



## A. R. NYKL AND MEXICO'S PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

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**ABSTRACT:** This article aims to describe the personality of the talented Czech linguist and distinctive philosopher Alois Richard Nykl, with a special focus on his repeated stays in Mexico as well as his reflection of the post-revolutionary developments there. The unpublished travelogue “Present-Day Mexico”, complemented with the author’s short texts and other archive materials from Nykl’s estate, served as the initial material for this study. This has resulted in a colourful and multilayered picture of the Mexican society in the 1920s as well as Nykl’s complex personality. After over 90 years, his analyses of the contemporary situation and estimates of the future development of Mexico provide an opportunity for an interesting comparison with the present state of affairs.

**KEYWORDS:** Alois Richard (A. R.) Nykl – Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American cultures – Mexico – Mexican revolution – Czech travelers – Czech American

*“As I wrote in my idealistic World Ethics: When humanity becomes humane, they may understand me better.”<sup>2</sup>*

Quite recently, in 2018, we commemorated the sixtieth anniversary of the death of a phenomenal Czech linguist, polyglot, philosopher, journalist, poet, amateur archaeologist and tireless globetrotter Alois Richard Nykl (1885–1958). Until nowadays the extraordinary life and legacy of this remarkable scholar has been better known in the scholarly community abroad than in his homeland. In the former Czechoslovakia

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<sup>2</sup> Archive of the Náprstek Museum (hereinafter abbreviated as ANpM), Nykl, Box 72, Folder 5.1, Personal Correspondence, Bohumír Lifka, A. R. Nykl to Jaroslav Nykl, August 12, 1958. Translation J. Ženka (Ženka 2014: 71).

after the Communist Coup, Nykl, as a citizen of a hostile state, the United States, became a *persona non grata*, and over the decades he fell into almost complete oblivion. Only in the last years, thanks, above all, to the enormous endeavor and commitment of Czech historian Josef Ženka, who between 2013 and 2015 processed the vast and mostly uncatalogued personal papers deposited in the Náprstek Museum in Prague and edited Nykl's unpublished autobiography,<sup>3</sup> Nykl's interesting personality is coming back to light.

## The life of Alois Richard Nykl

Born as the oldest child in a family of a gamekeeper in a small municipality called Kachní Louže (literally "the Duck Pool"), he made his way out from the deep forests of Central Bohemia into the big world. After his studies in Karlovy Vary and Prague he departed to Switzerland in order to develop further his remarkable linguistic talent. His desire to achieve "independence" (and probably to avoid military service, too) brought him via Hamburg to the United States in 1905. Nykl had first settled in St. Louis, but later moved to Chicago. He tried diverse jobs, including work as a journalist for several newspapers, among them the famous Czech community newspaper *Svornost*. In his free time he kept travelling to broaden his horizons, and in 1907 he decided to move to Mexico, pursuing his plan of "conquering the world with languages." This first stay in Mexico between 1907 and 1909 apparently left a mighty trace in the soul of the inquisitive Czech (or, as he called himself, Bohemian). Nonetheless, his friendship with members of Mexico's Syrian minority induced him to deepen his knowledge of the Arabic language through traveling to an Arabic-speaking country. In 1909 he left via the US and Europe to Egypt, where he succumbed to the charm of the Arabic language and literature and even adopted some principles of Islam into his personal creed. In 1911 he moved from Egypt to Japan (the idea of visiting Japan arose in his mind during his stay in Mexico already). There he worked (among others) as an editor of the first-ever published Japan journal on automobiles and published his first book – *Nippon Automobile Club Year Book and Guide for Motorists in Japan*.<sup>4</sup> After the outbreak of the First World War his situation became complicated, as he gave up his Austrian citizenship and his Declaration of Intention lost its validity. Due to this, Nykl had no citizenship. Under such circumstances he decided to move to the United States and apply for US citizenship. According to his own statements, he was also willing to contribute to the Czech American effort to create a new, independent Czechoslovak state. In this point, it may be said that he was unsuccessful, mainly due to his lack of knowledge of the real situation in the Czech community in Chicago. He described his experience with a rich portion of bitterness in his book *Poznámky k Revoluční akci v Chicagu (1914–1918) [Notes on the Revolutionary Effort in Chicago (1914–1918)]*.<sup>5</sup>

Nonetheless, he achieved success in a different field, much desired by him – he was accepted at the University of Chicago. As his dream field of study, Oriental studies, was only slowly developing, he decided to study Romance languages instead. As his astonishing language skills and knowledge by far surpassed what was required, he finished his studies very quickly. He defended his master's thesis in 1919 and his

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3 Nykl – Ženka (ed.) 2016.

4 Nykl 1914.

5 Nykl – Ženka (ed.) 2017.

PRESENT DAY MEXICO

Gleanings of two years' travel and study  
from Rio Grande to Yucatán

by

A. R. Nykl

December, 1925



Fig. 1 The original title page of the book *Present-Day Mexico* (ANpM, Nykl, Box 28, Folder 2).

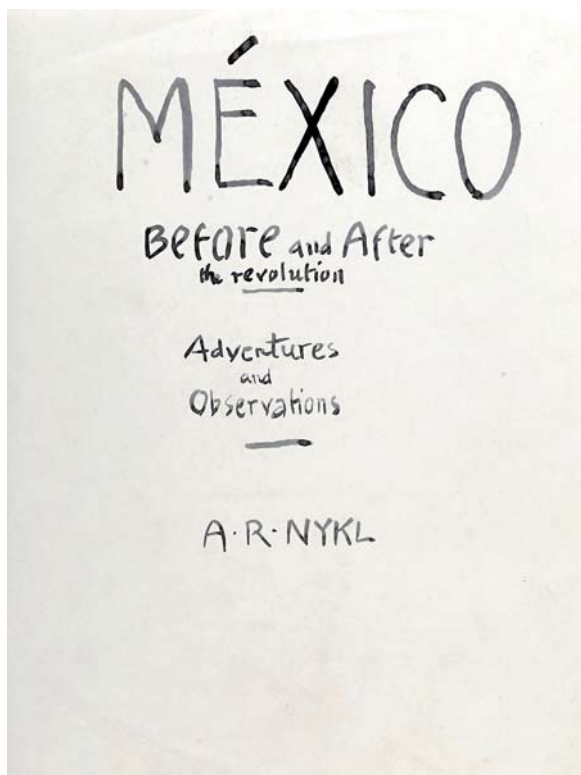


Fig. 2 The original title page of the latest version of Nykl's book on Mexico, called *México before and after the revolution: Adventures and observations* (ANpM, Nykl, Box 34, Folder 2).

