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## Jenő Bánó

Travels of an Immigrant and his Path to Diplomacy

### Abstract

This paper introduces a case study of Hungarian emigration to the Americas, which illustrates some of the general trends in migration at the turn of the century as well as a unique career path of a Hungarian immigrant in Mexico. By discussing and analyzing the life, diplomatic career, and publications of Jenő Bánó, the paper touches upon issues including the significance of travel writing in influencing migration, the use of migration propaganda, and relations between Hungary and the Americas.

*Keywords:* immigration, Mexico, United States, Porfiriato, travel writing, Jenő Bánó

At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries an unprecedented number of people left Hungary looking for better opportunities abroad.<sup>1</sup> The great majority of them emigrated to North America and more specifically to the United States.<sup>2</sup> Similarly to several hundred thousand fellow emigrants, Jenő Bánó also left behind the mother country with the objective of finding employment in the United States that he hoped would enable him to return to his family in Hungary and start a new life. In all other respects, however, his career in North America differs greatly from that of the average Hungarian immigrant of the time: after a short stay in the United States, he moved to Mexico and started various business ventures, while he began to share his experience in North America in various publications. His activities as a traveler and travel writer not only helped Hungarians learn more about foreign lands and little-known regions, but his texts (rather consciously from Bánó's part) also boosted his career, as a few years later we encounter him no longer as a typical immigrant or a

plantation owner in Mexico, but as the consul general of the country in Hungary. Travel writing and Bánó's conscious career building plans related to it played a central role in him becoming a diplomat a few years after leaving Hungary and thus we see a unique transformation from immigrant to travel writer and diplomat.

From his very first publications, it seems to be Bánó's clear plan to improve the former negative image of Mexico (also clearly discernible in Hungary), to offer an alternative, more favorable approach to the country and its people that focuses on beauty and opportunities that might even be attractive for Hungarians. In line with this, he criticized former writers for their hostile attitude and made sure he would benefit from this alternative image presented:

It is obvious that we are deceived at home as the small number of books written about Mexico, and in common use in Austria and Hungary, contain more malevolence towards Mexicans than honesty [...]. We Hungarians, while reading Austrian books on Mexico, might well remember when a few years ago our good friends wrote about us in a very similar fashion, moreover, the dear German Schulverein still likes to present us to foreigners as outlaws and semi-barbarians.<sup>3</sup>

It seems that he used travel writing to advance his own career in his new home: he made sure, as we will see, that Mexican President Porfirio Díaz himself would be informed about the positive treatment of Mexico in his books.<sup>4</sup> In one of his letters to his father, Bánó wrote: "The publication of my work and its translation to Spanish later on can bring me a bright future in Mexico as it is probably the first work to introduce the local conditions benevolently and fairly."<sup>5</sup> He viewed Mexico as a modern and civilized country with a friendly and welcoming population, an image not readily available before. Due to the overtly complimentary voice assumed and the praise received by Díaz, Mónika Szenté-Varga refers to Bánó simply as a "publicist of the Porfiriato."<sup>6</sup>

The image presented by Bánó contrasted sharply not only with the former Western-European or US travel accounts emphasizing an undeveloped (uncivilized) country with a lazy and uneducated population, but also those written by Hungarians visiting the country earlier: these include former revolutionaries like Károly László, Pál Rosti or János Xántus, as well as the Hungarian participants of Habsburg Maximilian's Mexican venture (e.g., Ede Pawlowszki and Ede Szenger), who all visited and wrote about the country and its culture.<sup>7</sup> Despite some of the

individual differences, overall, these writers depicted Mexico as one lagging behind the United States and Western Europe, which regions were perceived as possible developmental models. Bánó demolishes such images consciously, which at the time nicely coincided with the plans of the Mexican government led by Porfirio Díaz and paved the way for Bánó's career in diplomacy.

Between 1876 and 1910, the Mexican government encouraged the settlement of foreigners (Europeans in particular) and for this purpose tried to advertise Mexico as a land of unlimited opportunities.

Díaz and his supporters organized an international public relations campaign to reinforce the regime's apparent durability with a veneer of cultural credibility. For this they recruited foreigners and Mexicans to lobby opinion makers and policy makers abroad and to write foreign-language 'books, pamphlets, and articles that were directly or indirectly subsidized by Porfirian authorities.' They wanted to show the world that Mexico was becoming more European and less 'Indian,' more civilized and less dangerous.<sup>8</sup>

The main aim of the administration was to lure foreign investment to the country, together with European settlers, partly by improving the image of the nation abroad. This attracted several foreigners who in turn could witness and propagate modernization and improvement. The policies contributed to more friendly attitudes and positive images in travel accounts, for which Bánó's publications may be seen as perfect examples. However, similarly to earlier attempts, the overall immigration policy of the government failed because even though Mexico was presented as a more attractive place, other regions of the Americas were still perceived as more advantageous, and newly arrived immigrants did not get the support they were hoping for.

