Rescue Work: A Biographer's Engagement with B. Traven and Abbie Hoffman

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How does a scholar rescue an author from the folds of obscurity who doesn't want to be rescued? That has been the challenge B. Traven biographers and their ilk have faced ever since his novels and stories were first published in the aftermath of World War I. Indeed, 100 years after *The Cotton Pickers*, a collection of narratives about itinerant field workers—and members of the Industrial Workers of the World—was published in 1925, readers around the world remain largely in the dark about the basic facts of Traven's life.

A few years ago, Paul Berman in the pages of *Tablet* examined the Traven story and concluded that he was not Jewish, as Timothy Heyman, a British banker and the husband of Traven's step-daughter, Malu, claims. Heyman calls Traven a "non-Jewish Jew." Berman adds, "my own suspicion is that … he was merely non-Jewish." When Jews called for a homeland Traven urged them to think of Earth as their home.

It seems highly unlikely that an author today could achieve what Traven once achieved. Our technology makes it nearly impossible to disappear and reappear as he did without leaving a clear footprint and an unambiguous record. In doing that, Traven was unique.

Along the way, he wrote bestselling yarns: one about white men prospecting for gold; another about a Mexican woodcutter named Macario who tangles with the Devil; and a third about the miraculous nighttime rescue of a small boy in a remote village who wears shoes for the first time in his life, falls into a raging river and dies.

It's true that with the help of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) I unearthed crucial information about Traven's attempts to secure an American passport. (He claimed to be a U.S. citizen.) As he knew, the San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1906 destroyed records of births and deaths. There was no way to prove, as he claimed, that he was born there on February 25, 1882 and that he had been studying "philosophy and political economy" in Europe since 1901. I did not solve the mystery I had set out to solve and didn't rescue him from his legend as "the man no one knows." Still, Traven's strange life and legend seem to be worth revisiting in our celebrity-driven culture, if only to remind readers that the fame game is not the only game available to authors.

In 1975 at the age of 33 and with two non-fiction books under my belt, I crossed the US-Mexico border and lived for a year in the thick of the chaos and the cacophony that engulfed the capital. I had a contract and an advance from U.S. publisher Lawrence Hill to write a biography of the author of *The Treasure of the Sierra Made* and other works of fiction who didn't want anyone to write his biography. He couldn't have been more emphatic on that subject than when he wrote to the *Büchergilde Gutenberg*, his German publisher. (His books were written in German and published in Germany in the 1920 before they were published in English in the US and touted as "proletarian literature." Traven was a pseudonym,)

Traven explained to his editor at the lefty *Büchergilde*, "My biography would not disappoint you, but it is my own private affair and I want to keep it to myself." He added, "The biography of a creative person is completely unimportant. If the person cannot be recognized and understood in his works, then he isn't worth a damn and neither are his works." That attitude made Traven an odd man in the book culture of the 1920s, when Hemingway, Fitzgerald and others courted fame.

Roberto Bolaño, whom I met in 1975, wisely fictionalized Traven in his brilliant posthumously published novel, 2666, in which he appears as Benno von Archimboldi, the book's reclusive German author who settles in Mexico. Likewise, I included Traven in a novel published under the title *Underground*. Five years after I arrived in Mexico, I wrote a non-fiction work titled *My Search for B. Traven*, which recounts efforts to write a biography of a man who didn't want his biography to be written. A decade later, it was translated into French and published in France as *A la recherche de B. Traven* where it sold better than the American version. A cult figure in France more than in the US, Traven was a literary treasure in the eyes of French readers in large part because he wrote about the Indians of Chiapas in a series of six related books under the umbrella "the Jungle Novels."

In my eyes, the series was and still is a masterpiece about exploitation, oppression and rebellion that culminates in a book titled *The General from the Jungle* that celebrates guerrilla warfare and the utopian community the Indians create. Che Guevara would have hailed it as a brilliant work of fiction that's true to history. As I learned from a member of the French Committee in Solidarity with Chiapas, the Zapatistas, the rebel organization, used Traven's short stories to teach illiterate peasants to read and to write. There couldn't have been a more fitting way to honor Traven's work.