the intellectual of the neighboring republic.<sup>6</sup> It was probably on the excursion to Cholula organized by the summer school where Nykl met Růžena and Rudolf Sudek, a couple of Czech compatriots living in Penzacola in the Valley of México since 1905. They became friends and in the coming years Nykl was visiting them quite often. He even wrote a study about the colony in Mexico together with R. Sudek,<sup>7</sup> which was later published in a shortened version in the periodical *Amerikán Národní kalendář* [*The American National Calendar*].<sup>8</sup> He returned to Mexico the next year, in 1925, travelled to Yucatán and Tehuantepec, and studied the ruins of Maya pyramids there. After his return to the US he terminated his contract with Northwestern University and was given an annual salary as a severance pay. This provided him with enough money and time to undertake another trip to Mexico, leaving in February 1926 and returning back to Evanston in August of the same year. This time he spent a lot of time with his friends, the Sudek family, and travelled to Oaxaca, Tulla and other places, and he took a lot of valuable photographs.

<sup>6</sup> Nykl described his impression in his article "Summer School of the Universidad Nacional de México". (Nykl 1925).

<sup>7</sup> ANpM, Nykl, Box 19, Folder 2, *Česká kolonie v Mexiku* [*The Czech colony in Mexico*].

<sup>8</sup> Nykl – Sudek 1926.

dissertation on Aljamiado texts in 1921. By this time, Alois Richard entered a new stage in his life: the personality of Nykl, a traveler, yielded to Nykl, a scholar. He was teaching Romance languages consecutively at several universities, first at Northwestern University in Evanston near Chicago.

During the summer of 1924 Nykl attended a summer school organized by the Universidad Nacional de México, accompanying a group of American teachers. These summer schools were organized by the National University of Mexico since 1921 and they were offering the American colleagues courses on the Spanish language, Mexican history, archaeology, ethnology, music, arts, economy, etc. This was intended to increase the understanding of the revolutionary process among

In 1926 he was offered a job at Marquette University in Milwaukee, and, in 1929, a research fellowship at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. His dream of becoming an expert in Arabic literature was becoming true, and between 1929 and 1933 he published his key research works.<sup>9</sup> In the next decade, he was spending his time traveling in Spain, France, Portugal, North Africa, Eastern Mediterranean, the Balkans, and even returning to Czechoslovakia from time to time, and publishing his work in the field of Andalusī Arabic literature. In 1941 he returned to the United States, where he was teaching Japanese and Portuguese at Harvard University. In the 1940s he travelled twice to Mexico, where he lectured on Andalusī Arabic poetry.<sup>10</sup>

Nykl ended his cooperation with Harvard University in 1944, but stayed in Cambridge, Massachusetts, until 1951 when he left for Mexico again. There, in the house of his friends, the Sudeks, he wanted to work on his (never finished) English-written memoirs *From Eternity to Eternity*. But for an unknown reason he lost sight in one eye and had to return to the United States in an



Fig. 3 A photograph of the author himself with his own pictographical signature, including words in nahuatl “Nahui cuetzpallin” (Present-Day Mexico, Box 28, Folder 2).

<sup>9</sup> These were: *A Compendium of Aljamiado Literature containing: Rrekontamiento del Rrey Ališandere (an Aljamiado Version of the Alexander Legend, with an Introduction, Study of the Aragonese Traits, Notes, and Glossary), The History and Classification of the Aljamiado Literature*. New York – Paris, 1929; *A Book containing the Risāla known as The Dove’s neck-ring about love and lovers, composed by Abū Muhammad ‘Ali ibn Hazm al-Andalusī, translated from the unique manuscript in the University of Leiden edited by D.K. Pétrof in 1914*. Paris, 1931; *Kitāb Al-Zahra. (The Book of the Flower): The first half composed by Abū Bakr Muhammad Ibn Abī Sulāiman Dāwūd al-Isfahānī (A.H. 297/A.D. 909). Edited from the Unique Manuscript at the Egyptian Library*. In collaboration with Ibrāhim Tuqān. Chicago, 1932; *El Cancionero del Šeih, nobilísimo visir, maravilla del tiempo, Abū Bakr ibn ‘Abd-al-Malik Aben Guzmān [Ibn Quzmān]*. Madrid, 1933.

<sup>10</sup> Rueda, Julio Jimenez. Un raro libro sobre poesía hispanoárabe. *Revista de revistas*. December 17, 1950, as cited in Nykl – Ženka (ed.) 2016: 33.



effort to save his sight, never to return to Mexico again.<sup>11</sup> He died in 1958 in Evanston, and, as he didn't maintain any close relationships with the Czech American community, he wasn't buried at the Czech National Cemetery in Chicago, but in an unmarked grave in the All Saints Cemetery in Des Plaines.<sup>12</sup>

Even though A. R. Nykl is known and valued above all as a specialist on Hispano-Arabic literature – being the first to translate the Qu'ran into the Czech language directly from Arabic – a considerable portion of his personal papers and both published and unpublished research and popular works were dedicated to Mexico. Nykl himself called Mexico one of the biggest loves of his life in his Czech biography *Padesát let cest jazykozpytce a filosofa*:

*“Mexico of my youth stayed in my soul as the first big love, which was later joined by Egypt and Japan. All the other is just a dim light of passing years, with several bright points resembling stars shining from under clouds.”*<sup>13</sup>

In another place he mentioned in his biography that it was his interest in pre-Cortesian cultures of America and his willingness to prove whether there was any cultural influence from the Eurasian continent to these native cultures<sup>14</sup> which gave him the final impulse to travel to Egypt and later to China and Japan.<sup>15</sup>

It seems that he had even selected Mexico as the place of his final rest, as he was not permitted, for political reasons and, later, for his ill health, to return to Czechoslovakia:

*“It seems to me that my wanderings on the Earth have come to an end. I stand on a hillock in Tlaxcala and contemplate the unique view of the two snowclad volcanoes. My life came to an end in the land of the Nahuatl people because I could not return to my native Central Bohemia.”*<sup>16</sup>

But his destiny or “qadar”<sup>17</sup> did not make him rest in the land of snowclad volcanoes, but in the land of Sanborn's and other “so-called blessings of great cities”,<sup>18</sup> for which, according to the occasional remarks scattered in his works, he used to have very little love.

