

## RESTLESS BLOOD

Frans Blom, Explorer and Maya Archaeologist

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Tore Leifer  
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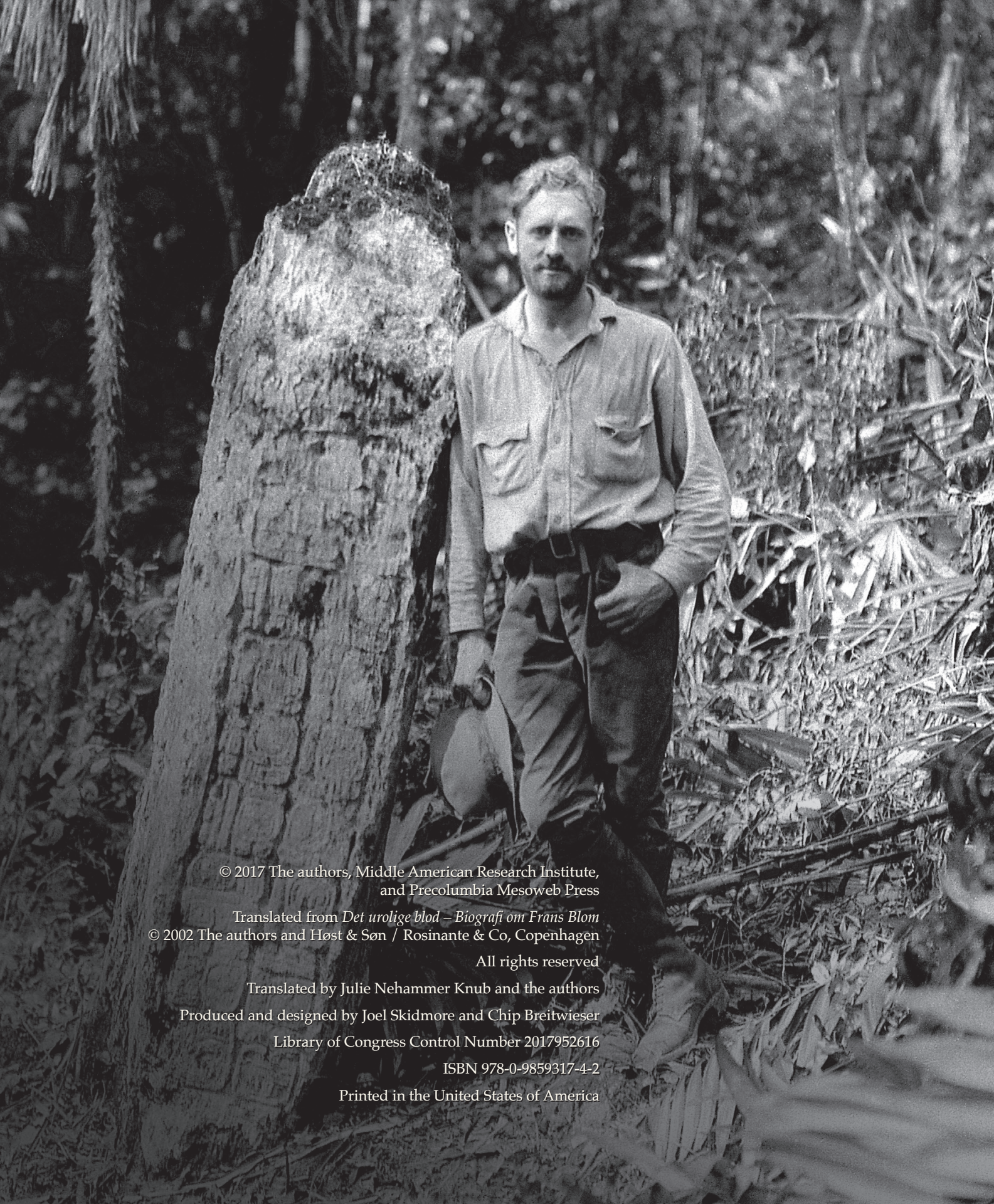
# RESTLESS BLOOD

Frans Blom, Explorer and Maya Archaeologist

With a preface by Michael D. Coe

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## Author Biographies

Tore Leifer (1964), MA in Musicology, Film, and Media from the University of Copenhagen; graduated in Solfège and Conducting from the Royal Danish Academy of Music. A well-known radio host at the nationwide Danish Broadcasting Corporation (DR), Tore is also a writer and translator, the author of several books in the fields of musicology and cultural history. He is a Knight (Chevalier) of the Ordre des Arts et des Lettres.

