New York, Simon & Schuster, p. 212.



The Hollywood Ten and two of their attorneys stand outside district court in Washington on January 9, 1950.

denounced by paid government informers. They pled the Fifth Amendment, refused to name people known to them as Communists and, as a result, were cited for contempt. They too went to jail. No proof of any illegal activity was required.

All those who chose to leave held political convictions which could and sometimes did make them prime targets for the investigating committees. They had been active in the drive for racial integration, the labor movement, or the Spanish Civil War, or were closely involved, in one capacity or another, with the Soviet Union, China, Roosevelt's New Deal, Henry Wallace's presidential campaign—even with folk music.

Former resident Edna VanderSchelling told me that she and her husband Bart—an opera singer in his youth who had been seriously injured during the Spanish Civil War—held folk singing sessions in their home in Laurel Canyon. "We made a lot of noise singing, but we didn't care because we didn't have any ulterior motives."

But that was 1950 and in progressive circles the mood was strained. When a friend told them "Someone's been asking about you guys," they got out, with the intention of spending a few weeks in Mexico. They stayed for more than 12 years.

III

The irony is inescapable. Once here, these highly politicized individuals, unlike earlier political expatriates such as Bertram Wolfe, an active member of the Communist Party of Mexico (PCM), lived lives completely detached from Mexican politics. (There may have been some exceptions among those few individuals who became Mexican citizens.) This did not mean, however, that their lives in this country

would be free from official interference on the part of both the Mexican and American governments.

In general, Mexico's attitude could best be described as embarrassed ambivalence. Much like the parent confronted by a disgraced daughter knocking on the door with a babe in arms, Mexico simply accepted the expatriates and looked the other way. Benign neglect, rather than autocratic supervision, seems to have been the rule, and today most expatriates speak positively of their experiences with the Mexican government. There are even glowing stories of sympathy from some local officials. In his book *From Right to Left*,³ Fred Vanderbilt Field writes:

... on the afternoon of September 6, 1958 a neighbor ran over to tell me that he had just received a telephone call (we had no telephone at that time) from a Mexican lawyer in the middle echelons of the bureaucracy with an urgent message for me. Orders had been issued by Gobernación, the government department responsible for foreign residents, for my arrest and deportation. The police had already gone looking for me at an apartment I had once occupied. I discovered later that a sympathetic friend in the government had removed my present address from my government file, leaving only the old one.

Others were not as lucky as Field. In September 1958, close to forty people, including about ten Americans as well as some Spanish, Yugoslav and Polish refugees, were rounded up in a series of raids ordered by President Adolfo Ruiz Cortines. An American partner in a local construction firm, who was a friend of some of the politically motivated

³ Connecticut, Lawrence Hill & Co., p. 289.



Dalton Trumbo and John Howard Lawson (right) borne aloft by a crowd of a thousand supporters.

expatriates, was deported. (Ironically, the deportee was a member of the American Legion and was not here for political reasons.) A screenwriter and a producer-director were deported along with him.

According to newspaper reports at the time (see *The New York Times*, September 14, 1958) the round-up was a result of labor agitation—clashes between the police and dissident factions of the oil workers' union as well as protests by the grade-school teachers' union—and strikes by university students protesting bus fare increases.

Aside from distracting attention from the strikes and other disturbances, such arrests were generally believed to be a result of pressure on *Gobernación* (the Department of the Interior) by the American Embassy, which would have liked to see Mexico take a tougher stance toward the self-exiled.

However, this was just one of many examples of collaboration between the two governments in dealing with "subversives." On August 18, 1950, Mexican agents turned Morton Sobell, a defendant in the Rosenberg case, over to the FBI, only two months after he had come here with his family. Gus Hall, a leader of the Communist Party USA who had jumped bail in New York in 1951, was apprehended in Mexico City after four months at large and handed over to U.S. officials at the border, after FBI agents tracked him down through the local Communist network.

Mary Oppen, poet George Oppen's wife, in her book *Meaning: A Life*,⁴ writes:

We noticed two men hanging around our house day after day, checking on us. On one visit from these

surveillants, George and I were sitting on the patio with the man who was interrogating us. We were curious as to what questions he would ask. He had the same dossier, with all the same background that the FBI men had had in California and all the same errors, but these were Mexican men, supplied with dossiers that the CIA and FBI had compiled.