## The fate of Nykl's estate, deposited in the Náprstek Museum<sup>19</sup>

In his estate, deposited in the Náprstek Museum, materials dedicated to Mexico, being his travel diaries, travelogues, scrapbooks, his articles on Native American

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<sup>11</sup> Nykl – Ženka (ed.) 2016: 34, 64.

<sup>12</sup> Nykl – Ženka (ed.) 2016: 35.

<sup>13</sup> Nykl – Ženka (ed.) 2016: 327. Translation by Dagmar Winklerová.

<sup>14</sup> The theory of the cultural influence brought to the American continent by Chinese Buddhist missionaries, together with the conviction that Mesoamerican pyramids were constructed in the same fashion as the Egyptian ones are presented in Nykl's early work, in an article “Mexiko: stručný nástin země a lidu” [Mexico: a brief outline of the country and the people], in: *Amerikán Národní kalendář* (Nykl 1910). It may be an accepted contemporary theory, before the start of extensive archaeological excavations in Mexico after WWI.

<sup>15</sup> Nykl – Ženka (ed.) 2016: 349.

<sup>16</sup> ANpM, Nykl, Box 13, Folder 2, Horal, Loyza. From Eternity to Eternity: The adventures of a Bohemian-born linguist, non-paginated first version of preliminary Epilogue.

<sup>17</sup> „Qadar“ (قَدَر in Arabic) is a concept of divine destiny in Islam.

<sup>18</sup> ANpM, Nykl, Box 28, Folder 2, *Present-Day Mexico*, p. 13 (pagination made by the archivist).

<sup>19</sup> The following chapter is largely based on a research carried out by J. Ženka, as was presented in his article “Alois Richard Nykl and the Náprstek Museum” (Ženka 2014).



Fig. 4 A photograph of the author with his handwritten caption and his original bookmark  
(*Present-Day Mexico*, Box 28, Folder 2).

linguistic or social and political situation in the post-revolutionary Mexico, or even manuscripts of unpublished books form a great part. The fate of his archival materials and the history of its deposition in the Náprstek Museum are quite adventurous. The key person which connected the renowned linguist with the museum was a long-time librarian and archivist of the Náprstek Museum, Bohumír Lifka (1900–1987). The two met by a chance after Lifka had published an essay on Nykl on the occasion of his fiftieth birthday in 1936 in the Czech magazine *Krajan* [*The Compatriot*],<sup>20</sup> based on the articles on A. R. Nykl published earlier in a compatriot daily *Národní listy* [*National Papers*] and *Amerikán Národní kalendář* [*American National Calendar*]. A. R. Nykl discovered the article later in the same year during one of his stays in Czechoslovakia, and even though the short essay was full of mistakes and thus not much to his liking, it

<sup>20</sup> *Krajan*, V, Issue 3, February 1, 1936, as cited in Ženka 2014: 59.

was the start of a personal correspondence, which later developed into a life-time friendship.

Dr. Lifka seems to have admired Nykl's linguistic skills, and Nykl deeply respected Lifka as an honorable man with a talent for synthesis. Nykl often visited Lifka while in Prague, and went through the museum collection with his help. The personal friendship with the museum's librarian was crucial for Nykl's connection to the Náprstek Museum, as there were no other bounds between him and the museum nor did he keep in touch with anybody else from the museum employees.

It was no doubt their mutual trust which made Nykl choose the Náprstek Museum as a safe place to deposit his personal papers and books in 1938. By that time he sent his precious notes, his unfinished and unpublished books and personal library in sixteen trunks and four crates to the Museum under the protection of his friend. When Nykl was leaving Czechoslovakia in the last train heading to Vienna in September 1938, he hardly thought that he was never to see his papers, his friend Lifka nor his homeland again.

The fate of the personal papers and the contact of Nykl himself with the Museum were strongly influenced by the outbreak of the Second World War and further by the post-war developments and the onset of the Communist era. Nykl resumed his contact with Prague in 1946, and was interested in the opportunity to publish his biography there, and a second edition of his book *Eternal Japan* improved by including extended photographic material he also had deposited in the museum before the war. He was also hoping to return to Czechoslovakia and have the third edition on his translation of the Qu'ran published. All these hopes were frustrated after the "Communist takeover" in 1948. The publisher Mazáč, who was willing to publish Nykl's monographs, committed suicide after his publishing house was confiscated. Nonetheless, Nykl kept in touch with Lifka until his death and attempted to transfer even other parts of his literary heritage to the Náprstek Museum, as he probably considered his friend Lifka the only person able to preserve his legacy. Dr. Lifka was dutifully carrying out the entrusted task until February 14, 1959, when he was arrested by the state security, charged with high treason, imprisoned for one year and forced to leave his job in the Náprstek Museum. Nykl's entire legacy, consisting of the major part of the manuscripts, articles, scrapbooks and photographs collected since his childhood until August 1938 and transferred to Prague from Karlovy Vary in 1938, supplemented later by documents from 1951 to 1957, sent (probably as per Nykl's testament) after Nykl's death from Evanston, and two smaller collections of personal correspondence and manuscripts, provided by Nykl's friend Bohuslav Dušek and his brother Jaroslav Nykl, was then left untouched and unnoticed in the Museums's archive and library depositories. Only in the last years, thanks to the effort of the aforementioned J. Ženka and others, following in his steps, they have been slowly unveiling their secrets and serving the original purpose intended by Nykl: to serve humanity by sharing the experience of a remarkable person, able to share and discuss his thoughts with the people worldwide in almost whatever language he met during his errant life.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> With respect to the A. R. Nykl's language skills, Edwin J. Webber, his contemporary, wrote in Nykl's obituary:

„Those who knew him would hardly have disputed the claim that he spoke sixteen and read twenty-eight languages.” (Webber 1960: 96).

For more details on this topic see the introductory study by J. Ženka, in Nykl – Ženka (ed.) 2016: 36–46.





Fig. 5 A photograph taken by Nykl with his handwritten caption (*Present-Day Mexico*, Box 28, Folder 2).

## Mexico before and after: the political situation in Mexico during Nykl's stays

As the comparison of the situation in Mexico during the presidency of Porfirio Díaz and after the Mexican revolution was a focal point of most of Nykl's works on Mexico, it is beneficial to provide a brief description of the key events of the Mexican history during the first half of the twentieth century, when it comes to Nykl's involvement in the events.