Jesper Nielsen (1972), Ph.D. and Associate Professor in American Indian Languages and Cultures at the University of Copenhagen. Also a member of the Proyecto La Pintura Mural Prehispánica en México at the National Autonomous University of Mexico. Jesper has published numerous books, chapters, and articles on Mesoamerica in international peer-reviewed journals (including *Ancient Mesoamerica*, *Antiquity*, *Latin American Antiquity*, *Mexicon*, *The PARI Journal*, and *Ancient America*). Recent book publications include *Palaces and Courtly Culture in Ancient Mesoamerica*, co-edited with Julie Nehammer Knub and Christophe Helmke (2014) and *The Writing System of Cacaxtla, Tlaxcala, Mexico*, co-authored with Christophe Helmke (2011).

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## Preface

By Michael D. Coe  
Professor Emeritus, Yale University

Frans Blom was the archetypal archaeologist of public imagination. Like the fictional hero of Indiana Jones films, or the real Hiram Bingham (discoverer of Machu Picchu), Blom was an explorer, adventurer, and scholar combined in one extraordinary individual. But, as will be seen in this biography, Blom had his internal demons, resulting in a life that saw outstanding achievements alternating with personal, self-made disasters. The worst of these demons – the bottle – would ultimately destroy him.

From his early days as a young Dane exploring for oil in the back country of the Mexican Gulf Coast until his fading days in his last home in the highlands of Chiapas, he was never so content as when he was on muleback searching out Maya ruins, and making camp in dense jungle. Back in the 1950s, when I was an anthropology graduate student at Harvard, the two great works describing his major explorations, *Tribes and Temples* (written with Oliver La Farge) and *La Selva Lacandona* (with Gertrude Duby) were cherished readings.

To Blom goes most of the credit for having set up a major institute for Maya research at Tulane University; even though a growing addiction to alcohol resulted in his dismissal, during the fourteen years that he directed it, M.A.R.I. (as it is known) resulted in great discoveries and first-rate research publications. Frans Blom was clearly an independent thinker, not afraid to “think outside the box” in interpreting the ancient Maya. It was he who first proved the existence of certain mounds in the earliest Maya sites (called “E-Groups”) as marking sight lines for astronomical events.

He was among the first to photograph fallen Maya monuments at night, with lights, to bring out the hieroglyphs carved into them. But more significantly, he insisted that glyph specialists were wrong about their approach to the Maya decipherment, that they had been assuming that all the many, still unread glyphs that followed calendric notations were nothing more than ritual or calendric commentaries on the dates. On more than one occasion, Blom published his opinion that these writings would some day prove to be phonetic.

Why wasn’t it Blom who was to come up with this proof for the “breaking of the Maya code,” but the young Russian scholar Yuri Knorozov who accomplished this in 1952? Blom’s major failing was not his addiction, but rather his inability to work on one particular project for very long. Scientific archaeology is not just exploration, but long, slow, meticulous, and often boring excavation into the past, with occasional moments of real excitement. With his aptly named “restless blood,” our Danish-American-Mexican hero clearly had no stomach for this kind of work, and almost all his published

reports have little or nothing to do with such matters as the stratification of sites, on which all field archaeology is based.

That is particularly true with La Venta, Tabasco, which Blom and La Farge explored and photographed in 1925. To these two, the great stone monuments that they found there showed that La Venta was merely a western outlier of the Maya civilization. We now know that this was a capital center of the Olmec culture, and was occupied from about 1000–400 BC. Later excavations by the Smithsonian’s Matthew Stirling and others proved that the Olmec was Mesoamerica’s founding civilization, far earlier than the Classic Maya.



If Blom had only come back to La Venta with an excavation team, he, rather than Stirling, would have been renowned as the discoverer of a hitherto unknown people.

And yet in my eyes, Frans Blom was a truly great Mayanist and scholar. I knew well most of his contemporary Mayanists, such as his Harvard mentor Alfred Tozzer, but I had never met him. I suppose that I was a little afraid to come across his reputedly formidable wife Gertrude “Trudi” Duby, who (I was told) had “dried out” Frans and had him totally under her control in Na Bolom. I had actually mounted an exhibit of her fine photographs taken in Lacandon country, in Yale’s Peabody Museum, but I avoided her as our personalities would certainly have clashed.

But I did meet him at last. In August 1962, the biannual International Congress of Americanists met in Mexico City. I was there, along with several hundred attendees, both foreign and Mexican – archaeologists, ethnologists, linguists, and the like. One evening, the director of the National Museum of Anthropology, the brilliant and urbane Ignacio Bernal, held a large reception for the participants in his beautiful home. At one point I met my old friend David Kelley (we had been fellow students at Harvard), and he told me that none other than Frans Blom was all by himself in a back room, “four sheets to the wind” as we say. It was apparent that he had escaped Trudi and Na Bolom, if only for a while. We immediately decided to find him.