Upon consulting a lawyer, they learned that the plainclothesmen were either from the secret police or *Gobernación*. Unable to identify their pursuers from file photographs which their lawyer procured from *Gobernación*, the Oppens were then taken to the steps of the building where the secret police congregated in the mornings. Once they had identified the men who had followed them from among the group milling about on the stairs, the lawyer reprimanded the two agents and asked them to report directly to her if any additional information was required. Mary Oppen writes that "We never saw the men again."

We Happy Few: A Journal of the Blacklist Years, a work in progress by writer Jean Rouveral Butler, wife of screenwriter Hugo Butler, includes this account of her confrontation with her postman, Señor Flores, after their desperately-needed checks from the States had not arrived:

Embarrassed, he muttered something about our mail being revisado—a word I didn't know. Algo político, he explained.... He suggested I meet him at the post office when he went off duty that afternoon, and he would take me to his supervisor.

Upon arrival, she repeated her story of the missing checks and, "in the middle of the recital, burst into tears of

⁴ Oakland, California, Black Sparrow Press, p. 198.

desperation." Her emotional appeal, along with her advanced state of pregnancy, appeared to move both men. "The supervisor said he'd see what he could do." That afternoon Señor Flores returned with several weeks' accumulation of mail.

The vulnerability of the expatriates, combined with Mexico's unpredictable responses, made them easy prey for the agent out to make a quick buck. One resident remembers a small-time operator who would drop in periodically, request a modest gratuity in exchange for "protection," and then disappear.

At the same time, Dalton Trumbo could throw a huge party—which people still talk about—and invite a large group of politicians, who not only came but spent the evening dancing with the wives of the blacklisted writers. (Those who didn't had brought their mistresses.)

When Fred Vanderbilt Field escaped arrest by Mexican agents during the September 1958 roundups, he spent ten days in the Acapulco home of a member of a government commission, where he was joined by another fugitive a few days later. He writes:

My reaction to the episode was astonishment at the complexities of Mexican society. One branch of the government had ordered my expulsion while certain officials had saved me from arrest. Yet another official had offered his vacation house in Acapulco until the matter was resolved."⁵

While a certain surreal humor characterized a few of these situations, in general there was nothing funny about them. Among the more harrowing incidents was the



Morton Sobell in Atlanta Penitentiary in 1961.

attempt to deport two local American businessmen. They were seized by agents on the morning of December 18, 1957. One of them tells of being taken to Gobernación and questioned about his business activities, immigration status and political affiliations by Mexican authorities.

Through a window opening onto the courtyard he caught sight of his lawyer and was able to attract her attention. Though she was not allowed to speak to him, she was able to notify his family and bring him some money and warm clothes.

Around midnight, accompanied by government agents, he was driven to Laredo and told to walk across the border and give himself up to U.S. officials—only to discover, after a series of lengthy interrogations, that the Americans were unwilling to receive him because he lacked the proper documents.

Speaking virtually no Spanish, he was left in the dark as to the charges against him and the intentions of his abductors. After a miserable night in a Mexican jail, he was returned to his original captors, driven to Monterrey, returned to Nuevo Laredo and switched from one hotel to another, sometimes crossing paths with the second American businessman, who was travelling in another car.

A few days into his ordeal he was allowed to read a newspaper in Spanish from which he was able to surmise that "Sam and I were the most dangerous Communist spies in the world." After a week, thanks to the intervention of his lawyer, he was finally returned to Nuevo Laredo and released into the custody of local officials.

After some more haggling, he [a Nuevo Laredo immigration official] decided to permit us to report at 9 a.m., 2 p.m. and 9 p.m. That was our routine; get up in the morning, sign in and then have breakfast. We were constantly being followed—if we walked, we were followed by walking "tails," if we rode, we were followed by a car. The only thing I couldn't understand was why we were being followed in Mexico by a car with Texas license plates.⁶

The two were eventually allowed to return to Mexico City.