When he arrived for the first time in 1907, Mexico was just entering the fourth decade of a relatively prosperous and peaceful rule of an officially elected president and "benevolent dictator" Porfirio Díaz. A veteran of the War of the Reform (1858–60) and the French intervention in Mexico (1862–67), a leader of the republican troops against the rule of the misfortunate Habsburg, Emperor Maximilian, he seized power in a coup in 1876. Together with his allies, a group of technocrats known as "Científicos", he ruled Mexico for the next thirty-five years, a period which went down in Mexican history as Porfiriato.

Díaz is until now perceived as a controversial figure by historians (largely depending on their own ideological background); the traditional interpretation is that while his

strategy of “little politics and much administration” brought stability and considerable economic growth after decades of conflict, it grew unpopular due to civil repression and political stagnation. He is being credited with maintaining peace in the countryside through the effective service of *rurales* (a rural police), opening the country to foreign investments (which, on the other hand, is sometimes criticized as unpatriotic) and improving much the transportation system by expanding a railway network. It cannot be overlooked that his economic policies largely benefited his circle of allies and relatives as well as foreign investors, and helped a few wealthy estate owners acquire huge tracts of land, leaving rural *campesinos* without proper education and very bad life prospects. He is even blamed for the death of 600,000 workers by the end of his rule in 1910. Despite ostentatious public statements favoring a return to democracy and not running for office in 1910, Díaz ran again. His failure to institutionalize presidential succession, as he was by then 80 years old, triggered a political crisis between the Científicos and the followers of General Bernardo Reyes, allied with the military and with peripheral regions of Mexico. After Díaz declared himself the winner of the eighth term in office in 1910, his electoral opponent, Francisco I. Madero, issued a call for armed rebellion against Díaz, leading to the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution. After the Federal Army suffered a number of military defeats against Madero’s forces, Díaz was forced to resign in May 1911 and fled to Spain. He spent his last years in exile in France, where he died in 1916.

Begun by elements of the Mexican elite hostile to Díaz, led by Francisco I. Madero and popular leaders like Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, the revolution expanded to the middle class, the peasantry in some regions, and organized labor. In October 1911, Madero was overwhelmingly elected in a free and not manipulated election. But opposition to the Madero regime soon increased from both the conservatives, who saw him as too weak and too liberal, and from former revolutionary fighters and the dispossessed, who saw him as too conservative.

These conflicts came to a head in February 1913, when Madero and his vice president Pino Suárez were assassinated. The authoritarian regime of General Victoriano Huerta came to power, backed by the United States, foreign business interests, and other supporters of the old order. Huerta remained in power from February 1913 until July 1914, when he was forced out by a coalition of different regional revolutionary forces. When the revolutionaries’ attempt to reach a political agreement failed, Mexico plunged into a civil war (1914–1915), which plundered the wealthy estates and impoverished the country. The Constitutionalist faction under wealthy landowner Venustiano Carranza emerged as the victor in 1915, defeating the revolutionary forces of former Constitutionalist Pancho Villa and forcing revolutionary leader Emiliano Zapata back to guerrilla warfare. Zapata was assassinated in 1919.

The armed conflict, including military interventions on the part of the United States, lasted for the better part of the decade, until around 1920, and had several distinct phases. Over time the Revolution changed from a revolt against the established order under Díaz to a multi-sided civil war in particular regions, with frequently shifting power struggles among factions in the Mexican Revolution. One major result of the revolution was the dissolution of the Federal Army in 1914, which Francisco Madero had kept intact when he was elected in 1911 and General Huerta used to oust Madero. Revolutionary forces unified against Huerta’s reactionary regime and defeated the Federal forces. Although the conflict was primarily a civil war, foreign powers that had



*Mr. Nyhl exploring the ruins (Iglesia)*

Fig. 6 A photograph of the author with his handwritten caption (*Present-Day Mexico*, Box 28, Folder 2).

important economic and strategic interests in Mexico also figured in the outcome of Mexico's power struggles, with the United States playing an especially significant role.

Another important point was the promulgation of a new Constitution on February 5, 1917, which many scholars consider the end point of the armed conflict. "*Economic and social conditions improved in accordance with revolutionary policies, so that the new society took shape within a framework of official revolutionary institutions,*" with the constitution providing that framework.<sup>22</sup> The period of 1920–1940 is often considered another phase of the Revolution, as the government power was consolidated, the Catholic clergy and institutions were attacked in the 1920s in the "war of Cristeros," and the revolutionary constitution of 1917 was implemented.<sup>23</sup>

It was in this period of consolidation of the country and securing the results of the Revolution, shortly after the former general and president Álvaro Obregón ceded his office to Sonoran revolutionary Plutarco Elías Calles, who, in an attempt to buffer his

<sup>22</sup> Womack 1991: 125.

<sup>23</sup> For an overall picture of the Mexican Revolution see for example: Knight 1986; Knight 2016; González 2002.

regime against further coups, began arming peasants and factory workers with surplus weapons, continued other reforms pushed by his predecessor, such as land reform and anti-clerical laws to prevent the Catholic Church from interfering in politics, that Nykl returned back to his well-loved country. But the Mexico that emerged in front of his appalled sight was a really different one from the Mexico he remembered from his youth.

### **The book *Present-Day Mexico* and reasons that may induce A. R. Nykl to write it<sup>24</sup>**

The item, which by its great complexity overshadows by far all the other Nykl's papers written on Mexico, is a manuscript of his carefully prepared book on Mexico, in which he was comparing the Mexico under the rule of Porfirio Díaz that he visited between 1907 and 1909 with the lamentable condition of contemporary post-revolutionary Mexico he witnessed during his visits between 1924 and 1926. The publication of this book was much desired by Nykl, but never materialized until now, when a critical edition of this document is just being prepared for print publication.<sup>25</sup>

In the archive of the Náprstek Museum there are deposited five consecutive versions of the manuscript (or, more accurately, a typescript). These versions, except for the title, were not changed dramatically by the author in the course of time, rather enriched with new newspapers articles, Nykl's own photographs, postcards and other materials and his abundant notes and specifications.

The first version, typewritten on 336 loose sheets and bearing a bold title of "A New Conquest of Tenoch-Titlan. Hikes in and around the Valley of Mexico (later crossed out and replaced by "Hikes and Philosophy in Mexico")",<sup>26</sup> was probably written shortly after his return from the summer school in Mexico in 1924. This is verified by the first sentence of the preface of this first version:

"My recent stay and travels in Mexico **during the months of July and August** gave me an opportunity to see and appreciate the contrast between its present condition, after fifteen years of revolutionary and post-revolutionary turmoil, and its condition between 1907 and 1909, which meant the culminating point of Diaz's thirty years of "benevolent" dictatorship.