And there he was, standing upright, red-faced, with flowing white-blond hair, and a drink in his hand. After we had said who we were, he began a rambling monologue about how effete archaeologists were these days, afraid to face the jungle, ignorant about how to travel jungle trails on foot or by muleback, spoiled by modern luxuries. That was not entirely true as far as I was concerned, but we took it all in without arguing. And we did get to shake hands with this unforgettable, towering figure in Maya research. He eventually returned to Trudi and Na Bolom, and was dead ten months later.



## Introduction: A Life

In June 2011, a group of dedicated people sets out from San Cristóbal de las Casas in the southern state of Chiapas, Mexico. It is a strange and moving scene. They escort two small, child-sized wooden coffins; one contains the remains of Gertude Duby Blom, the other those of her husband Frans Blom.

For almost two decades the two have laid side by side in San Cristóbal's cemetery in the cool highlands, Frans dying in 1963, to be followed by Trudi in 1993. Now they are to be reburied in the Lacandon Maya settlement of Naha in the Lacandon jungle, allegedly following the expressed wish of Trudi who had spent years with the Lacandon in their forest environment.<sup>1</sup>

Shortly after their arrival in Naha, the ceremony begins, prayers and offerings are performed according to Lacandon traditions, the alcoholic drink *balché* is passed around to everybody attending the burial. The small coffins are lowered into the jungle soil accompanied by two small bags of earth from Trudi's and Frans's native countries: Switzerland and Denmark.

Among the people who have made the trip to the jungle is an elderly lady, known as Doña Bety, who had lived with Frans and Trudi since she was 12 and was the only child they ever had. Emotions and tears are flowing freely as a new chapter in the amazing story of Danish-born Maya archaeologist Frans Blom is concluded: An exhumation and a second burial of his bones, these "archaeological objects," as he jokingly had said – this time in the humid, tropical jungle.

This would probably seem an unlikely destiny for most people, but perhaps not so for Frans, whose seventy-year life had been anything but average and seems more like a chain of unexpected events. Twice his life was dramatically turned upside-down, twice he was married, twice did he miss out on some of the most spectacular discoveries in the history of American archaeology, and twice did he change his national citizenship. To be buried twice is almost what one would expect in the case of Frans Blom.

In the summer of 1999 the authors of this biography gathered at what we then assumed would be Frans Blom's final resting place in San Cristóbal, partly to make a small offering at his grave, partly to mark the beginning of our research on the first biography on Blom in Danish. Earlier we had traveled through the "Promised Land of Ruins and Indians" as Blom had called the Yucatan peninsula in his most famous publication *Tribes and Temples*, visiting many of the sites that Blom had been among the first to explore and map.

What initially drove us was our fascination with an exceptional human life, as well as a professional interest in Maya research history. It seems that we are not alone in this, and Maya studies have entered a period of increased reflection upon its establishment, early history, and pioneering scholars.<sup>2</sup>

What is striking is that in its early stages Maya archaeology was a field

dominated by truly charismatic individuals and strong personalities, and by documenting the lives of these colorful characters they become the prisms through which we can perceive the development of Maya archaeology and ethnology – sometimes better than in the published excavation reports and monographs. This is reflected in a number of biographies of the most central figures in the era of early Maya archaeology: Sylvanus Morley, Tatiana Proskouriakoff, Adela Breton, and the incredible "Count" Jean-Frédéric Waldeck.<sup>3</sup> More recently, autobiographies by some of the most renowned present-day Maya scholars have appeared, thus adding their own voices to the still expanding story of how the ancient Maya were first discovered and investigated.<sup>4</sup>

Our own efforts to leave no stone unturned that could cast new light on Frans Blom's life would eventually last for three years. During this prolonged period of time we carried out research in Denmark, Mexico, and the United States, and along the way had the good luck of benefitting from the generous assistance of colleagues in the field of Mesoamerican archaeology, librarians, archivists, and Blom's relatives.

From the beginning we also drew on American historian Robert L. Brunhouse's biography *Frans Blom, Maya Explorer*, published in 1976. Still, although Brunhouse's book is thorough and well researched, he did not read or speak Danish, he never delved into the Danish archives to seek information, and what little he has to tell about Blom's childhood and youth is therefore rather inaccurate. The darkest and saddest period of Frans Blom's life and career is also described superficially by Brunhouse (perhaps out of consideration for those still alive at the time, including Trudi), but however sad those years from 1939 to 1943 were, they cannot be evaded if we wish to understand Frans and his later life. And so we must mention the series of unfortunate incidents that seemed destined for a time to put an end to his life.