My year in Mexico was not a waste, not by any means. I gathered useful information about Traven, including the letter I have quoted above, as well as a diary entry in which he wrote rather enigmatically, "the Bavarian of Munich is dead Black brother." Traven had edited and published a magazine titled *Der Ziegelbrenner* in Munich in the early twentieth century under

the name Ret Marut. An anarchist and a pacifist, Marut took part in an abortive revolution in 1919 and was arrested and jailed. He escaped, and after avoiding the authorities for years, fled from Europe, a subject he writes about in The *Death Ship*, his first novel and the only one not set in Mexico.

A German scholar named Rolf Recknagel unearthed the story of Marut's fugitive days in Europe, and published it in 1966 in a book wisely titled *Beiträge zur Biographie*, translated as "Contributions to a Biography" though never published in English. To this day, Traven's real name is unknown, as is the time and place of his birth, though half-a-dozen or so biographers have tried: Judy Stone's *The Mystery of B. Traven*; Michael Bauman's: *Traven: An Introduction*; Karl Siegfried Guthke's *B. Traven: The Life behind the Legends;* Will Wyatt's *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre;* Rolf Recknagel's *B. Traven;* and recently Roy Pateman's *The Man Nobody Knows.* None of them are big sellers or required reading in colleges and none of them satisfy the global curiosity about Traven.

In Mexico City, an elderly German émigré named Hedwig Yampolsky rendered Recknagel's book into English for me page-by-page. I rented rooms from her in Tlalpan on the outskirts of the monstrous city that grew by over a thousand people every day, as locals fled from the violence and poverty in the countryside.

Before I arrived in the DF, I indulged a romantic notion that I might encounter peasants and workers. Granted, I did meet Indian lumberjacks in Chiapas. We slept together on the floor of the Catholic Church, woke up at 5 am and cleared out so that the priest could say mass. But for the most part I rubbed shoulders with wealthy Mexicans who I met in the three-story house on the Rio Mississippi where Traven lived at the end of his life with his Mexican-born wife Rosa Elena Lujan, who became my near-constant companion.

Chelena, as she was known, had misled me; Traven had not shared his secrets with her so she couldn't help me carve out his biography. Still, I wrote the introductory essay for a collection of Traven's short stories published by Lawrence Hill under the title *The Kidnapped Saint*. The essay appeared in print under the name Rosa Elena Lujan. I received no credit and no remuneration, and didn't like it. Still, there were perks.

Rosa Elena and I strolled once or twice a week to the central post office to collect the correspondence from Traven's fans around the world. Then we walked to the bank to deposit Traven's royalties which kept Rosa Elena in the comfortable style of life to which she had grown accustomed and to which I became a willing participant. After errands, we ate enchiladas at Sanborns, a Mexico City institution, and talked about Mexican history and the anarchist Ricardo Flores Magón, a charismatic figure in the Mexican Revolution who died in 1922 around the same time that Traven arrived, most likely in or around Tampico. Ricardo and his brothers, Enrique and Jesus, known as the "Magonistas," caused trouble in Mexico and in the US before Ricardo died in prison.

I loved my outings with Chelena and the parties on the Rio Mississippi. She and I played hosts to visitors who loved Traven's books and who sat in the library and heard our stories. I had a full-time job entertaining them. Daily life on the Rio Mississippi and in the city was a distraction that could be entertaining and amusing, but it also fueled my sense of frustration. The biography went nowhere fast.

Twice a week, Chelena threw lavish dinner parties for her friends in the Mexico City elite. I remember a tall, thin woman with the whitest of complexions who wore silks and satins,

and a man who spoke Castilian Spanish and worked for Mexican TV. They were not my people, nor Traven's either, I thought. The afternoon gatherings, which lasted for three or four hours, included non-stop conversations and lively gossip. Roly-poly Petra, one of the servants, rushed back and forth from the kitchen to the dining room with warm tortillas. They had to be warm or Chelena sent them back to the kitchen to be reheated.

At these gatherings, l felt like one of the characters in the surreal 1962 film *Exterminating Angel*, directed by Luis Bunuel. The cinematic characters—members of the bourgeoisie—can't leave a dinner party to which they have been invited. I couldn't leave the Rio Mississippi either. It would have been bad manners. Chelena expected me to sit at the head of the table and talk about Traven.

The gatherings encouraged me to emphasize Traven as a writer for the underdog. I would use him, I told myself and Chelena, too, as an iconic author to show that white men, Europeans from the "First World," could transcend and betray their own nationality, class origins and white skin privilege and cast their lot with the wretched of the Earth.

