

Tools of Progress: A German Merchant Family in Mexico City, 1865–Present. *By Jürgen Buchenau*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004. xii + 268 pp. Illustrations, photographs, maps, tables, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$49.95. ISBN: 0-9263-3087-8.

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Jürgen Buchenau's cleverly titled *Tools of Progress* traces the trajectory of the German hardware emporium Casa Boker (known as "the Sears of Mexico" during the Porfiriato) from "the vanguard of modernization to the rearguard of globalization" (pp. 2–4), tracking clan Boker from "trade conquistadors" to imperfectly assimilated "blue-eyed Mexicans" (pp. 5–8). In the process, we meet nationalistic Bokers who strived to preserve their Germanness in Mexican diaspora, pragmatic Bokers who "refused to place the imperialist aims of the German state above their own commercial interests" (p. 8), and resilient Bokers who, by "continually negotiat[ing] their relationship with their host country (Mexico), their home country (Germany) and a hegemonic power. . . (the United States)," survived revolutions, wars, embargos, interventions, and economic crises (pp. 196–97).

Now full disclosure. Jürgen and I met in graduate school at the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill and found that our interests overlapped. When I needed a place in Mexico City, he arranged a room with Erika Grabert, the "elderly German woman" who housed him during his unsought Boker indenture (p. ix). In Mexico City, he took me to Edificio Boker to interview Pedro Boker about the Mexican firm's founder Roberto, a U.S. citizen of convenience. When I asked Jürgen if he planned a history of the firm, he was less than enthusiastic, as his stint with Boker was still fresh. In 1995, at the Yale conference "Rethinking the Post-Colonial Encounter," we shared a panel that Jürgen describes in his preface (p. ix): I presented Mexico City's American colony as a "latter-day trade diaspora" of "integral outsiders," and he described German colony life "under the cheese cover" ("bell jar" in the book) and his family as "cross-cultural Bokers" (p. 196).

German life strategies in diaspora evolved from self-segregation to the creation of enclaves to partial assimilation (p. 30). Though Mexico City had a German population (mostly male) as early as the mid-nineteenth century, a colony per se only formed when the numbers of German wives and then of children, reached a tipping point. Families gave rise to institutions around which a colony coalesced. Foremost was the Colegio Alemán (German School), not merely because it educated the expatriates' Mexican-born children but also because its curricula "preserve[ed] [their children] for German culture" (p. 46).

Jürgen does not lay apartness at German feet alone, however. Mexico's closed society disallowed "hyphenated identities," and foreigners assimilated slowly even during the welcoming Porfiriato (pp. 30–32). Jürgen offers an insider's view of alienation among the fourth and fifth generation whose native tongue is Spanish, whose German is poor, and whose spouses are Mexican (pp. 185–90). I remember well "blue-eyed Mexicans" at Frau Grabert's table saying, with bitter resignation, that they would never be accepted as Mexican in Mexico, their native land. The other side of the identity question—that of Germanness—appears in ambivalent relations with the *kartoffeldeutsche* (recent arrivals from Germany). While diaspora Germans absorbed Mexican antipathy to the United States, the *kartoffeldeutsche*, who lived with a U.S. military presence for fifty years, were influenced by American rock'n'roll youth culture, an influence seen in the "hippie teachers" at the Colegio Alemán's during the late 1960s and 1970s (p. 161).

Tools of Progress also delves into business and economic history. Casa Boker was an unintended consequence of Heinrich Boker's reinvestment of arms-sales profits in export ventures and industrial manufacture. He sent his brother to establish a branch in New York City while he built the factory that produced the Arbolito-brand cutlery and blades that later would "carve out a niche" in Mexican markets (p. 30). He then sent his son, Roberto, to apprentice in New York, where he acquired business sense and U.S. citizenship. Both proved useful when Roberto journeyed to Mexico during the French intervention to check on the firm's investment in a merchant partnership. One partner died, and Roberto stayed to manage the investment, marking the establishment of Casa Boker.

Resourceful Roberto proved an innovative marketer. As the exclusive agent for Singer Sewing Machines, he introduced a lease-to-buy plan that brought Mexican households one at a time into the machine age. His sales agents nursed Mexico's "incipient consumer culture" as they traveled the provinces with the company's merchandise catalogs (pp. 39, 51). Boker product lines evolved in response to customer demand, and more American goods were added—Remington typewriters and later such exotics as Studebaker automobiles. In 1900, 40 percent of the products in the Boker catalog were of German origin, 20 percent were British or European, 34 percent were from the United States, and 6 percent were Mexican. By 1911, the U.S. share hit 40 percent, with Germany, Britain, and Europe together totaling 42 percent. Most dramatic, however, was the tripling of Mexican manufactures to 18 percent, indicating the success of Porfirian policy of import substitution industrialization.