This brings us to an important point, namely that our ambition has never been to produce a biography solely of the scholar Frans Blom and his academic achievements and failures, although his professional career dominated a large part of his life. We hope to have documented and reconstructed – as far as the sources and evidence allows – a full life of an extraordinary man. A human being is never just a scholar, a spouse, a sibling, or a poet. He or she can be all that at one time, with shifting focus and success; and what happens in your private life, be it consciously or not, often affects the trajectory of your professional life. This was certainly also the case with Frans Blom. As such, this book is written with the deepest respect, empathy, and admiration.

\*

During the final editorial work, one more burial took place.

Two lung transplants had extended years of life and love and work. But in September 2016, our friend and co-author Toke Sellner Reunert died from his congenital cystic fibrosis, at the age of 45. He knew that death would come; he wrote the songs and the speech for his own funeral. And he did not live to see the publication of this book.

We mourn the loss of a dear friend and a soaring spirit.

In loving memory –

*Tore and Jesper*



## Chapter 1 A Wealthy Merchant's Son (1893–1919)

*"Get out into the world and suffer a real blow, that might help."*  
(Frants Ferdinand Blom, around 1910).<sup>5</sup>

Copenhagen, Denmark, 1919. Frants Blom has left for Mexico, leaving a terrible void at Hotel d'Angleterre's famous Palm Court. "A little mournful sigh went through all the hearts of the young ladies at the Palm Court, as it was rumored that Frants Blom had left."<sup>6</sup>

What had happened? Why did he leave? What was he trying to escape? And was it true that he was shipped off to Mexico by his parents on a one-way ticket, tired as they were of his youthful, wasteful ways?

To answer these questions let us begin by going back to 1893, the year that Frants was born. Copenhagen is the expanding capital of a small and tranquil Scandinavian kingdom. The streets are bustling with horse-drawn streetcars and carriages; new buildings pop up everywhere. Electricity, telephones, elevators, and indoor plumbing are among the innovations that imbue the city with new energy. Expansion and progress are the order of the day; stucco and gold adorn the façades of the new office buildings, theaters, hotels and department stores. The first automobile arrives in Copenhagen in 1895, and the following year sees the first public show of the brand-new invention, motion pictures. These are Victorian times: fan palms, plaster statues, and heavy plush draperies adorn the cozy, wealthy bourgeois homes. But this is also a city of great social disparities, a changing city, on the threshold of a new century.

On August 9, 1893, Frants Ferdinand Blom is born into a wealthy bourgeois family of prosperous builders and businessmen. Frants (as his name is originally spelled) is the first child and only son born to Alfred Blom and his beautiful, young wife Dora.

Young Alfred Blom is still only a secretary with an insurance company when he marries Dora on May 20, 1892, in Copenhagen's most important church. But soon thereafter, he becomes a partner in his father-in-law's import company and joins the ranks of the city's most important merchants. Frants is born in 1893, his sisters Esther and Vera in, respectively, 1897 and 1898, and in the year 1900 the young family moves to an impressive and luxurious residence in the poshest part of town, near the mansions of the nobility and the royal palace of Amalienborg.

The Bloms were originally a family of builders who by their competence and diligence, two of the era's most highly rated qualities, had succeeded

Frants Ferdinand Blom, c. 1904.



in working their way up into the highest business bourgeoisie. The Bloms were not one of the ancient aristocratic families, nor did they belong to the well-established plutocracy or the old families of high-ranking government officials; they belonged to the era of industrialization, business, and modernity.

However, the royalty and aristocracy gradually opened up to the upcoming business bourgeoisie, and Frants's parents took great pleasure in attending the much-coveted, magnificent court balls. Indeed, Frants grew up at the very top of society, the upmost upper classes of the Danish capital. And Frants's mother had a predilection for culture. Dora Blom took her son to tea at the homes of writers, artists, and politicians, and great artists came to visit at the Blom residence. Many years later, when Frants had become Frans, and Blom the archaeologist was in the jungle of the Maya, he wrote (in English) this little recollection from his childhood:

I remember once, when I was quite a child, that mother and father had guests for dinner. Being a child, I was sent off to bed very early before the guests arrived, but it did stick in my mind that the guest of honour was a man who played the piano.

That was good warning for me, because I at that time hated any male or female who in any way was connected with a piano, because I was supposed to take piano lessons.

But when the guests came, my two sisters and I were there to be presented, and the piano man did not scare me at all. He was a little, short man under a huge mop of white hair. He was dressed in black and wore a funny black tie, and his wife was the sweetest looking old lady one could ever see. His name was Edvard Grieg, and it took many years before I realized what that stood for.

Meanwhile I shook hands and was sent off to bed, in my room which was just next to the family sitting room.