I met Rosa Elena's alluring friends, including Federico Martin, a retired doctor, and for a time Diego Rivera's brother-in-law. His sister, Guadalupe Marin, was married to Diego before he married Frida Kahlo. Another visitor was Angelica Arenal Bastar, the lifelong partner and widow of the muralist, David Alfaro Siqueiros, who spent afternoons on the Rio Mississippi talking with Chelena about their respective husbands. Alas, Siqueiros died the year before I arrived. All around me, potential sources vanished. Traven himself died in 1969; I arrived on the scene too late to meet him in person.

But I met Chele and Malu, the daughters from Chelena's first marriage to Carlos, a Mexican playboy who had owned the rights to sell American TVs in Mexico and who made and spent a fortune. Chele, the oldest daughter, was dark, a Marxist and an intellectual. Malu was blond, bourgeois and married, first to a wealthy Mexican, and second to Timothy Heyman, a British banker who claimed, like many others, to have solved the Traven mystery and who declared Traven a "genius" and an "entrepreneur." Easy for him to say.

Chele and Malu struck me as two sides of the Mexican bourgeoisie; one defiant, the other compliant, both devoted to their mother, and she devoted to them, and with Traven as the proud step-father they shared. Surely, Traven recognized at the end of his life what he had been missing: a family. "He feels so very, very lonely," he wrote of himself using the third person in March 1955 as though he was a stranger to himself. He added, "It seems to be his destiny, or part of his destiny, to feel always lonely and to be always lonely." So, he married Chelena and adopted her daughters.

Though I enjoyed Rosa Elena's and Mrs. Yampolsky's companionship, I, too, felt lonely in Mexico City. When Bert Schneider—the producer of *Five Easy Pieces, Easy Rider* and the Vietnam documentary, *Hearts and Minds*—visited Abbie Hoffman (one of the founders of the Yippies, a satirist in the tradition of Jewish comedians like Lenny Bruce, and a defendant in the Chicago Eight Conspiracy Trial) he brought with him to Mexico City a shoebox filled with California *sinsemilla*: weed not seen before, weed without seeds or stems.

After a drug bust in New York, Abbie aimed to be drug-free. So I inherited the sinsemilla and smoked it at night on the roof of Mrs. Yampolsky's building in Tlalpan where I could look down at the street and watch the drama that unfolded: dogs snoozing; boys peddling on their

bicycles; men drinking mezcal, telling stories, laughing, and enjoying the company I could not join.

On one nightmarish occasion as a passenger in a car in Mexico City, after eating a marijuana brownie at a fiesta and getting stoned out of my mind, I thought I was lost in the inescapable labyrinths of Mexico City. I worried I would never get back to my apartment in Tlalpan. The streets all looked alike; time seemed to have expanded infinitely and darkness enveloped the car in which I was traveling. I was sure that the Mexican couple, who insisted they were driving me home, had kidnapped me. Then, just when I gave up all hope, we arrived outside the iron gate to the building where I lived. Saved from perdition. I stumbled inside, went to bed, vowed not to eat another marijuana brownie and slept soundly.

In Traven's "The Night Visitor," a ghost story with a moral, an American named Gales, the novelist's alter ego, reads so many books about the past that it comes alive in the person of an ancient warrior who rises from the dead and invades a bungalow on the edge of the jungle. The resurrected warrior is "the night visitor." I, too, had a night visitor: Traven himself. I woke after midnight, looked in the mirror and saw his face, not my own. After that I aimed to be his double, I wore his clothes, and typed on his typewriter. But becoming Traven didn't solve the mystery.

At an exhibit for the work of the American abstract expressionist painter, Robert Motherwell, I met Mexican author Octavio Paz and talked with him about his masterpiece *The Labyrinth of Solitude (*1950). "Man is alone everywhere," Paz wrote. He added, "The Mexican does not transcend his solitude … he locks himself up in it." Paz explained that "Mexican solitude is existential and a form of orphanhood. … [It] has the same roots as religious feeling." If solitude is a form of orphanhood than I was a most solitary fellow and an orphan, too.