This timing, later crossed out and omitted in later versions, corresponds to the date of the summer school in 1924 in which Nykl participated and later wrote an article about it.<sup>27</sup> There was even a chapter about the summer school planned in the original table of contents, but it was later omitted.

This version (as the only one) also contains a chapter dedicated to the agrarian reform and a detailed mention of the case of murder of Rosalie Evans, an American-born owner of a hacienda near Puebla. This criminal case, much reflected in the contemporary press, took place in August 1924, during Nykl's stay in the summer school in the Valley of Mexico.

The typescript contains a lot of Nykl's handwritten comments, corrections and deletions, and is enriched with 552 clippings from American and Mexican newspapers

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<sup>24</sup> For more details see the introductory studies by J. Ženka and D. Winklerová, in Nykl – Winklerová – Křížová forthcoming 2019.

<sup>25</sup> Nykl – Winklerová – Křížová forthcoming 2019.

<sup>26</sup> ANpM, Nykl, Box 28, Folder 1 Book on Mexico (1924–1926; hereinafter referred to as 28.1).

<sup>27</sup> Nykl 1925.

illustrating the discussed topics. All the articles are dated to 1924 to 1925. Later Nykl redrafted his planned book, incorporating into it some new experiences from his later travels to Mexico between 1925 and 1926, even though the main structure, based on the trips undertaken as part of the summer school in 1924, remained unchanged.

As a result, he drafted a new version. It was finished by the end of 1925, as attested by Nykl's correspondence with potential publishers.<sup>28</sup>

In the archive of the Náprstek Museum, there are two copies of this second version: the original typescript and a carbon copy. The original, called "Mexico Today", which was later changed to "Present-day Mexico. Gleanings of two years' travel and a study from the Río Grande to Yucatán", is bound and enriched with 131 photographs taken by Nykl and supplied with his handwritten captions.<sup>29</sup> It also contains a lot of the author's handwritten notes and corrections, postcards, calling cards, and a lot of newspaper clippings related to the text or illustrating it in some way. The articles are dated to the period between 1922 and 1927.

The carbon copy with the same title,<sup>30</sup> also bound, does not contain photographs, but it was supplemented with a lot of newspaper clippings dated to 1927–1929, calling cards and even three letters addressed to Nykl. Even though the typewritten text is identical, it is apparent that this version was redrafted by the author later than the previous one (28.2) – it contains handwritten references to events from the years 1927–1928, additional bibliography of the titles published after 1926 and also additional 4 pages of the text, describing Nykl's experience from Yucatán.<sup>31</sup> The text was also significantly shortened by crossing out phrases and whole passages, especially those containing often scathing criticism of contemporary American society – probably to make it more acceptable to the potential publishers (after the text had been refused by several publishing houses).

All these later additions and modifications were incorporated into the last version of the typewritten text, which is preserved in the archive in two unbound copies. They differ in the title and supplements.

The first one (a carbon copy) is titled "Mexico Adventures and Observations".<sup>32</sup> It consists of 346 loose pages of the typewritten text, with no handwritten notes or photographs or any other supplements. It was probably written between 1928 and 1930.

The second one (the original) bears the most expressive title "Mexico before and after the Revolution: Adventures and Observations".<sup>33</sup> It contains a lot of Nykl's handwritten notes and corrections, additional bibliographical references, one photograph and one added page with an epilogue. Thanks to this additional bibliography and the developments mentioned in the epilogue, this version of the text can be dated quite precisely to the last month of 1930, as attested, for example, by this phrase:

<sup>28</sup> ANpM, Nykl, Box 121, Institutional Correspondence, Nykl, Dodd, Mead & Company, A. R. Nykl to Dodd, Mead & Company, 2 January 1926

<sup>29</sup> ANpM, Nykl, Box 28, Folder 2, Present-Day Mexico (1925) (hereinafter referred to as 28.2).

<sup>30</sup> ANpM, Nykl, Box 31, Folder 4, Book on Mexico (hereinafter referred to as 31.4).

<sup>31</sup> ANpM, Nykl, 31.4, pp. 282–286.

<sup>32</sup> ANpM, Nykl, Box 34, Folder 3, Mexico Adventures and Observations (hereinafter referred to as 34.3).

<sup>33</sup> ANpM, Nykl, Box 34, Folder 2, México before and after the revolution: Adventures and observations (hereinafter referred to as 34.2).



*"It is also encouraging to note that the army expenses are to be cut considerably by its discharging 5,000 soldiers. In the parade I saw on Independence day<sup>34</sup> in 1908 there were some 12,000 troops and 15 generals, including Don Porfirio. This year, if the newspaper reports are correct, there were 30,000 troops and 75 generals, whose pay is more than double of what it was 22 years ago."<sup>35</sup>*

This copy (34.2) can be thus considered the latest known version of Nykl's book dedicated to Mexico and its contemporary social and cultural changes, even though we cannot exclude the possibility that there existed even other copies and versions which were sent to the publishing houses or deposited elsewhere and never reached the deposit in the Náprstek Museum. But it seems that after 1930, A. R. Nykl gave up his efforts to have his book published – he was either too busy, preparing his most remarkable research books on Andalusian Arabic texts for edition, or maybe he didn't consider it up to date any more in the rapidly changing social and political climate of the Mexico in the 1930s. Or he may very well be just tired of a fruitless communication with the publishing houses and he was probably also struggling with a lack of financial resources. It is unclear whether he ever returned to the idea of publishing the book in his later years.

The purpose for which A. R. Nykl strove so much to have his book published, redrafting and updating it several times, was quite manifestly expressed by the author himself in the Foreword of the very first extant version (28.1) of the book:

*"My theory is that without the good knowledge of the language one is not well qualified to speak with much authority about a foreign country, and everyone who attempts such a task should display at least as much knowledge of the language as the freshman in the high school is supposed to possess at the end of the first semester. My reading has convinced me that our blundering policy with regard to Mexico is primarily due to the crass ignorance of our leaders, who on the whole know nothing about the Mexicans and their cultural background.*

*For that reason I hope that this book will encourage those who wish to know more the history of Spain, Mexico, and South America to study Spanish, and, if possible, will give them an initiative to go to the Latin American continent and associate with the educated and partly educated people there. There are Mexican vagrants and murderers, but Mexico cannot be judged by them with any more foundation than we<sup>36</sup> can be judged by ours, who by far outstrip the Mexicans both in numbers and in the academic skill. We must emphasize the universal instead of the particular, and instead of regarding Mexico as our legitimate prey regard it as a neighbor who needs our help, but does not want to lose his property in the transaction. All this has been said many times before, but it will bear repetition."<sup>37</sup>*

The prospective target audience of his book was specified by Nykl in his abstract and a presentation of the book:

*"The book is so planned that it will be useful to the widest circle of people interested in Mexico: to tourists, teachers of Spanish and Latin-American history, students of archaeology,*

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<sup>34</sup> The Mexican Independence Day is celebrated on September 16.