I was fast asleep when sweet music came to my drowsy mind. I awakened and crawled closer to my bedroom door. Then I turned the door handle and without a noise the door opened. I peeped in and saw the old white-mopped man playing the piano, and for the first time in my life a piano sounded good to me. But then the old lady got up and in an impatient way said: "Edvard, you never know how to play your own work! Let me play!"

So Madame Nina played. Gradually my door opened. The piano was close and I crawled under it. The music soared around me, and not appreciating that great moment I fell asleep.

Suddenly rude hands dragged me out from under the piano. I was scolded and on the verge of a spanking, when the old gentleman with the big mop of white hair came to my defence, saying:

"You must not treat him rough. He must like my music." That saved me from a spanking and may also be why I am a devotee of Grieg's music.<sup>7</sup>

The story of Frans Blom's Danish childhood and youth has, until now, been told as little more than a few anecdotes about his "wild" or "somewhat too merry" life as a young lounge lizard, leading to his being shipped off to Mexico by his family in 1919. These rather sparse anecdotes and even sparser data have been repeated again and again, in encyclopedias and works of reference, and in several Danish travel writers' descriptions from the 1950s of

this extraordinary adventurer and archaeologist in southern Mexico.

The present chapter, therefore, is the first to tell the full story of the wealthy merchant's son, Frants Ferdinand Blom. His family background, his childhood and youth, and the events leading up to his arrival in Mexico in 1919.



Alfred and Dora Blom, c. 1892.

Frants's father, Alfred Sigvard Blom (1863–1949), was a solid businessman with his father-in-law's company, but Frants's grandfather, Julius Andreas Blom (1815–1900), was better known in town. He had made his fortune in the lumber and construction businesses, and a street in one of Copenhagen's new working-class neighborhoods was named after him – a street where the Blom family owned a number of tenement buildings. Julius Blom himself lived with his family in a magnificent apartment near the royal palace, and his country retreat was the splendid Springforbi mansion north of town, wedged between the sea and the beautiful forest of Dyrehaven. Julius Blom owned a large collection of Danish art, he had enough silverware and china for 36 people,





Frants, Esther, Vera and their mother Dora Blom, c. 1901.

including the exquisite Flora Danica dinner-set, and “Blom’s Springforbi was rightly just as famous as his private wine cellar and his cigars, which were both second to none in Copenhagen.”<sup>8</sup> Among the guests who frequented the Bloms was the world-famous writer Hans Christian Andersen, “who told his fairy tales to the children of this home, where many artists and men of genius met with stock exchange magnates, officers, nobles, and diplomats. In short, here came everyone belonging to the grand and important families of Copenhagen.”<sup>9</sup>

Frants’s mother, Dora (Theodora Franciska Henriette) Blom (1872–1933) was said to be “one of the most beautiful young ladies in Copenhagen at the time.”<sup>10</sup> She was the daughter of merchant Heinrich Christian Petersen (1837–1909), who in turn was the son of a great merchant and shipowner in

Flensburg in Schleswig, whose ships sailed the Caribbean and went whaling near Greenland. Dora’s mother Franciska Fischer was born in Tilsit in what was then East Prussia (now part of Russia), the daughter of a wealthy grain dealer and windmill owner, and Dora’s grandmother was of the noble von Plehwe family who owned a large estate in East Prussia. H. C. Petersen founded his company of import and sale of agricultural machinery in 1870. Frants’s maternal grandfather was not only an accomplished businessman but also a well-read man who loved the accounts of the great explorers and had read to his children the books about Stanley and Livingstone.

On New Year’s Eve 1893, Alfred Blom joined his father-in-law’s company as a partner, since Dora’s two brothers had not shown the ability or the interest in taking over the company. This pattern was to repeat itself when Alfred Blom later had to find a successor to the family business, and his own impossible son was not an option.

In the winter months, Alfred and Dora Blom lived with their three children Frants, Esther, and Vera in a large, luxurious apartment just a few hundred yards from the royal palace. The family spent the summer months at their country house Sømmandshvile (Sailor’s Rest) in Rungsted north of Copenhagen. This country house had earlier been part of the Rungstedlund estate, birthplace of the world-famous writer Karen Blixen, author of *Out of Africa*, also known as Isak Dinesen. For many years, Alfred Blom rented Sømmandshvile from the Dinesen family; later he bought the house.

In a letter from 1907, Frants’s aunt Ellen describes how the two cousins Erik and Frants played together in the forests around Sømmandshvile: “Erik, it seems, must believe that he is in paradise. He and Frants are hard to locate in the forest at night, where they build huts with some other boys, equipped with cloaks and electric flashlights! And he dies quite in the fashion of an Indian.”<sup>11</sup> Walter Scott, Jules Verne, Rudyard Kipling, and James Fenimore Cooper’s novels about the Native Americans were among the books that Frants and other boys his age devoured with great enthusiasm.