As a receiving country, Mexico has played a marginal role in the great migrations of the last two centuries. Although rich in natural resources and economic opportunities, it was poor in available land and jobs for lower-class immigrants. Not even the Porfirian propaganda – persuasive as it was in luring foreign investment – could convince more than a tiny fraction of all Europeans who embarked for the Americas to try their luck in Mexico.<sup>9</sup>

Travel writers took note of modernization in the county. Infrastructure was improved, the Pacific Ocean was connected with the Gulf of Mexico

and major cities were linked with Mexico City. This made traveling faster, safer, and more reliable and made various parts of Mexico more accessible for travel writers as well. Similarly to the US, the railroad unified the country and improved commerce and the economy. Telegraph lines were laid, law and order was enforced in the countryside (with the *rurales*), the budget was balanced, and Mexico provided a welcoming atmosphere for investors in various fields.<sup>10</sup> According to Buchenau, “Porfirian modernization led to a greater influx of foreigners. Entrepreneurs and professionals flocked to Mexico from Britain, France, Germany, Spain, and the United States, forming sizeable foreign-born communities in the larger cities.”<sup>11</sup> These investors (and travel writers) arriving into the country contributed to the modernization of Mexico while also promoting the Díaz regime.

Besides the obvious modernization of the country, however, they often ignored the negative aspects of the policies of the Díaz government: while noting the improvement in terms of commerce and trade, we also have to remember that almost everything was in foreign hands at the time,<sup>12</sup> Díaz crushed opponents cruelly, and his rule did not bring prosperity for the majority of Mexicans; peasants and workers lived under difficult circumstances and Indians were often starving. Therefore, while the Díaz government brought modernization for the higher classes, the masses often suffered and had major problems. It also has to be noted here that Mexico could not compete with the United States in luring immigrants to the country: the US was on the way of becoming the leading economic power in the world and was also inviting European workforce to the country.

Bánó’s life nicely fits into this framework. In his books and other publications he provides accounts of the country, its famous sights, population, flora and fauna, similarly to former travel accounts. At the same time, he offers more insights into an immigrant’s life in America, also including tips and guidelines for future migrants. Besides the themes present before as well in Hungarian travel writing, Bánó brings new topics into the Hungarian discourse on Mexico: he notes signs of modernization, demands a more positive representation of the population, and while the US still serves as a reference point in his Mexican accounts, it is often presented as a threat to Mexico and not a necessity for its development. Bánó in many ways turns the former approach inside out, but while his predecessors emphasized negative features only, Bánó also turned a blind eye to what he did not want to see and reported mostly

what presented Mexico in a favorable light, in harmony with the objectives of his publication. Bánó's travel accounts serve as an exciting case study for the links between travel writing, migration, and propaganda and on why and how travel accounts can change according to the background, preconceptions, and objectives of the writer.

### **Travels of an Immigrant and the Path to Diplomacy**

An overview of Bánó's biography, career plans, and personal letters is important because it can help us decode some of the reasons why he wrote in a distinctively different style from former Hungarian writers.<sup>13</sup> Bánó was born in 1855 in Roskovány, in present day Slovakia. His father, József Bánó, was a Member and also Deputy Speaker of the Parliament for 9 years. While Bánó is usually categorized as a "Central American traveler" in most publications, he traveled extensively elsewhere as well. He graduated from the Marine Academy in Fiume but later worked as an employee at the Hungarian Royal Railways where he retired from at an early age. He claimed that it was the death of his wife, Kamilla Münnich, in 1888 that prompted him to retire, to embark on a journey around the world, and eventually to emigrate to the United States, leaving behind his family in search of a new life.

Having said that, it is clear from his accounts that he left the country for economic reasons, looking for employment and a new and better life in the New World at the high tide of New Immigration. In his letters presented below, the real reason for leaving the country is highlighted several times and this is important because it influenced the way he saw the Americas and the manner in which he wrote. As he claimed, he was looking for a better future,<sup>14</sup> and just like other New Immigrants, he wanted to return home after saving enough money in the New World: "If I am lucky, I can return to my homeland where we will enjoy the fruits of my work together [with my family]."<sup>15</sup>

After visiting various cities in Europe, Bánó left the Old Continent and arrived in New York in May 1889 traveling extensively in the United States (as recorded in his first book). He went to the Niagara Falls, Chicago, and San Francisco, among other places, providing short, post-card-like snapshots of cities and places visited. Bánó planned to settle in the United States, but after spending a month and a half in San Francisco he moved "to the empire of the famous Aztecs, the present Republic of

Mexico, to personally see whether all those news about this beautiful country and its people are true.”<sup>16</sup> Bánó was actually referring to work and investment opportunities in Mexico, establishing coffee plantations in particular, that he had heard about.

After traveling from San Francisco to the Mexican border and then in various parts of Mexico, Bánó bought land and founded a coffee plantation in Oaxaca and named it Camilla after his late wife. Bánó later married a Mexican woman of Zapotec origin with whom he traveled extensively in Central and South America, including Venezuela, where he stayed and worked for a year, Cuba, Columbia, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, San-Salvador, and Guatemala. Bánó wrote that the *Camilla* plantation was taken from him by his partner during this time by tricking Bánó into signing a paper while he was sick. Later, he established other plantations, called *Hungária*, *Hunnia*, and *Pannonia*, and also started to grow vanilla, sugarcane, and rubber trees. These plantations, however, were destroyed by a tornado before they could bring any profit.<sup>17</sup>