<sup>35</sup> ANpM, Nykl, 34.2, p. 347.

<sup>36</sup> There was originally written "United States" instead of "we" and "their" instead of "ours". But later Nykl decided for the more encompassing perception of the reader and the author himself as parts of the American society. In later versions he always counted himself among the Americans.

<sup>37</sup> ANpM, Nykl, 28.1, pp. 10–11.

and plain businessmen; in short, to all those who wish brief, but authoritative statements of actual facts.”<sup>38</sup>

The period of 1920–1927 was a time of frequent cultural encounters between the intellectual elites of both Mexico and the United States, as was also the purpose of the summer schools organized at Universidad Nacional. At that time, many American intellectuals, especially the leftist ones, expressed their concern about Mexico and were trying to protect it against the possible profit-seeking intervention of their home country. Even though a leftist’s orientation cannot be reasonably ascribed to Nykl, he was probably seeing himself as an ambassador of the mutual accord, a peace-seeker, fighting against the prejudice and ignorance and encouraging his fellow countrymen to visit Mexico and make their own opinion.<sup>39</sup>

The years 1920 to 1935 were also a period of increased interest in Mexico and its Great Revolution, manifested in a growing number of published works of varying quality written on the subject in question.<sup>40</sup> This was also probably one reason which made Nykl supplement his prepared book with an extensive appendix of notes on the books published on Mexico and Mexican-American relations. He was probably willing to express his “absolutely objective” opinion and subject the publications to his (often biting) criticism, thus facilitating the potential reader to distinguish the works best suited to provide him with the thorough knowledge of Mexico and its culture before his potential travel.

### Nykl’s vision of Mexico’s Past, Present and Future

One of the bound versions of a typescript of Nykl’s key work on Mexico<sup>41</sup> contains a front page which used to be adorned with a photograph (now missing). In the place of the photograph, there remains a type-written question “Does he need religion?” The same burning question (bearing in mind that this third version was completed in the full heat of a bloody religious conflict called the Cristero War) was later handwritten by the author on the lower margin of the page, adding another inscription to it saying: “Mexico’s Past, Present and Future”.

This ambition of the author to provide the reader of his book with a brief insight into the most remarkable historical events and processes that contributed to the formation of a modern Mexican nation, to give him a clue to better understand the present-day chaotic situation, and even provide him with the author’s prognosis for the future development of Mexico, make this book rather extraordinary. It is not a mere travelogue, nor a tourist guide, a reportage, a collection of personal memoirs, or a scientific paper on Mexico’s history, archaeology, economy or demography, but an amalgamation of all of the above.

<sup>38</sup> ANpM, Nykl, Box 3, Folder 13, Present-Day Mexico, an abstract and a presentation of the book.

<sup>39</sup> Compare Berger 2010: 115.

<sup>40</sup> DELPAR, Helen. *The enormous vogue of things Mexican: cultural relations between the United States and Mexico, 1920–1935*. Tuscaloosa, ©1992, p. 56, as cited in Novotná, yet unpublished master thesis: Tab. 1.

<sup>41</sup> ANpM, Nykl, 31.4, p. 1.

Of course, the self-proclaimed impartiality of Nykl's point of view<sup>42</sup> may be questioned, as he himself quite often incorporated very personal and thus subjective judgements into his work, which in turn reflected his rather conservative mindset,<sup>43</sup> and his thoroughly positivistic approach would nowadays be a subject of methodological criticism. Nevertheless, Nykl was indeed a brilliant observer. His bright mind and ability to work seamlessly with multiple languages, together with the capacity to see the phenomena from multiple viewpoints, permitted him to mediate to his readers very deep and apt insights into events that were very often presented in contemporary American press and literature in a one-sided and preconceived manner.

One of the main objectives of his work was apparently to shed more light on the rule of the "benevolent dictator" Porfirio Díaz, much despised by the first generation of historians of the Mexican Revolution and Nykl's contemporaries, and to present the whole period and the changes Mexican Revolution had brought to the society in a less biased manner. This objective can best be illustrated by letting the author speak for himself:

*"My recent stay and travels in Mexico gave me an opportunity to see and appreciate the contrast between its present condition, after fifteen years of revolutionary and post-revolutionary turmoil, and its condition in the years 1907 to 1909, which represented the culminating point of Díaz' thirty years of "benevolent" dictatorship. One who has not seen Mexico in the days of Díaz' rule can hardly form an accurate opinion as to the relative value of the great dictator's work and the work of the revolution."*<sup>44</sup>

We may assume that he was trying to fight with his humble means the arising propaganda myth of "La Revolución Mexicana".<sup>45</sup> The myth which in the coming decades helped to foment the process in which "cosmopolitan classicism gave way to earthy Mexican social realism"<sup>46</sup>, undoubtedly much to the despair of Nykl, a classic proponent of a cosmopolitan humanism.

*"The present young generation is largely inclined to look upon Díaz only as a tyrant who has tried to build a false structure of progress on the illusion of peace at all costs. They accuse him of having thrown the country on a false path after Juárez had given it the right direction [...]"*

*The fact remains, nevertheless, that however ruthless the old soldier's policies may have been, they have done several things for Mexico for which he deserves full credit [...]"*<sup>47</sup>

Nykl appreciated Díaz for securing the rural regions, ridding them of banditry by means of mounted constabulary, the famous *rurales*, for making accessible the vast natural resources of the republic by building a net of railroads, establishing a stable

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<sup>42</sup> "My endeavor throughout the following pages was to bring out the essential facts about the present situation in an interesting and impartial manner." ANpM, Nykl, 28.2, p. 10.