IV

Behind the occasional round-ups and other incidents lurked the long shadow of Uncle Sam. According to Philip Agee:

The [Mexico City] station also collects information about Communists from the U.S. living in Mexico. Many of them arrived during the McCarthy period and have subsequently become citizens. Information about them is mainly of interest to the FBI which calls

⁵ From *Right to Left*, p. 289.

⁶ Personal correspondence with the author.

them the American Communist Group in Mexico City (ACGMC). Information collected about them includes that obtained through the LIENVOY (Joint CIA-Mexican Security Service telephone-tapping operation).⁷

A financial consultant, prominent in the American community in Mexico City, told me of an expatriate shop-owner who would politely ask his pursuer to remain in the outside office. At one point the financial consultant was questioned by the Mexico City head of the FBI, a personal friend of his, regarding his dealings with the shop-owner. "I told him that he knew me well enough to know he shouldn't ask."

The far-flung FBI surveillance network appears to have kept tabs on dozens of families living in this country. Today, under U.S. law, information compiled by the FBI in Mexico during this period is available under the Freedom of Information and Privacy Acts.

Hundreds of pages in the dossier of an expatriate New Yorker, for example, trace address changes, visits with friends, his daughters' comings and goings, private conversations and his family's social life over a period of many years. The item for March 23, 1954 states:

In February 1954 (blacked-out) reported that Hugo and Jean Butler had invited a number of their close friends to a picnic and softball game at their home on the afternoon of February 13, 1954. According to (blacked-out) the Butlers arranged the afternoon to give an opportunity for a number of American Communists to get together without arousing suspicion. (Blacked-out) advised that the following individuals were in attendance at the above-described picnic. (A list of 8 names follows.)

In a somewhat different account, included in his unpublished article "Growing up Blacklisted," science fiction writer Crawford Kilian, whose father Mike worked for Mexico's Channel 2 television station, states:

The focus of our week was the Saturday-morning softball game in the big vacant lot next to the Butlers' house on Palmas. By 10:00 we had a gathering of kids and adults.... We would play for a couple of hours, then convene on the Butlers' glassed-in front porch for lunch. The kids were quite welcome in the adults' conversation, but we were just as likely to go into the living room to play records or up to Michael's room to fool around with toy soldiers, or back out into the lot to chuck spears at one another while screaming, "Dog of an Aztec! Pig of a Toltec!"

Where did the FBI get its information? Aside from wire taps and periodic surveillance, paid informers were probably a major source. Several people I spoke to believe

that a former friend and business associate of theirs was responsible for the leaks.

Following the government round-ups in September 1958, my parents distanced themselves from their politically progressive friends and established closer ties with some Mexican acquaintances and a group of apolitical Americans who shared their enthusiasm for playing bridge.

Just recently, my sister Judith mentioned that my mother once confided that she and my father had kept their distance from their political friends for a number of years, convinced that there was one informer, and perhaps two, in their midst.

"Guilt by association" worked as effectively in Mexico as it did in the U.S., aided by "leaks to the press" that might have originated in the U.S. Embassy. A translator who accompanied his wife, a professional dancer and guest of the government, to Mexico told me that his reasons for leaving the United States were never political. There is no reason to disbelieve him. Politically progressive and a close friend to many of the self-exiled, however, he was named as a political expatriate in the September 2, 1957 *New York Herald Tribune* article.

In the March 20, 1961 issue of *Newsweek*, Fred Vanderbilt Field was reported to have attended a Mexico City Latin American Conference for National Sovereignty, Economic Emancipation and Peace supported by the left wing. Field writes that:

I had had a lot of publicity, some based on fact, some based on half fact and half invention, and some, like this one, a complete and deliberate lie. I was angry. I had been angry before and done nothing about it. Protests to magazine and newspaper editors in those days were useless. But this time I had to do something. I was living in Mexico as the guest of the government and if I was to stay, I had to conform to its rules.... The important rule for foreigners was that they could not interfere in the internal affairs of the nation, and of course, attending a conference on national sovereignty could be so interpreted... many persons had been thrown out of the country on less evidence.⁸

Field then proceeded to investigate who had written the article—which, like many of its ilk, was unsigned. Upon discovering that the author was one Harold Lavine, he arranged to have himself invited to a party that Lavine was attending. After Field plied Lavine with bourbon until early the next morning, Lavine said his information had come from the FBI.