Looking for new opportunities after this financial disaster, Bánó moved to Mexico City. It was here that he met the President of the Republic and he was offered (unexpectedly, as Bánó himself wrote) the position of Consul General in the newly established Mexican Consulate in Budapest, a position he held between 1903 and 1912.<sup>18</sup> The job itself can be seen as an indication of his connections and may be attributed to his favorable publications about Mexico and a tendency on his part to emphasize the importance of commercial links and contacts between Mexico and Hungary. Thus, Bánó returned to Hungary after spending several years in the Americas. Later he worked as the Mexican consul in Egypt. During the First World War, he moved to Spain with his wife and settled in Barcelona. His second wife died in 1919 and Bánó himself passed away in 1927 in Malaga. He was a corresponding member of the Hungarian Geographical Society and honorary member of numerous foreign institutions and associations.<sup>19</sup>

Bánó wrote extensively about his journeys and life in the Americas. His first book, *Úti képek Amerikából*<sup>20</sup> [Images of a journey in America] documents his journey from Hungary to Mexico, from leaving his home through the transatlantic voyage to travels in the US and Mexico (until his arrival to Mexico City, before leaving for Oaxaca). In this book, we have a great opportunity to compare the images of the United States and Mexico and to see how the perceptions of Bánó shifted as his plans and life also changed. It is also important that the book has an appendix that

includes letters sent by Bánó to his father between 1889 and 1890 that provide some insights into the background of the journey and the development of Bánó's plans in the New World. These include explanations, motives for leaving Hungary, background information for Bánó's decisions, including the one to move to Mexico and start a coffee plantation. The letters include information usually not found in travelogues. Bánó also added a study on Mexican coffee and its cultivation, a former publication of his, which is an early work in a long line of articles aimed at presenting various produces and goods of Mexico.

Bánó's second book, *Mexico és utazásom a trópusokon* [Mexico and my travels in the tropics],<sup>21</sup> details his life and travels in Mexico, Cuba, Venezuela, and Central America. "It is a simple travelogue," Bánó notes, written in response to the success of the first publication. He claims in the introduction that *Úti képek* was criticized by a few people only and not because of its content but because of its political views (discussed below). *Mexico és utazásom* also includes former articles published in various journals and magazines as well as a translated Mexican review of his first book. The first part of the third major publication (*Bolyongásaim Amerikában* [My wanderings in America]) is basically a combination and reprint of the first two accounts and other publications with some revisions (grammatical as well as spelling), with photos of Díaz and other government officials added. The second part includes numerous exciting chapters on Mexican flora and fauna, Indians, life on the plantation, similarities between Mexicans and Hungarians, etc. All books include unique photographs as well that complement the text. Bánó also mentions a fourth volume in his autobiography, titled "Epizódok amerikai életemből" [Episodes from my American life], which, however, was never published.

Bánó authored numerous shorter publications in various languages including Hungarian, Spanish, and German. The Hungarian articles were published in *Pesti Napló*, *Szepesi Lapok*, *Magyarország*, *Budapesti Hírlap*, *Magyar Kereskedők Lapja*, and other newspapers and magazines, while they were also included, often verbatim, in the books as well. They mostly concerned Mexican life, descriptions of Mexico and Mexicans, Indians, and introduced numerous Mexican goods. In these articles Bánó called attention to possible commercial opportunities for Hungarians.

Bánó's writing style is enjoyable, entertaining, often humorous, and the texts read well. The reader is familiarized with the transatlantic voyage, issues of the New Immigration, life in the US and Mexico, and

fascinating stories of everyday challenges faced by immigrants. Bánó not only introduces the readers to what it was like to live on the other side of the Atlantic but also provides a glimpse into the psyche of the immigrant and the questions always haunting him: did I make the right choice when leaving my family? Was it worth coming to America? Did I choose the right place for settlement? These questions made Bánó continuously ponder on his relationship with the home country and the new land, on questions related to travel, migration, and his future.

### **Criticism of the Imperial View – Images Revised with a Plan?**

Bánó's novel approach towards Mexico was influenced by numerous factors. First and foremost, his status as an immigrant in Mexico during the Porfiriato affected his attitude towards the representation of the country in a crucial way. He knew that the publication of a favorable account could help the realization of his plans in the country (gaining government support), thus he was planning publication of his experience from an early stage of his stay in the New World<sup>22</sup> and he consciously worked on demolishing former negative images. Even if in certain aspects Mexico is mentioned as less civilized than Europe, there are no references to any kind of inferiority, and there is a strong emphasis on the future rise and development of the nation. His experience in the United States shaped his view of inter-American relations: having found no work, he was disappointed in the US; thus, he willingly emphasized the downsides of immigrant life there and contrasted them with opportunities in Mexico. While the United States still serves as third reference point, it is not seen as a masculine savior of feminine Mexico or a model to be followed without reservations any more, but as a threat to Mexico's unique culture and national identity. Such an attitude is also shaped by the similarities perceived by Bánó between Mexican and Hungarian history in terms of continuous struggles with great powers.

Bánó believed that both Mexico and Hungary had been misrepresented by Western, imperial powers before. "It is obvious that we are deceived at home," writes Bánó, calling attention to the malevolence of Europeans towards both his home country and adopted new home. While former Hungarian travel writers often identified with the imperial view of Western travelers and depicted Mexico as the periphery (introducing the West



as the center and the standard in terms of civilization, culture, and progress), Bánó rebels against such an approach.

