

WEST VIEW

The Treasure of Calle Mississippi

BY ALAN CHEUSE



MEXICO CITY—Inside the comfortable three-story house, with its small garden in the rear and third-floor workroom now seldom used, thick curtains muffle the rising sounds of traffic on Calle Mississippi on the other side of the wall. Here lives Rosa Elena Lujan de Traven, a dark-haired woman of medium height, the guardian of the treasure-trove of original manuscripts, unpublished stories, letters, diaries, photographs and other mementos of the author of "The Death Ship" and "The Treasure of the Sierra Madre."

A portrait on the living room wall shows off the passions of her younger years when her first marriage was rapidly racing to an end and she had just reencountered a tart-tempered slender fellow with a high forehead, a writer with a lust for anonymity who was in need of a Spanish translator, with whom she had gone out for coffee many years before.

Widowed since 1969, when B. Traven, that slender fellow, died at the age of 79, Rosa Elena Lujan today wears middle age the way that younger women wear a flower: to set off her natural beauty. Pausing now and then to sip cognac, in a few minutes she verifies more facts about Traven's identity than anyone had in 50 years. During the last two decades of his life, the evasive, ferociously self-protective writer revealed to her all the facts of his identity: his birth in Chicago to well-off parents of German origin; his early days in Germany in the guise of Ret Marut, combative editor of the *Ziegelbrecher* (the Brickburner, an anarchist journal which served as the soul of the short-lived Bavarian Revolution just prior to World War I); his years as an itinerant seaman on a series of "death ships"; his sojourns with the Indians in the Southern Mexican state of Chiapas; his middle age punctuated by the appearance of Nazi bonfires heaped with copies of books by B. Traven and Thomas Mann.

"All of this I will describe in the biography of my husband which I am writing for Lawrence Hill and Co.," she said. "I spend every morning talking my memories into a tape recorder, which means his memories as well. I think it will be a good and interesting book for many people since for so many years the Germans, and some Americans too have been trying to unravel the 'mystery' of my husband's life. The form of it is important to me, too."

"My husband was one of the freest men who ever lived. His desire for privacy was part of that freedom and the book about his life will have to reflect this, how do you say, unconventional nature."

If Rosa Elena Lujan de Traven talks into the machine in the same manner that she talks to visitors, the book should be a compelling and valuable literary biography which may well win Traven the attention he has long deserved among readers of his native English. It certainly should dispel once and for all the various myths which still cling to his reputation. Was he the illegitimate son of Kaiser Wilhelm? Was he a member of the IWW who fled the United States during the persecution of the "Wobblies"? Did he write only in German and then allow North American editors to "create" English-language versions for U.S. readers?

"My husband said to me before he died," said Rosa Elena Lujan as she showed me the photostat of the visa Traven acquired when he entered Mexico for the first time in 1913 at the age of 23, "I was born in the U.S., I belong to the U.S." The birthplace—Chicago, Ill.—on the visa verifies that statement.

"But he also said that he belonged to Germany as well, although for many years after the rise of Hitler he refused to acknowledge that he wrote in German, he hated the Nazis so. And he became a Mexican citizen at the end of his life. He is very popular in Germany today and, of course, in Mexico. But in the United States he is still relatively unknown, almost ignored. Perhaps because America is a publicity culture and since he hated publicity—he was always afraid that in the early days the Germans would try to kill him—he never became famous in his native country."

Her narrative turns back in time to the initial appearance of "The Death Ship" in Germany in the mid-20s and the immediate fame it brought to Traven. He was in Tampico, the Mexican shipping port, and he received a wire from the Book Guild saying that they were publishing so many thousands of the novel and that they wanted some biographical information. He wired them back saying that the book was the important thing, not the author. From that time on, he was quite a successful author, but also a mystery man to his readers.