But Casa Boker did not invest in Mexico's industrialization. Instead its Francophile manager, Carl Friederichs, sank 75 percent of the firm's capital (1.5 million pesos) into its art nouveau headquarters, the Edificio Boker. Friederichs's failed attempt to remake Casa Boker in the image of Enrique Tron's Palacio de Hierro created long term liquidity problems (p. 55). Seeing a possibility of bankruptcy and personal liability, the new managing director, Franz Boker, reorganized the partnership as a joint-stock company incorporated in Mexico. Cia Ferretera Mexicana (CFM) shares were all held by the partners or their heirs, most of whom resided in Germany, receiving large annual dividends, siphoning profits, limiting reinvestment, and so virtually guaranteeing the firm's stagnation.

Also contributing to the firm's inertia was Franz Boker's almost instinctive rejection of the culture of mass consumption. He saw no virtue in French-style display marketing, had opposed construction of the Edificio (a "white elephant"), and was positively repelled by the "new mass market" that he associated with "pernicious, modern 'Americanism' [and] U.S. hegemony" (p. 98). His dislike deepened when World War I erupted, but pragmatic business considerations prevailed, and he limited CFM's public support for Germany so as not to alienate his U.S. suppliers. This ceased being a mitigating factor when the United States declared war and placed CFM on its enemy trading list. The firm then pledged a war loan to Germany and allowed its legation to

install a wireless station for espionage purposes in Edificio Boker, which also served as the Verband Deutscher (German Association) meeting hall. After Germany's defeat, Franz refused to recognize the Weimar government and continued to fly the imperial flag, causing the German consulate to relocate. When the Nazis came to power, he muted his enthusiasm to maintain good relations with U.S. suppliers. He also pragmatically ignored Nazi policies that might affect profits adversely and continued to do business with Jews and to employ them. When World War II erupted, Franz tried to steer a course for the firm "between the Scylla of the German legation and the Charybdis of U.S. efforts to eliminate Axis influence outside Germany" (p. 128). To no avail: the United States again blacklisted CFM, and some months before the U.S. entry into the war, Mexico's government took over the firm, placing it under the Junta de Administración.

Until the intervention, CFM had finessed its biggest revolutionary headaches—labor-union pressures and government demands for increased Mexicanization. Remarkably, Casa Boker had "emerged unscathed from the revolution" even "profit[ing after 1917] from the scarcity of imported goods . . . and . . . higher profit margins" (p. 77). Annual earnings, except during the years 1931 to 1934, exceeded those of the halcyon Porfirian days. Franz felt secure enough to build a family home, Casa Amarilla, a modest cross-cultural mansion near San Angel. The intervention, however, nearly destroyed the firm. When the junta returned CFM in 1948, the firm, now broken and bankrupt, owed 1.8 million pesos. Franz cleared the debt by digging up two milk cans buried at Casa Amarilla, each containing a million gold pesos. The venerable Mexican tactic of hoarding pesos allowed CFM to survive, and it turned to the past for its business plan as well, employing founder Roberto's strategy of sending out traveling salesmen to offer a selection of licensed German and American products.

While Mexico enjoyed its postwar economic miracle, Casa Boker struggled. The real Sears opened in Mexico City; CFM's union contract did not allow it to reduce its bloated workforce. As the government of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) restricted imports to promote "consumer nationalism" and import substitution, CFM bought out its German shareholders to comply with the law mandating a 51 percent Mexican ownership of Mexican corporations, leaving no funds to invest in manufacture. Then there was the fire of 1975. Three years later, a "greatly diminished" Casa Boker

reopened. As they had before, the Bokers missed emerging economic trends. Deterred by high rents, they did not open stores in the new malls, even as Mexico City's downtown became more crowded and less accessible. Despite these obstacles, Boker, S.A. de C.V. managed to ride out debt and currency crises and today continues to "bob and weave with the Mexican economy" as it faces the challenges of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

Jürgen Buchenau is to be commended for writing what is, at some level, a personal history requiring a forthright treatment of family associations with the Porfirian dictatorship and the Third Reich—a difficult task. But the end result is not without its problems. The index is awful, omitting even family members Helmuth Boker and Gabriele Buchenau. Buchenau doesn't do enough with the economic data, and where the data were explained, I often found myself thinking, "Yes, but . . .". For example, his assertion that CFM's "success [was] closely tied to the volume of Mexico's foreign imports" is not adequately supported by the data in the accompanying table. Yes, Casa Boker's profits fell when Mexico's economy experienced downturns, but Buchenau does not show a year-to-year correlation between the value of its imports and profit levels. However, these are relatively small problems in a fine work of scholarship that makes a substantial contribution to the growing body of literature on the importance of expatriate communities in world history.

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