The European imperial view is criticized and ridiculed throughout the accounts: “This is what we are like here in Mexico, wild and heartless, and also, as they like to think in Europe, completely uncivilized.”<sup>23</sup> Bánó expresses his frustration with the attitude of imperial powers, their lack of knowledge and interest in Hungary. During one of the dinners on the transatlantic voyage, a language gap emerged between Bánó and his English fellow traveler. His comments clearly reflect Bánó’s hurt feelings:

[...] but no problem, you are lucky now that he is English and thus he spares you from further requests for information, [...] as he believes that this is normal for Hungarians, living there in Asia; he knows that you are Hungarian from the passenger list and he only suspects that Hungary is in Asia because he remembers to have studied this at school, and this is pretty likely too. [...] to suppose that you do not speak English would hurt his pride because he would never believe that a civilized man, let him be a Mezzofanti otherwise, does not speak English; he, however, knows no other language of course.<sup>24</sup>

This leaves its mark on Bánó’s thinking and once he sees Mexico being treated the same way as Hungary, he feels sympathy and defends Mexico and Mexicans. Such a relationship and sense of common fate had not been expressed in Hungarian travel writing before.

Bánó even draws questionable parallels between Hungarian and Mexican history: while Mexicans were oppressed by the Spanish and lived under the influence of the United States, Hungary lived under foreign rule for centuries and now also suffers in the shadow of the Habsburg Empire. “Similarly to us, Hungarians, who suffered under foreign influence for centuries, they also felt the Spanish yoke on their necks for hundreds of years;” Bánó then adds: “just like we, after getting rid of our handcuffs, would like to enjoy the hardly-won freedom and we are looking for the love and respect of foreign nations, the Mexican is also content with freedom and strives to win the esteem of foreign countries.”<sup>25</sup> Bánó raises his voice to defend Mexico, while also commenting on his home country’s status within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He objects, for example, when seeing US maps where Hungary appears with the same color as Austria and is indicated only as a “province.”<sup>26</sup> The letters published in the first book and various sections

of other publications reveal Bánó's opposition to coexistence with the Austrians as a result of the Compromise of 1867: "I like the King, as the Apostolic majesty of Hungary, I consider his being holy and invulnerable, however, I do not like the union."<sup>27</sup>

Bánó believes that Hungary loses her national character and identity as a result of the Compromise; she cannot enjoy national celebrations or express a sense of national belonging as the imperial symbol of the double-headed eagle always lures over the country. Hungary should not give in to foreign powers and Bánó clearly expresses his opinion: "Long live the homeland! Long live independent Hungary!"<sup>28</sup> This attitude clearly influences Bánó's perceptions of Mexico as well. He demands fair treatment for Mexico and emphasizes the significance of preserving the unique identity (and independence) of the country. The former rulers, the Spanish, are not presented as heroes, their reign was characterized by destruction and genocide.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, US influence is also seen as harmful, unlike in the case of former travel writers. It is not a model to be followed any more, but becomes dangerous for the Mexican national character, just like Austria's rule over Hungary:

[Mexicans] do not like the North Americans and still the neighbor's influence expands day by day; but in my humble opinion this with time can pose a threat for this young state that has just started to flourish and which as an independent republic is destined to a great role, if, however, they would unite with North America, the country would lose its originality, special characteristics, and nationality among the Anglo-Saxons – as it happened in California, New Mexico, and Texas – and it would be degraded to a secondary position within this enormous body.<sup>30</sup>

While László and Xántus, for example, perceived US influence and occupation as desirable for Mexico and Pawłowski justified European intervention, Bánó considers foreign, especially US influence, to be dangerous, just as he believes in the same with regard to Austria and Hungary. In line with this, the Mexican-American War is not presented as a natural step benefiting the "manifest" expansion of the US and the progress of the newly acquired region but it is seen as a huge loss for Mexico. American soldiers are depicted as murderers, while Mexicans as heroes fighting for their country: "Happy is the nation that has such children."<sup>31</sup> Bánó even defends Mexico from US expressions of superiority.<sup>32</sup> One cannot but think that this is also a defense of Hungary against similar attitudes.

His changing view of the United States, American citizens, and the inter-American relationship between Mexico and the United States was due not only to his critical attitude towards great powers but also to his former experience in the United States. His original plan was to find employment and settle down in the United States;<sup>33</sup> however, he did not get a suitable job and thus decided to move on to Mexico and try his luck there. This could result in a degree of disappointment in the United States as it did not fulfill his expectations (as a land of opportunities). At the same time, Mexico could give him what the US did not: good prospects for an immigrant. In the relatively short accounts on the US, many of Bánó's images revoke characteristic, former depictions of the country: fast development, growing industry and lively commerce, good transportation system, together with the surprisingly beautiful natural scenery. The population is presented as industrious, busy, and cultural and racial diversity is emphasized in major cities like New York and San Francisco.<sup>34</sup> While he is astonished by what he experienced in the United States, the former image depicted with reverent admiration is not present any more. Already at arrival he criticizes the customs, he is judgmental with Mormons,<sup>35</sup> while New York is described as interesting but not beautiful.<sup>36</sup>

As Bánó could not find a suitable job in the United States, the country is not presented as the land of opportunities anymore.<sup>37</sup> He actually calls attention to threats on immigrants<sup>38</sup> and no success stories are discussed regarding Hungarian-Americans: "There are several other Hungarians in San Francisco but as I heard they all live under the most modest circumstances; California, the promised land – as we can see – does not really waste its blessings on our poor compatriots who wandered here wishing to get rich."<sup>39</sup> He presents a completely different image with regard to Mexico: Mexican accounts emphasize Hungarian success, a welcoming environment and people, and good opportunities for immigrants.