What saved me that year from the kind of existential solitude that Paz writes about was my friendship with Abbie Hoffman, who was living in Mexico City on the lam under the name Barry Freed. In 1973 he was arrested in New York by two undercover cops and charged with selling them two kilos of cocaine. Rather than go on trial and face a long prison term, he jumped bail, crossed the US-Mexico border and created a new life for himself with Johanna Lawrenson, the daughter of Jack Lawrenson, a union organizer, and Helen Lawrenson—a famed writer for *Vanity Fair* and the author of the provocative essay "Latins Make Lousy Lovers." Johanna was game for anything and everything, though she might have learned from Chelena about living with a famous author with multiple identities. It was stressful to run with a fugitive who longed for his famous former self.

In New York, I had helped Abbie go underground: drop his Boston accent, trim his beard and take on the persona of a college prof. On one notable occasion when he had a real break-down and cracked up, I rescued him from himself. In the Hilton Hotel, where he was registered under the name Barry Freed, he bolted from the room and ran down the hall shouting "I'm Abbie Hoffman." Such are the wages of fugitive life. Johanna and I smuggled him out of the Hilton and delivered him to a doctor in LA who gave him a shot of Thorazine. When I saw him next he apologized and so we went on the road again seeking new adventures.

In many ways Abbie/Barry was the opposite of Traven. After all, Abbie wanted fame and insisted that fame could bring him everything else he wanted. That seemed true. Friends threw money, houses and cars at him. In Mexico, he wrote his autobiography, titled *Soon to be a Major Motion Picture* which would be published in 1980 with an introduction by Norman Mailer. Abbie, the iconoclast and anarchist, served as a kind of opposite and doppelganger for Traven.

When life on the Rio Mississippi proved too much for me, I abandoned it. My brother, Adam, and his girlfriend, Sylvia Brown, accompanied me by bus on a journey that took us to Oaxaca, the indigenous heartland, then to the hot humid coast along the Pacific and on the last leg to magical, mystical San Cristobal de las Casas in the remote mountains of Chiapas, where we met famed anthropologist and photographer Trudi Blom in her home, which she called "House of the Jaguar."

Blom had her own theories about Traven. I listened to hers as I had listened to Chelena's, thanked her and moved on. Everyone had a solution to the mystery. I didn't want to have one. Let mystery flower: that became my credo.

From San Cristobal, Adam, Sylvia and I traveled to the end of the road in Ocosingo, an isolated village where the jungle began and where we met an old retired Mexican school teacher who knew Traven in the 1920s. At last I had found someone who talked compellingly about the real Traven and who I could trust.

Thanks to an American priest from Boston, we were allowed to sleep on the floor of the church where we shared space with two-dozen or so Indians who worked as lumberjacks cutting down trees in the jungle. Half-a-century after Traven visited Chiapas, the jungle, *la selva*, was still under attack. The Indians burned *la selva*, a word that sounded magical to me, to clear spaces to grow crops and so the air was polluted. In *la selva*, empty Coca Cola cans spoiled my stroll and prompted me to turn back. There was no paradise in Chiapas and no escape from commodity culture, either. White bread was available but not corn tortillas; Nescafe but not freshly brewed coffee from beans grown and harvested in Chiapas.

From Ocosingo, we retraced our steps, crossed the mountains and circled around to Palenque, where we saw ancient Mayan ruins and met American hippies searching for hallucinogenic or "magic" mushrooms. After the long bus journeys that had transported me from one indigenous culture to another, and after traveling from desert and ocean to mountains, I had enough vibrant images lodged in my head and didn't want anything hallucinogenic.

On the last leg of our Mexican odyssey we made it to hot humid Veracruz on the Gulf of Mexico which was in the midst of an oil boom, and with all the hotel rooms occupied by workers. (Traven wrote about the oil boom of the 1920s in the first part of *Treasure of the Sierra Madre).* I slept on a mat on the floor in a room with no windows and no air conditioning and felt like I was suffocating. Only the *liquidos*, the cold fruit drinks, saved me from drying up.

Back in Tlalpan, at Mrs. Yampolsky's, mail and magazines from New York awaited me. Nothing seemed to have changed. The world was the same. Traven had known that feeling. After he returned to Mexico City from a year in *la selva*, Chelena told me, he read the newspapers and thought that the world was in the same place it had been when he left.