The success of "The Death Ship" compelled his publisher to ask Traven to put into novel form some of the stories he had published in German magazines about a gringo laborer named Gales who wandered through the south of Mexico. This Traven did, after adding some new material. The result was "The Cotton-Pick-

ers," a marvelously authentic narrative about Mexican life just after the revolution. Using as illustrations the many photographs he took during his own wanderings through the jungle state of Chiapas, Traven next published "Land des Fruhlings" (Land of Springtime), a travel book about southern Mexico which has never been translated into English. He then wrote the first volumes of the six-volume "Jungle" series in which he portrayed the ferocious repression by the landowners of the Indian population of Mexico and the revolution which ensued. Next came "The Treasure of the Sierra Madre" and "The Bridge in the Jungle." Although it was "Treasure" which brought him to the attention of the U.S. public (by virtue of the classic John Huston film which was made from the text), it is "Bridge" which remains for many of his readers the most affecting of his novel-length narratives.

The Traven residence itself is a far cry from the high jungle of Chiapas. But out of homage to the various ships which Traven sailed on there is a "bridge" on the third floor. This is the passageway and staircase leading to Traven's study where he spent most of his days and part of his nights at work on his books for the last 15 years of his life. As she recently wrote in her affectionate introduction to "The Kidnapped Saint and Other Stories," a posthumous collection of Traven tales, his widow explains that her daughters were forbidden to cross "the bridge" into Traven's work area, but waited patiently at luncheon for him to descend and help with their homework, to give them allowances and tell stories and help with their education in several languages. To Rosa Elena and the daughters Malu and Chelo, Traven was "Slipper," the captain of the household.

"Many people thought that I had changed Traven toward the end of his life," his widow says. "But the truth is he changed me and my daughters. He gave us a new and different view of the world."

We look at closets filled with mementos of Traven's travels through southern Mexico: a saddle still brown with country dust, suits of rough clothing, a box of stone carvings in the pre-Columbian mode and the row on row of translations of Traven books in more than 30 languages and the steel filing cabinets where the original manuscripts are kept.

He made us conscious that people in our own country were homeless and starving. Previously, I had had a sense of Christian charity, but not an understanding of social injustice and the need for basic social change. Traven gave us all this important education." We look at Traven's death mask, which shows—unlike the clear-eyed bust by sculptor Federico Canesi which dominates the small patio in the rear of the house—a long, angular face and broad forehead contorted somewhat in pain.

Many readers have been changed by reading Traven since that mask, his final disguise, was cast in May of 1969. Every year new editions appear in Western Europe, and there are signs that a Traven renaissance may be on the horizon in the United States. An Eastern university press has recently brought out the first book-length study of Traven's fiction, another is promising a collection of scholarly essays on his work, a young graduate student at the University of South Carolina has founded the B. Traven Newsletter and Lawrence Hill and Co. promises the publication of the still untranslated "Trotas" (Tree-trunks) from the "Jungle" Series and "Rosa Blanca." Traven's dramatization of the activities of U.S. oil entrepreneurs in Mexico in the days before President Cardenas nationalized his country's oil and mineral deposits, "Land des Fruhlings" and "Asian Norval," Traven's last novel, still remain to be published in the United States. Along with the biography, these promise to bring much more attention to Traven than he has ever received before in this country.

But, fittingly enough, the man whom most North Americans know by means of the film of "Treasure" may yet have his reputation seriously enhanced by a group of films based on his works. Prize-winning cameraman Gabriel Figueroa's film of "Rosa Blanca," for a long time banned in Mexico, was released last year in Mexico City by order of the president himself, and some North American Traven aficionados are trying to arrange the New York premiere of the picture. Several European companies promise productions of films based on the "Jungle" novels; a Los Angeles-based independent production company plans to film Traven's short story "The Night Visitor," and Paul Leduc, the Mexican film-maker whose "John Reed: Insurgent Mexico" won him acclaim in the Museum of Modern Art New Directors series several years ago, has acquired the rights to "The Death Ship" and "The Cotton-Pickers."

Mexico City has renamed a street in one of its new districts Calle de Traven and Ocoingo, the Chiapas village where Traven lived for several years, has been renamed Ocoingo de Traven. And several major United States libraries have recently inaugurated efforts to acquire the treasure of Calle Mississippi. The man who dedicated his life to fighting for and writing about the rights of the world's anonymous citizens and who protected his own anonymity so ferociously for such a long period of time is about to become a public legend in his native country. Thomas Mann and B. Traven. A few years from now that combination may not seem strange at all.

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