Bánó is eager to share with his readers the examples of modernization and improvement in Mexico. He travels on and describes the various new railroads that he points out as new projects bringing progress for the cities and the country in general. He presents technology available in the country, together with signs of industrialization, mining, and great developments in agriculture. Mexico was depicted as a country offering business opportunities earlier as well but it was seen as an attractive place for American or English settlers and businessmen. This is also changed by Bánó, who introduces Mexico as an alternative destination for Hun-

garians, an even better one than the US. This was in line with the intentions of the Díaz government (even if probably they did not think of Hungarians in the first place). As we have seen, Bánó knew that such a publication could be beneficial for him and he actually sent his writings to Díaz. The review of his first book was republished in *Mexico és utazásom*, and it praises Bánó for the fair and positive treatment of Mexico. According to Díaz's letter, the Mexican President promised support for Bánó's endeavors.<sup>40</sup>

Bánó encourages Hungarian immigration to Mexico both indirectly by the complimentary depiction of the country and also more explicitly: "This is Mexico, dear father, a really blessed country, and anyone who has a practical mind is destined to become rich here."<sup>41</sup> Bánó goes even further and writes: "It would be wiser for our Tóts [people of Slovak ethnicity living in the territory of Hungary], if they want to emigrate from the upper parts of our county, to come here and not to the unfortunate North America where they are looked upon as draft animals."<sup>42</sup> While in the US he presents the difficult circumstances of Hungarian immigrants, in Mexico he emphasizes success. He writes about six Hungarians in Mexico City and claims that "all my Hungarian compatriots have a successful life both in social and financial terms, and what is even more important, they are all loved and respected both by Mexicans and others."<sup>43</sup> Hungarians have a much better status in Mexico than in the US and Bánó mentions the example of Samu Lederer, his influential friend and patron in Mexico City, who could not cope in the US but became successful in Mexico after moving there. Bánó also provides practical advice for Hungarian readers, offering growing tips for coffee, vanilla, rubber tree, etc., describing workers and their wages, the difficulties of immigrant life, and he also calls attention to the support granted by the government and realizable profits. It is in this sense that Bánó's books provide a mixture of a typical travelogue, a migrant narrative, and propaganda.

Bánó identifies with the policies of the Díaz government. He also notes that the demand for labor force cannot be satisfied by Indians only in the future, so emigration will be needed that can come either from Asia or Europe. "I believe both me and the government would give the advantage to European emigration and will not bring in – only in greatest need – the Chinese, who have flooded California and the West coast of North America so much that Americans are trying to get rid of them by all means."<sup>44</sup> Hungarians would be welcomed as immigrants in Mexico but

Bánó also admits at one point that “one should not forget that although people are nice in Mexico and life is also pleasant, the conditions are not yet as established as in the civilized states of the Old Continent.”<sup>45</sup>

Bánó claims in his book that after reading his publications several Hungarians contacted him about opportunities in the country.<sup>46</sup> “I am not surprised that many people want to emigrate from Hungary” [...] “It seems that soon a Hungarian colony will be born under the Mexican sky for which [Hungarian Prime Minister] Mr. Kálmán Tisza will pass the death penalty on me and all my coffee *in contumaciam*.”<sup>47</sup> Bánó claims that he is not interested in the reactions of the government to his accounts: “I do not care too much about them. Why don’t they worry about how their sons could get by at home?”<sup>48</sup> Bánó’s discussion of the issue of migration serves as a possibility for commenting on problems of the home culture just as the defense of Mexico against malevolent Western voices is used to make remarks on Hungary’s similar treatment.

### **Mexico: Old Themes Adjusted, Novel Issues Introduced**

On the way from San Francisco to Mexico City, Bánó crossed the US-Mexican border at El-Paso and continued his “snapshots” of the landscape and various stops along the way. Throughout his Mexican accounts many of the usual images and topics reappear, but new elements are also added and a more positive attitude is presented in the texts. While he criticized the customs process in the United States, the very first impressions in Mexico are sympathetic. The officers are compared to their German colleagues, this time, however, the Mexicans are seen as superior in terms of their work and behavior:

I have never seen more polite customs officers in my life than here in Passo del Norte (and the foreigners living here told me they were like this everywhere) and yet they strictly perform their duties; [...] This kind of behavior with which they treat everyone provides such a sharp contrast with the Austrian, but even Hungarian, and especially German officers [...] that I cannot help but ask myself the question: ‘is it possible that the officers of Mexico who we – and especially the Austrians – like to think of as semi-barbarous, at home among the half-civilized, could acquire such polite and nice manners?’<sup>49</sup>

This short passage illustrates the fundamental change in the reputation of Mexico and Mexicans in Bánó's portrayal: for him, Mexicans are both reliable and kind, and the European (especially the Austrian) depictions are false and hostile.

Bánó emphasized progress in Mexico as his predecessors did in relation to the United States before: "In the last few years – mostly after the influence of the clergy was broken – the country has made such significant progress in the field of industry, commerce, arts, and science that it has earned the respect of Europe a long time ago and especially deserves to be taken out of the line of *terra incognita* and to receive more attention from us as well than before."<sup>50</sup> Industrialization and developing infrastructure, together with business opportunities, provide an attractive destination for immigrants in Bánó's texts. Mexico is described as a country "moving forward by enormous steps". Such accounts, however, do more than just take note of development that certainly took place in Mexico at the time. Bánó identifies with the policies of the Díaz government and projects his positive view of progress in the country to all aspects of life, remaining blind to problems of the nation.