One of the oft-repeated myths about Blom’s Danish childhood is that each of the main languages English, French, and German was spoken at home two days a week; only on Sundays were the children allowed to speak Danish. It sounds unlikely, though – rather like one of the tales that Blom later liked to have people believe. There was hardly a prohibition against speaking Danish in the family, but it is undoubtedly true that Frants and his sisters, besides perfect Danish, learned English, French, and German. Frants’s parents spoke all three languages fluently. The family at first had a French, later an English governess, and the family no doubt practiced conversation in the different languages at the dinner table. Knowledge of the principal languages was part of a general education, useful not only on holiday trips to the German spa towns, the Italian lakes, or the French Riviera, but also important for a young man’s future business career.

Blom’s English skills were of great use to him later in Mexico and the United States, and his knowledge of several languages undoubtedly made it easier for him to quickly learn Spanish as well. His admiring mother talks in a letter about his “uncommon talent for languages.”<sup>12</sup>

In March 1904, Frants’s parents decided to enroll him in the new and highly reputable Rungsted Boarding School north of Copenhagen, not far from the family’s country house. Eleven-year-old Frans started here after



Frants (in the center) among classmates, Rungsted Boarding School, 1905.

the summer vacation, in August 1904. It was a boarding school inspired by the English public schools, founded in 1900, where the sons of managing directors, factory owners, engineers, merchants, counts, and barons were taught according to modern pedagogical principles. Karen Blixen's brothers from nearby Rungstedlund also attended the school.

Frants was an intelligent boy but did not always concentrate in class. His grades were initially high, but in the course of his school years he lost some of his interest in school work. Later, in the jungles of Mexico, he recollected his school days: "I often wish that I had been more diligent in arithmetic class, or had listened more carefully to the mathematics lessons. The thing is that it is all amusing; it's just that there are many teachers who lack the ability to make it fun and lively for the pupils."<sup>13</sup>

Naturally, there were things to be seen and experienced outside the realm of the school and the walls of the classroom. In 1905, the great Colonial Exhibition was held in the Tivoli Gardens, the world-famous amusement park in the heart of Copenhagen, where "natives" from the Danish colonies – the Virgin Islands, Greenland, Iceland, and the Faroe Islands – were exhibited with their strange attire. Here, one could get a glimpse of genuine Caribbean "Negroes" from the Virgin Islands (among them two small children forcibly abducted from their families in order to be exhibited in Denmark), Inuit from Greenland with kayaks and stuffed polar bears, plus other exotic exhibits which certainly could pique the imagination of a boy like Frants Blom.

In 1906 the great "Danmark Expedition" was sent off to Greenland with a

lot of press attention. But it was to become a tragic journey. Frants Blom had just turned fifteen when the ship *Danmark* finally returned to Copenhagen with the survivors in August 1908. For not all came home alive. The three polar researchers – Ludvig Mylius-Erichsen, Niels Peter Høeg Hagen, and Jørgen Brønlund – had died in the ice from cold, starvation, and exhaustion in November 1907, while the other expedition members returned as heroes – young adventurous men who had devoted their lives to the exploration of North Greenland and the Arctic. This too was nourishment for boyhood dreams and the longing for the unknown.

While Frants attends school, his mother makes social calls and cultivates the capital's cultural and social life, while his father tends to business, goes to the stock exchange, and promenades in the afternoons. Alfred and Dora Blom attend the court balls at the royal palace of Amalienborg, receive invitations from nobles, or from foreign diplomats such as the Russian envoy, Prince Koudacheff. The beautiful and elegant Dora Blom, who in 1906 is given a pearl necklace by her parents worth 25,000 kroner at the time (around 240,000 U.S. dollars today), knows how to carry herself with grace. Aunt Ellen writes about a court ball in 1907: "it was a magnificent ball in the old King's palace, where we 600 guests dined and danced [...] I hardly understand how there can be so many presentable people in such a small town, for I don't think that I have ever seen so many people gathered at the same time. And by the way, I must say that I think Dora was the prettiest of them all, with the exception of Countess Raben, of course."<sup>14</sup>

Frants's diary from the winter 1907 and spring 1908 is preserved. He writes about anything and everything from life at school, about his classmates, his teachers, and his family. "Of my friends there are few whom I really care for, they are mostly so superficial."<sup>15</sup> And in general he seems to have a hard time with his peers. Not that there are many of the teachers that Frants likes either. The only teacher whom Frants is really fond of is the young Mr. Sørensen, who unfortunately leaves the school in the spring of 1908 to become a clergyman. Frants seems to form an even stronger bond with Mr. Sørensen after he has gone, as though it is easiest to cultivate the friendship at a distance, to relish the longing and loneliness. "I have received a letter from Mr. Sørensen. It is the best thing I know. Soon he will be my only friend." Already at this age, it seems that Blom is very much a loner by nature.