But at the end of 1975 I wasn't the same person who arrived in Mexico City. It was time to go. I was sure I would be unable to write Traven's biography. Still, I thought I could write a road novel a la Jack Kerouac which would double as a novel about a fugitive named Kenny Love, a character inspired by the real-life Abbie Hoffman and with myself as his pal, Ishmael Messenger. Adios Mexico.

But it wasn't goodbye to Abbie or Traven. I wrote the novel I wanted to write and also a non-fiction book titled *My Search for B. Traven* about a man trying to write a book about a man who doesn't want to be written about. That book was published in 1980, five years after I went to Mexico. Intentionally, I decided to leave the Traven mystery unsolved.

Twenty or so years after the American edition of *My Search* appeared in print, a French publisher put out a French edition. The editor and the translator and French readers liked the story of an American writer who becomes Traven's double, more than they liked the facts about Traven that I had gathered. In Paris I met a group of French citizens who belonged to the Committee of Solidarity with the People of Chiapas. One of the members told me that the Zapatistas used Traven's short stories to teach the Indians to read and to write. I couldn't imagine a better use of Traven's work.

In Hollywood in 1980, I sold the idea for a movie which was titled *Homegrown*, about marijuana and meant to be a remake of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, which had been directed by John Huston and starred Humphrey Bogart. My film featured hippies not gringos, marijuana not gold, the mountains of California not the Sierras of Mexico. It was as much about greed as Traven's novel, though marijuana growers objected strenuously. They weren't greedy, they insisted; they just loved to get high. Billy Bob Thornton starred in the picture, along with Hank Azaria, Ted Danson, Kelly Lynch, Jon Bon Jovi and Jamie Lee Curtis. I was on the set and appear in one scene as an extra.

In Santa Cruz, where the outdoor scenes for *Homegrown* were filmed, I reminded myself that Traven showed up on the set where *Treasure* was filmed, introduced himself as Hal Croves and claimed that he was Traven's representative. No one believed him. Warner Brothers dispatched a press release that insisted that Traven himself showed up for the filming. He rejected that story and claimed that it was a hoax to create big box office sales. I couldn't resist the temptation to meet the movie stars on the set, to have breakfast with Bill Bob, meet with Kelly Lynch in her trailer, and to allow some of their stardom to rub off on me.

In the end I knew that I was closer to Abbie's way than to Traven's, though in writing the screenplay for my marijuana movie, *Homegrown*, I borrowed and tweaked the ending of *Treasure*: my movie cops confiscated the contraband marijuana and burned it. I had seen the incineration of a marijuana crop at a lumber mill not far from the town of Willits in Mendocino County. In the movie, the smoke wafts over the near-by town. Crime doesn't pay; the growers and dealers are arrested, but the citizens are stoned. It's an ambiguous ending. I had my marijuana and I ate it, too. A reviewer for a big city newspaper noted that the movie fused *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* with *The Three Stooges*.

B. Traven has been very good to me again and again in Mexico City, in Hollywood and in France. I'm sorry if you feel I have blown your cover, Traven, but my book introduced readers to your work and helped to give them a longer life than they otherwise would have enjoyed.

Shortly before he died, Traven jotted down several ideas for stories which showed that his creativity was still at work after his prime had passed; he was still a surrealist and still intensely political. I found a notebook with his ideas in a blizzard of papers on the Rio Mississippi. One of them seemed especially contemporary.

Traven wrote, "US GI killed in action. Cannot be buried in Texas because of his Mexican origins. The corpse goes hitchhiking." Years after he wrote *The Death Ship*, his novel about borders and fugitives, he was still fascinated with them. In *The Death Ship* he had written "The only real defense civilized man has against anybody who bothers him is to lie." And in *The Cotton Pickers*, published a year before *The Death Ship*, he wrote, "If I had never tried bluffing at some critical occasions in my existence on earth I would have lost my life long, long ago."

In his novels, B. Traven was as transparent as a window pane and as mysterious as the moon. He was spot on when he said, “If the person cannot be recognized and understood in his works, then he isn’t worth a damn and neither are his works.” Much the same holds true for Abbie Hoffman. *Revolution for the Hell of It* and *Woodstock Nation*, his two Sixties classics, say more about who he was and what made him run than his fictionalized autobiography, *Soon To Be a Major Motion Picture*, which never did become a Hollywood movie.

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