Bánó emphasizes the role of Porfirio Díaz in Mexican modernization and praises him for his achievements and his strict rule of the country. The Mexican leader is acclaimed and supported throughout the books and even photos and stories are included of him, together with a letter from the President thanking Bánó for his attitude and the positive image of Mexico depicted in the Hungarian's first book.<sup>51</sup> Bánó offers no criticism of the Porfiriato and does not note problems of the Mexican population. This is not the only contradiction in his works. While Bánó criticizes the imperial powers for their treatment of Mexico (and Hungary), he also hails progress that the Díaz regime wanted to achieve with the involvement of US and Western European capital, workforce, and expertise (as, for example, in the case of the construction of railroads by the English).

While progress is represented for Bánó by industrialization and expanding commerce, nature and the natural environment still stand as central images of Mexico. Although it becomes less emphatic, Bánó writes about natural beauty and the abundance of nature and presents flora and fauna so different from Europe.<sup>52</sup> Still, the most dominant aspect of his descriptions focuses on Mexican modernization and business opportunities and the supporting political environment for prospective immigrants. His attitude towards modernization, opportunities in the country,

and his aim to provide an alternative depiction of the country, all shaped his view of the population.

The former stereotypical image of a lazy and uncivilized people and that of Mexico as a land of bandits is also revised in Bánó's texts. The Hungarian intended to make the country more attractive, express his sympathy towards the nation, as well as call attention to former misrepresentations. Bánó systematically refutes former negative depictions and constructs an image of a safe country with a hospitable population. This is clearly visible in his attitude towards the figure of the Mexican bandit that was, as we have seen, a central part of the image of the country in Hungarian travel writing. Mexico was always presented as hectic and dangerous, partly due to the bandits roaming the country. László, Xántus, and Rosti all wrote about stories of bandits attacking travelers and Maximilian's soldiers also projected a similar image. The Porfiriato set out to change this. To combat banditry in Mexico a new police force (the *rurales*) was established by Díaz and this certainly made the situation better and created order in the countryside, while also improving the image of the country abroad: "Under Díaz the rurales achieved international acclaim as one of the most effective mounted police forces in the world. This was more often a matter of effective publicity than of actual fact, and a good part of this reputation resided in the glamour associated with the official rural police uniform, modeled after the charro outfit worn by the *Plateados*."<sup>53</sup> Just as former travel writers exaggerated the presence of *ladrones* in Mexico, Bánó's treatment of the image of bandits is also more than simply taking note of changes and improvement in the country. He uses the commentary on improving safety to criticize former (imperial) travel accounts and tries to bring Mexico up to par with Europe:

I have read and heard so many people talk against the Mexican conditions that after my arrival to the capital I hid one lethal weapon in all my pockets as I thought that I would have to protect my life from sneak attacks at least once a day. After staying here for a week or two, however, and after I got acquainted with the local conditions personally, the protective weapons were gradually left out from my pockets and by now I walk around bravely at any late night without any weapon and alone [...]. as I can be sure that neither a thug nor a scoundrel is looking to take my life or belongings.<sup>54</sup>

Mexico City in Bánó's view is one of the safest places in the world and is directly compared with Europe: "When will there be such conditions regarding safety in that terribly civilized Europe?"<sup>55</sup> He extends his descriptions to the entire countryside and claims that even if he takes weapons with him it is to protect him from wild animals and not people.<sup>56</sup> The Hungarian expressly criticizes former travel accounts for their "absurd" treatment of the issue of bandits and even makes fun of them.<sup>57</sup> Bánó mentions that the stories of attacks are only born from fantasy or a lack of knowledge of Mexico and he offers to defend Mexicans again: of course there are bad people everywhere in the world but to claim that there are bandits wherever you travel in Mexico is unfounded and such claims should "make anyone at least a bit familiar with Mexican conditions smile."<sup>58</sup>

Bánó's travel account introduces a novel attitude towards the entire populace. Most groups within society receive a favorable treatment, people are presented as kind, hospitable, as well as good workers. When he writes negatively about certain people or groups of people, these examples are treated as exceptions to the general rule. For example, he posits a certainly racist view with regard to the representation of the black and mulatto population. He claims that they are also good workers if treated strictly but they can easily turn into wild animals. "In my opinion, the mulatto is the most dangerous type of person in the world; he is sneaky, greedy, drunkard and revengeful, with a great inclination to stealing and he does not have a guilty conscience even if he has to take the life of another human being [...]."<sup>59</sup> Bánó in racist remarks mentions that the "Negro blood" is treacherous, but he also emphasizes that these kind of people *are not real Mexicans*, they can be found in Veracruz only, and there are just a few of them.