But the first romantic crush has hit him. "I was at a ball at Niels's house. There was Inger, with whom I am completely infatuated. She is also attending all the other three balls I am going to. I have been a little crazy in that regard for some time, and as long as the boys at school don't hear about it, all is well." And Frants dreams of Inger. "I really like her, she is sweet and lively, and you can talk to her about anything, we have quite a few interests in common. I wonder what she thinks of me?"

There are often lectures at school, concerts, readings by actors from the Royal Theater. Travelogues from distant countries also titillate Frants's imagination and urge to travel. A lecture by the widely traveled journalist and globe-trotter Holger Rosenberg on "The New Siberia" makes an impression on Frants: "Particularly his descriptions of a Russian hotel were very funny. The slides were quite excellent. [...] It must be wonderful to have traveled in Siberia, it seems to be extraordinarily beautiful."

Frants's uncle Ferdinand Blom was sent to Eastern Siberia by the Great

Northern Telegraph Company in 1870, in order to construct a telegraph station in Vladivostok. Ferdinand Blom bought the building materials in Shanghai, and when construction was finished, he went back to Shanghai and Japan to supervise the laying out of the telegraph cable. It must have ignited Frants's curiosity to hear his uncle tell stories about Siberia, Japan, and China. Steamship voyages, new railways, wide open spaces, and foreign peoples.

Periodically the boys get grades, and Frants's concern about doing well enough in the grade race takes up a good part of the diary. At the same time Frants writes in February 1908: "Mr. S. [Sørensen] spoke yesterday about the harmful effects of keeping a diary; he believed that one writes too much about one's good deeds, not the bad, and thereby one glorifies oneself. It makes one selfish, and I'm already exceedingly selfish; if only it made me better. Selfish and conceited I am, but with God's help, I shall get rid of my selfishness."

The accusations of selfishness do not seem to have the beneficial effect on Frants that the adults must have intended. Rather, he keeps to himself even more, broods over his confused adolescent feelings, and connects this possible selfishness with a good deal of self-hatred and insecurity that will follow him for the rest of his life. But at the same time, Frants displays his own will to judge what is right and wrong. The teacher's admonition not to write a diary, the boy writes down meticulously – in his diary.

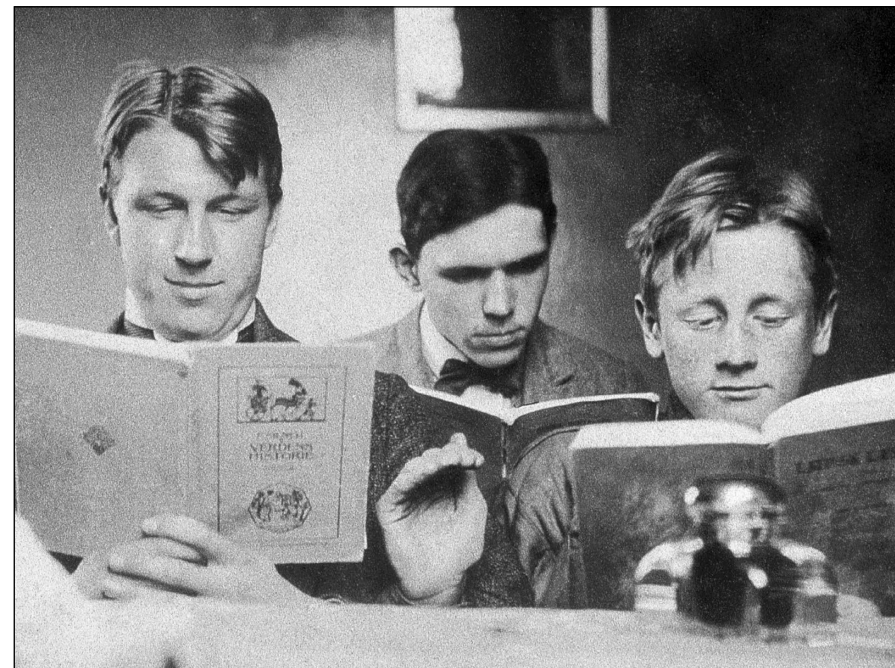
In 1908, Frants tries to find solace in religion. He begins to quote Christian hymns in his diary, and in May 1908 he writes: "Lately, I have gone around alone and thought about young people's relationship with each other. I have also thought about my own selfishness. But now I think that I have undergone a change." At this time Frants prepares for the Protestant confirmation, and he eagerly reads various Christian pamphlets and books. "Lately I have considered the idea of enlisting in the Y.M.C.A., I think I will talk to Father about it. On Monday I will go see the parson for the first time. I really want to have a *loyal* friend. I wonder if I could find one in the Y.M.C.A."