<sup>43</sup> This feature of Nykl's personality may be illustrated by a following passage from a letter to his personal friend, a Czech Mexican R. Sudek: "One may perhaps never visit again the places he used to live in during his youth, as the changes he will find there must inevitably sadden him." (ANpM, Nykl, Box 119, KPO, Sudek, A. R. Nykl to R. and R. Sudek, August 26, 1926.).

<sup>44</sup> ANpM, Nykl, Box 28, Folder 2, p. 5

<sup>45</sup> For a more detailed picture of the creation, perpetuation and social and political impact of the myth of the Mexican Revolution, see for example: Benjamin 2000; or Knight 2010: 223–273.

<sup>46</sup> Knight 2010: 243.

<sup>47</sup> ANpM, Nykl, 28.2, pp. 5–6

economy and getting foreign capital into the country by opening up the oil fields and other natural resources to successful foreign companies.<sup>48</sup>

In his effort to maintain an “unbiased” perspective, he is not overlooking the weak points of Díaz rule. Among these he counted the neglect of proper education of the natives and *mestizos* and creation of a false impression that Mexico was a prosperous and developed, entirely white man’s country, while in reality the prosperity was redeemed by suffering of large masses of unassimilated native tribes which were living in abject poverty.<sup>49</sup> Nykl saw the refusal to resolve the burning question of the more equitable land ownership as a particularly unwise decision. Instead of removing the evil of a landed aristocracy exploiting the landless native, Díaz found the *latifundio* system too useful for his politics and perpetuated and even strengthened it, which led to his downfall.<sup>50</sup>

Nevertheless, when confronted with what he found after his return to Mexico in 1926, after all the destruction and chaos of the Revolution, Nykl, with his idealistic mindset anchored by the idea of eternal progress of civilization and a non-violent uplifting of human spirit toward the highest moral values, must have been naturally shocked and depressed.<sup>51</sup> Even under such circumstances, however, he was trying to maintain a balanced viewpoint in his text, not omitting even some benefits the Revolution had according to his opinion brought to the society<sup>52</sup> (such as making some resolute steps toward the solution of the agrarian problem to the benefit of the masses of the people, even though the results for a long time yet were not quite satisfactory).<sup>53</sup>

Regarding the problem of the potential usefulness and beneficial effect of religion, Nykl was trying to answer honestly the question he had posited in the text’s very beginning. He himself, as can be ascertained from his texts and personal notes, was probably a man of deep personal faith who created a spiritual and moral system of his own,<sup>54</sup> picking up what he considered valuable from various world religions and rejecting any labels himself.<sup>55</sup> Nonetheless, he assumed (quite correctly, as far as can be

<sup>48</sup> ANpM, Nykl, 28.2, p. 5

<sup>49</sup> ANpM, Nykl, 28.2, p. 6

<sup>50</sup> ANpM, Nykl, 28.2, pp. 380–1.

<sup>51</sup> Nykl’s impression of a post-revolutionary Mexico is best illustrated by a following passage: “At the time the situation of Mexico, in a nutshell, was this: the revolution had driven most of the Díaz’ group of Científicos out of the country, had eaten up totally the treasury reserve, had destroyed much property. The credit abroad was ruined, the country impoverished, the army of beggars and unemployed increased, the people made distrustful, jealous and irritable, if not in all the States of the Republic, surely in a large number of them. The wealthy class had lost, the masses had in some respects gained. The peón had been given land and had now a greater opportunity to free himself from illiteracy, if he cared.” (ANpM, Nykl, 28.2, p. 8)

<sup>52</sup> In this point is this book far more objective than some other Nykl’s works from later years, when his nostalgia and increasing conservatism drove him to a rather idealistic view of “the good old times” and exaggerated acclamations like: “Mexico [...] of those days [i.e. days of Porfiriató] was entering the gates of Paradise” (Nykl – Ženka (ed.) 2016: 309). Translated by Dagmar Winklerová.

<sup>53</sup> ANpM, Nykl, 28.2, p. 379.

<sup>54</sup> Nykl’s moral system is embodied in his essay “Universal Ethics based on a New Revision of the Problem of Good and Evil” (Nykl 1928).

<sup>55</sup> This may be illustrated by his slightly immodest remark: “To a mind which has liberated itself from the bonds of any dogma and has a conception of deity “far above that of the idolaters” the antics of most existing creeds must appear as an endeavor of ants building a pyramid in the depths of a mountain forest.” (ANpM, Nykl, 28.2, pp. 178–9).

judged from the later developments in Mexican society)<sup>56</sup> that the Catholic church has an irreplaceable role in Mexican society and that the contemporary Crusades against religion will yield no positive developments, possibly only moral degeneration instead.

In an endeavor to provide his potential reader with fully thoroughgoing knowledge, Nykl paid attention to Mexican geography, as well as economic situation and demography. He did not restrict himself to mere description and supplemented his work with his original prognoses and recommendations presenting the possible future development that he anticipated on the basis of his analysis. Some of his observations and presumed scenarios offer a very interesting material for comparison after nearly 100 years (which, unfortunately, would by far exceed the required extent of this article and present a possible subject for future research and description). A few examples are provided below of Nykl's observations, some of which have not lost their poignancy even after nearly hundred years:

*"The whole of the present Mexican territory can be divided into three entirely different sections, of which only two are really Mexican, namely the North and the Center or South. Yucatán and the territory east of Tehuantepec is ethnically a part of Central America, and its problems are essentially different from those of the Mexican continent.*

*The North which roughly reaches to the 22<sup>nd</sup> parallel is a vast territory, sparsely inhabited because of the scarcity of water and the resulting deserted areas. [...] The North must inevitably come more and more under American influence. Its colonization cannot proceed from the South of Mexico. It is doubtful that it could be colonized by Europeans in large numbers, unless the various improvements mentioned were made and large colonies thus enabled to take up the reclaimed land. Should Mexico persist in emphasizing its Indianism, it could hardly hope for numerous European immigration [...].*

*The opening of the North to American, and consequently white, influence need not necessarily imply that the Republic would eventually lose its sovereignty over it [...].*

*Central Mexico is the section which, before all other parts of the Republic, should occupy the minds of Mexican statesmen and educators. It is the most fertile and the most densely populated part of the country, almost entirely mestizo and Indian, and truly Mexican. Here the agrarian and the indígena problems are of primary importance. These once solved, Mexico will possess in this central portion a powerful nucleus of power which will be capable of radiating its influence both north and east. Foreign activity will be confined mostly to larger cities and to mining and textile industries. The redemption of the agricultural regions must come almost entirely from the Mexicans themselves. [...]*

*Yucatán ought to be left to itself, but the Federal Government should be sufficiently strong to check any too radical experiments on the peninsula. Socialism has not proved itself beneficial to Yucatán except in creating a deplorable looseness of morals which does not aid economic progress anywhere in the world."<sup>57</sup>*

Particularly interesting is the author's following reflection – not only because it is quite different from the others for its rather pessimistic tune, but also because by that time the absolutely hypothetical scenario was slowly becoming a reality of the present, with a result all but different from what Nykl had anticipated:

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<sup>56</sup> Compare Křížová – Belucz 2010: 47–68.