A novel approach is used by Bánó with regard to the comparison of the US and Mexican population as well. While in the case of the former travel writers US citizens were presented as superior (hard working, industrious, and civilized), Bánó's accounts are more sympathetic towards Mexicans and critical of US Americans:

While the North American does everything with cold calculation and creates obstacles for the prosperity of the new settlers and laughs at their possible failures and applies the principle of 'help yourself' as extensively as possible, the Mexican receives the European with kind and obliging politeness and looks forward to his friendship as somebody from whom they can learn taste and many other good qualities.<sup>60</sup>



Unlike Americans, they also offer a helping hand if you are in trouble while they are not as cold as US citizens and they are also more inclined towards beauty and the arts. “The Mexican is honest and open and as hospitable as probably only the Hungarian among Europeans.”<sup>61</sup> He criticizes former depictions again several times, claiming that Mexicans are judged wrongly in Europe and they are mistakenly looked upon as semi-barbarous.<sup>62</sup>

The Native population of Mexico is presented by Bánó as the most fascinating group and he writes about them in various sections of his books. There is a genuine interest expressed by Bánó in Native tribes, their customs, myths, linguistic differences, and the process of transculturation.<sup>63</sup> A novel type of treatment is clearly discernible in their case as well: they are not lazy any more, but offer a cheap and reliable labor force mentioned several times (Bánó is actually working with them on his plantations); they are also open, kind, sensitive, and capable of studying and improvement as the example of Juárez and Díaz also indicates.<sup>64</sup> Even if sometimes they are presented as childish,<sup>65</sup> Bánó is sympathetic towards them, mostly compared to former depictions: “Our life among the Indians is safer than in the homes of Europe’s best police chiefs.”<sup>66</sup>

Similarly to László, Bánó also distinguishes between Mexican and North American Indians, however, László’s association is turned inside out. In the United States Bánó encounters Apaches and presents them in his first book as dangerous and wild, claiming that luckily such people will soon disappear: “It is fortunate that this group that cannot be tamed despite all the attempts of the United States decreases in number day by day maybe exactly due to its wildness.”<sup>67</sup> If you travel in both countries, Bánó claims, you can easily recognize the significant ethnographic differences between the two groups. While in the case of László the North American Indians were seen as heroic, brave, and to a certain extent superior, in Bánó’s case the exact opposite is presented: “numerous civilized and uncivilized Indians also visit San Francisco; the former are represented by those from the Republic of Mexico, while the latter by those from Utah, Arizona, and South California.”<sup>68</sup>

In terms of his sympathy, Bánó goes as far as to contemplate the common Asian roots of Hungarians and Mexican Indians: “I do not intend to prove the Asian heritage of the ancestors of Mexicans, nor to look for the nest of their ancestors, but there is one thing I cannot keep away from my compatriots, and that is to mention that striking similarity that existed

in the ancient traditions of both Hungarians and Mexicans.”<sup>69</sup> Bánó offers several examples to illustrate his point: the Toltecs, just like the Hungarians, recognized seven chiefs as their leaders, had a principality where continuity was ascertained by inheritance, the blood oath is present in the history of both nations, etc.<sup>70</sup> Bánó notes that the national colors are red, white, and green, the turul bird (or eagle) is present as a main symbol, there are also linguistic similarities, and both people like paprika, goulash, chicken paprikash and stew.<sup>71</sup> While these are interesting, although rather doubtful and unsupported, thoughts and parallels and the depiction of Indians is favorable in all publications, Bánó’s treatment of the Natives is just as one-sided (even if exactly the opposite way) as that of former travel accounts addressed in my dissertation. He did not take notice of (or did not share with his readers) the major problems of the Indian population during the Porfiriato and provided a falsely “perfect image.”

As we have seen, Bánó’s special approach to Mexico and his much more favorable treatment of the country was influenced by several factors: his career plans (knowing that these publications could benefit him), a degree of disappointment in the United States (in terms of immigration and opportunities), as well as a hatred of Austria and criticism of the imperial view. Later in his life in Mexico, as an employee of the Mexican government, it also became “his duty” to present such an image of the country and to emphasize opportunities for cooperation. His publications fit the policies of the Diaz government as Bánó supported and propagated the Porfiriato and advertised it at home. The Hungarian expressed more sympathy with and openness towards Mexicans than those writing before him and this resulted in a revised image of the nation as well as paved the way for his diplomatic career.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This version of the paper is the product of several earlier essays and presentations: a former version of this text first appeared in my doctoral dissertation, while a modified text was published in *IdeAs*. It also served as the basis of a chapter in my book on Hungarian travelers to Mexico published in 2018 by Debrecen University Press. I would like to dedicate this publication to our daughter, Laura: it is great to have you here with us!

<sup>2</sup> For more information on the Hungarian aspects of New Immigration see: Puskás, *From Hungary to the United States and Ties That Bind*.

<sup>3</sup> Bánó, *Úti képek*, 77-78. Translations are mine.