As Edna VanderSchelling, an American School music teacher for approximately ten years, was to learn, the press could be a powerful weapon against the "politically suspect." The September 19, 1960 issue of *U.S. News &*

⁷ *Inside the Company: CIA Diary*. New York, Bantam Books, p. 542.

⁸ *From Right to Left*, p. 293.

World Report listed her as a member of the “American Communist colony in Mexico.”

The school year had just begun, but shortly before the end of the fall semester she was given notice that her employment was being terminated. Mrs. VanderSchelling then filed a suit for libel against *U.S. News & World Report*. After a prolonged court battle and a series of appeals, the case was eventually denied a hearing by the U.S. Supreme Court, on grounds not of merit but of jurisdiction.

Since Mrs. VanderSchelling was no longer a citizen of a particular state, the case could not be heard in any state court. The federal courts, on the other hand, were authorized to hear only cases between citizens or entities of two different states or two different countries. In order to be heard in a federal court it was necessary for her lawyers to establish a “diversity of citizenship.” This was not accomplished to the Court’s satisfaction and the case, as such, was never heard.

The long arm of the law could and occasionally did reach over the border to Mexico City. Fred Field received a summons from James O. Eastland, chairman of the Senate Internal Security Committee, instructing him to appear and testify in connection with an investigation of Jacob Javits, who was then running for the U.S. Senate. Field simply ignored the summons, Crawford Kilian remembers accompanying his father to the American Embassy, and his father “telling us that he’d lost his passport because he was a Communist. I remember him saying only, ‘Well, boys, they lifted my passport.’”

V Throughout the 1950s, families continued to arrive as others dribbled back to the States, but by the early ’60s the fiery rhetoric which characterized the witch-hunt era had started to fizzle. McCarthy and the crusade which bore his name had, for the most part, been discredited. The State Department could no longer deny passports arbitrarily, and the Hollywood blacklists were soon to become a thing of the past. Most of the Hollywood crowd had left Mexico by then, and the few who remained soon began returning to the United States.

Those who had established businesses and prospered—like my parents—stayed on. The years passed. Their children were moving out, going to college, moving to the States. A few of their number died and were buried in Mexico. Others, like my parents, retired as their lives continued to change. By the time my brother Paul, born in 1955, went off to college, both my parents had become full-time students at Mexico’s University of the Americas.

Mexico City had also changed. The laid-back, small-time city of 1950 had become an overgrown metropolis, and the rapidly growing population brought with it the attendant problems of pollution, traffic and stress. No longer young, my parents worried about their health, the



Luis Sánchez Ponton, eminent Mexican attorney, in New York in 1957 to argue the Sobell case.

altitude, medical attention and costs. (Just a few years short of 65, they would, if they returned to the United States, soon qualify for Medicare.)

In 1981, at the height of Reagan’s popularity, my parents moved to San Francisco after spending more than 30 years in Mexico. Although a few of the political expatriates still remain, most of them left for similar reasons either in the late ’70s or the early ’80s.

During their years in Mexico the expatriates had sometimes felt unsafe, and many had known times of economic uncertainty. No doubt this would have been true no matter what country they had chosen. They returned to the United States with their Mexican paintings and furnishings and a taste for pre-Columbian art, spicy cuisine and Mexican music.

Although I cannot speak for the others, I do believe my parents’ attitude towards their years in exile was fairly representative. If you had asked, Belle and Mike would have told you that they never lost their gratitude, respect and affection for Mexico and the Mexican people for taking them in, no questions asked.

As I look back on those years, I remember our first days in Mexico City. We were living at Shirley’s Courts, and I recall leaving the motel with my parents at about 10 o’clock on a cool, sunny morning in November. As we stepped out of the hotel’s back entrance into the street, a young man wearing a red shirt whizzed by on a bicycle. On his head he balanced an enormous basket heaped high with *bolillos* (rolls) and, for a moment, I caught the scent of freshly baked bread.

For a child newly arrived from the Bronx, it was like something out of the circus or a dream. It was as if I had been given one swift glimpse of what Mexico would be like for my parents and many like them: a precarious and exotic adventure that required a certain naïveté, some skill and not a little courage—but all in all a strangely satisfying experience! ❖