<sup>57</sup> ANpM, Nykl, 28.2, pp. 392–4.



*"The resources of Mexico are great, but by no means fabulous as some enthusiasts would represent them[...] Optimists say that Mexico could easily support ten times the population it now has, and in theory they are right. If, however, Mexico has ten times its present population it will no longer be Mexican, but European, organized in European fashion with all the United States' additions. If Mexico is to remain Mexican, it must remain a country where people are satisfied with little, as was the case with Japan in the old patriarchal days. It has not the remotest chance of ever becoming anything like Argentina of Chile; its lot – at least in the South – will rather resemble that of Peru, Ecuador or Colombia, at best".<sup>58</sup>*

As nowadays the tenfold increase in population compared to the Nykl's era has been almost reached,<sup>59</sup> we may dare to say that Nykl would be quite surprised at how his prediction was fulfilled. It is true that Mexico's lot resembles in some aspects that of Peru and Colombia – but to the point of becoming, together with Chile(!), one of the four most quickly developing and efficient economies of Latin America, the so called "Pacific Pumas".<sup>60</sup>

The question of the possible future intervention and overall attitude of the United States toward its Southern neighbor apparently kept Nykl very much concerned. On many occasions in his text, he warned his readers against *"watching the Mexican life with an air of thoroughly Nordic superiority"*,<sup>61</sup> pointing out (often in a very sarcastic and disapproving manner)<sup>62</sup> all the errors committed by his compatriots on Mexican territory, and appreciating the relative value of Mexican culture in comparison with his own, considering it to be less influenced by the vices of the modern era.<sup>63</sup>

Even though at times he let himself be influenced by his idealistic and nostalgic personality, he endeavored to offer to his readers an honest, pragmatic, and

<sup>58</sup> ANpM, Nykl, 28.2, p. 372.

<sup>59</sup> On the next page the author continues, stating that: *"Today Mexico has nearly a million inhabitants less than it had in 1910, when its population was 15,150,369"* (ANpM, Nykl, Box 28, Folder 2, p. 373). Mexico's up-to date estimated population is approximately 127.6 million inhabitants (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2019). *World Population Prospects 2019, custom data acquired via website [cit. 2019-20-06]. Available online at: <https://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/DataQuery/>*)

<sup>60</sup> The term emphasizes the agility and efficiency with which these countries have distinguished themselves from other emerging Latin American markets in terms of economic growth and stability, global integration and commitment to democracy. It was first coined in 2012 by Samuel George and later developed into a 2014 study published by Bertelsmann Foundation (George, Samuel. "The Pacific Pumas: An Emerging (Pacific Alliance) Model for Emerging Markets", Bertelsmann Foundation, 2014-03-13. Available online at: <https://www.bfna.org/research/the-pacific-pumas-an-emerging-pacific-alliance-model-for-emerging-markets/>)

<sup>61</sup> ANpM, Nykl, 28.2, p. 173.

<sup>62</sup> This may contribute to some extent to the fact that his book was never published in the United States. Nykl himself was probably aware of it, as he was gradually softening his caustic tone in later versions of the manuscript.

<sup>63</sup> This admiration (although somehow Rousseau-like) can be discerned (together with Nykl's romantic retrophilia) from the following observation:

*"Children play in comparative cleanliness inside or in front of the house. Little shops offer pottery and tequila for sale, and a spirit of a most charming Christian communism pervades them. The floor is of hardened earth; and chickens, sleepy dogs and cats share the lodging with the family. No oil, electricity, gas, telephone, radio, automobile, noise, mad rush after nothing – but calm, fragrance of flowers; simplicity, tortillas, frijoles, chile. Comparing the two forms of life we must admit that while the latter is less progressive it is by far more Christian. There Christ would be welcome: in our civilization he would be sent to the nearest psychopathic hospital."* (ANpM, Nykl, 28.2, p. 240).

comprehensive answer to the question “*What should be the attitude of the United States toward the situation south of the Río Grande?*”

He warns his readers against the two influential approaches of his era, namely, that of an armed intervention and that of “*keeping our hands off*”,<sup>64</sup> rather appealing to finding the middle path between these two extremes. He was advocating for letting the Mexicans “*work out their salvation in their own way*” (even though he admits that it will undoubtedly require a very long period before the Mexican masses are properly educated in the comprehension of the democratic form of government), while recommending to the US Government to support those elements of the Mexican political scene which are honestly animated by the “*desire to fulfill the aims for which the revolution in 1911 was begun*”.<sup>65</sup>

At last, but not least, Nykl called the (presumably American) reader to assume a personal deal of responsibility for the future development of the relationships between the two nations: “*Mexico is next door to us and we should find it easy to become more intimately acquainted with it by visiting its varied regions, and to increase our enjoyment and profit of such visits by learning Spanish, the second language on the American continent. The knowledge of Spanish on the parts of our diplomats and business men will do away with the inclination to deal with Mexico with that superior air, born of lack of accurate knowledge, which is causing trouble everywhere in international relations.*”<sup>66</sup>

Alois Richard Nykl was no doubt an extraordinary individual. Not only was he gifted with an outstanding linguistic talent, but he, as far as can be ascertained, also conscientiously lived to fulfill his humanist vision that “*We must emphasize the universal instead of the particular*”. May this article make at least a small contribution toward gaining a better understanding of this remarkable Czech, who unfortunately found but little understanding amongst his contemporaries.

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<sup>64</sup> Nykl pointed out that: “*It is very true that Mexico alone can solve its problems, but they cannot be solved without foreign capital if Mexico wishes to be truly progressive. For that reason, it is not possible for the United States to keep hands off. It would not be difficult to whip Mexico into submission, if the United States should make up its mind to do so, and it would not take a frightful toll of human life. [...] There is little military difficulty involved, but the repercussion of such procedure in Latin American countries would be such as the United States cannot easily afford to face.*” (ANpM, Nykl, 28.2, p. 398).

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