- <sup>4</sup> Torbágyi, *Magyarok Latin-Amerikában*, 264.
- <sup>5</sup> Bánó, *Úti képek*, 198.
- <sup>6</sup> Szente-Varga, *A gólya és a kolibri*, 47.
- <sup>7</sup> On earlier Hungarian travelers see, for example: Venkovits, *A császárságnak buknia kellett* and *Revisiting the Legacy of János Xántus; Describing the Other, Struggling with the Self: Writing with Devotion, Drawing with Light; Letters from a Revolutionary*.
- <sup>8</sup> Frazer, *Bandit Nation*, 90.
- <sup>9</sup> Buchenau, 'Small Numbers', 44.
- <sup>10</sup> Foster, *Mexikó története*.
- <sup>11</sup> Buchenau, *Mexico Otherwise*, 92.
- <sup>12</sup> Lynn, *Mexikó története*, 134.
- <sup>13</sup> The biographical overview is based on Bánó's autobiography and list of publications available in the manuscripts division of OSZK and Balázs, *Magyar utazók lexikona*, 34-35.
- <sup>14</sup> Bánó, *Úti képek*, 115.
- <sup>15</sup> Bánó, *Úti képek*, 116.
- <sup>16</sup> Bánó, *Úti képek*, 7.
- <sup>17</sup> Bánó, *Bolyongásaim Amerikában*, 337ff.
- <sup>18</sup> For details see Torbágyi, *Magyar kivándorlás*. For changes in diplomatic, economic, and cultural relations see: Szente-Varga, *A gólya és a kolibri*, 28-44.
- <sup>19</sup> See Bánó's autobiography in OSZK.
- <sup>20</sup> Bánó, *Úti képek*.
- <sup>21</sup> Bánó, *Mexico és utazásom a trópusokon*.
- <sup>22</sup> Bánó, *Úti képek*, 131, 198.
- <sup>23</sup> Bánó, *Úti képek*, 186.
- <sup>24</sup> Bánó, *Úti képek*, 19.
- <sup>25</sup> Bánó, *Úti képek*, 79-80.
- <sup>26</sup> Bánó, *Úti képek*, 20.
- <sup>27</sup> Bánó, *Úti képek*, 192. Such statements seem to be unique in Hungarian travel writing on the Americas and show that Bánó clearly broke away from Hungary.
- <sup>28</sup> Bánó, *Úti képek*, 114.
- <sup>29</sup> Bánó, *Mexico és utazásom*, 58.
- <sup>30</sup> Bánó, *Úti képek*, 96.
- <sup>31</sup> Bánó, *Úti képek*, 98.
- <sup>32</sup> Bánó, *Mexico és utazásom*, 90.
- <sup>33</sup> Bánó, *Úti képek*, 121.
- <sup>34</sup> Bánó, *Úti képek*, 28, 59.
- <sup>35</sup> Bánó, *Úti képek*, 43-44.
- <sup>36</sup> Bánó, *Úti képek*, 30.
- <sup>37</sup> For changes in the perceptions of the United States in Hungarian travel writing see the publications of Glant.
- <sup>38</sup> Bánó, *Úti képek*, 25.
- <sup>39</sup> Bánó, *Úti képek*, 68.

- <sup>40</sup> Bánó, *Mexico és utazásom*, 25.
- <sup>41</sup> Bánó, *Úti képek*, 139.
- <sup>42</sup> Bánó, *Úti képek*, 195.
- <sup>43</sup> Bánó, *Úti képek*, 108.
- <sup>44</sup> Bánó, *Úti képek*, 195. Bánó's statement is a clear reference to the Chinese Exclusion Act passed in the United States in 1882 and renewed in 1892.
- <sup>45</sup> Bánó, *Úti képek*, 189.
- <sup>46</sup> Bánó, *Mexico és utazásom*, 183.
- <sup>47</sup> Bánó, *Úti képek*, 191.
- <sup>48</sup> Bánó, *Úti képek*, 195.
- <sup>49</sup> Bánó, *Úti képek*, 77.
- <sup>50</sup> Bánó, *Úti képek*, 79.
- <sup>51</sup> Such praising remarks of Díaz were not unique for Hungarian travel writing. Marie Robinsion Wright, for example, dedicated her work *Picturesque Mexico* (Philadelphia: J.P. Lippincott, 1897) to the Mexican President with the following words: "To Senor General Don Porfirio Díaz, the illustrious President of Mexico, whose intrepid moral character, distinguished statesmanship, and devoted patriotism make him the pride and glory of this country is dedicated this volume, describing a beautiful and prosperous land, whose free flag never waved over a slave, and whose importance as a nation is due to the patriot under whose administration Mexico now flourishes and holds its proud position among the republics of the world."
- <sup>52</sup> Bánó, *Úti képek*, 153.
- <sup>53</sup> Fazer, *Bandit Nation*, 85.
- <sup>54</sup> Bánó, *Úti képek*, 101.
- <sup>55</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>56</sup> Bánó, *Úti képek*, 141.
- <sup>57</sup> Bánó, *Mexico és utazásom*, 108.
- <sup>58</sup> Bánó, *Mexico és utazásom*, 92.
- <sup>59</sup> Bánó, *Úti képek*, 17.
- <sup>60</sup> Bánó, *Úti képek*, 178.
- <sup>61</sup> Bánó, *Úti képek*, 95.
- <sup>62</sup> Bánó, *Úti képek*, 138.
- <sup>63</sup> See for example Bánó, *Bolyongásaim*, 305ff.
- <sup>64</sup> Bánó, *Úti képek*, 106 and 79.
- <sup>65</sup> Bánó, *Bolyongásaim*, 316 and 182.
- <sup>66</sup> Bánó, *Úti képek*, 159.
- <sup>67</sup> Bánó, *Úti képek*, 70.
- <sup>68</sup> Bánó, *Úti képek*, 59.
- <sup>69</sup> Bánó, *Bolyongásaim*, 310.
- <sup>70</sup> Bánó, *Bolyongásaim*, 310-312.
- <sup>71</sup> Bánó, *Bolyongásaim*, 328.

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