Can solace be found in Christianity? Is it here that Frants will find understanding and friendship?

In January 1908, Frants had bought the theologian Olfert Ricard's book *Ungdomsliv* (Youth). Ricard was an influential figure in the public debate, a pioneer of the Y.M.C.A. in Denmark and later a clergyman, and his book, which was published in 1905, had a tremendous outreach in Denmark – in Ricard's lifetime alone it appeared in no less than 123,000 copies (for a population of then 3 million people).

Among the important topics in the book is sexuality, or as it is called, "The struggle for *purity* in adolescence."<sup>16</sup> The fateful battle that every young man must fight. There is no other way than to resist temptation in any form. "The fight must be fought all the way through."<sup>17</sup> This is the consolation and explanation that the 14-year-old Frants and his peers are offered in their meeting with puberty and budding sexuality, no matter what direction that sexuality might take.

Adolescence was seen as an important but also dangerous transition period and maturation process for the children who had to learn to curb their yearnings and become good and useful citizens. The boys should become men (preferably businessmen), girls should become attractive young women who could make a good match and be wives and mothers. Adolescence was



"Hard work??" is Frants' own title for this photo of himself and two classmates, c. 1909–1910.

therefore a subject of special interest to the adults – parents, teachers, clergy – and not least the competing youth organizations who sought to influence the children in a beneficial direction.

In Frants's case, the Y.M.C.A. did not turn out to be the answer; a later addition in his diary shows that the religious flame only lasted briefly: "Well, fortunately that did not happen." And later, in the jungles of Mexico, Blom will clearly voice his abhorrence of Christianity and its institutions.

But there were other youth organizations that appealed to young people; and one of them was, as we shall see, of great importance to Frants.

We also know that around 1908–09 Frants seeks out the prominent Danish art historian Emil Hannover to get tuition. Here, there was a special bond between mother and son, Dora and Frants. It was she, his mother, who loved beauty, art, culture, and literature, and it was she who introduced him to these things. In a letter years later, the admiring mother writes about her son's "genius" and his "artistic blood."<sup>18</sup> Frants's father was the more prosaic businessman. "I certainly have many interests that only Frans shared with me," Dora wrote many years later.<sup>19</sup>

Dora's elder brother – Frants's uncle – was a gifted but wild, excessively thrifless and self-destructive painter under the pseudonym Willy Gretor (1868–1923), friend and enemy of writers such as Frank Wedekind, August Strindberg, and Knut Hamsun, and in the 1890s the center of a fashionable circle of artists and writers in Paris. Willy Gretor committed suicide in Copenhagen in 1923. Frants Blom's artistic vein and restless blood did not come from strangers.

Dora Blom took her three children to the cities of Gothenburg and

Stockholm in neighboring Sweden, where they visited the most important art museums, which made a great impression on fifteen-year-old Frants. "What I saw struck me deeply with a desire to learn about the artists who produced the sculptures and paintings I had seen," he said as an adult. "Back home again, I timidly composed a letter to the director of one of the leading Danish museums. I told him about my desire to study the history of art, asked him for his advice and a reading list. When the postman came to our country house I gave him the letter to mail. The postman left – and I became worried. I had imposed upon the time of a great and busy man. After a while I felt I had to intercept that letter – so I jumped my bicycle and raced to the railroad station five miles away. But as I drew up before the station – out of breath – I saw the mail train leave for the capital."<sup>20</sup> Perhaps the mature Blom, with his talent for storytelling, dramatizes things a bit. At any rate the fifteen-year-old Frants approached Emil Hannover, who at that time was curator at the Museum of Arts and Crafts. According to Blom's own recollection later on, Hannover received the art-loving boy very kindly, advised him, and introduced him not only to modern art, but also to Antiquity, from ancient Rome to Greece, Egypt, Assyria, and Babylonia. How much actual instruction it amounted to in all, we do not know, but in a newspaper interview in 1923 (just six months after Hannover's death), young Blom says: "He was my very best friend – and he had taught me what I left with."<sup>21</sup> Blom later wrote with pride in his resumé that he had studied art history with the famous Hannover, and Blom's interest in art and beauty would prove to be one of the major guiding stars in his life.

On October 4, 1908, Frants underwent Protestant confirmation in Hørsholm Church near the Blom country estate in Rungsted. The act of confirmation meant the transition from childhood to adolescence, although Frants and his peers, still schoolboys, continued to be subjected to adult supervision and discipline. There was a long way yet before they really became adults and could decide for themselves; full majority was not reached until the age of twenty-five. But outwardly at least, one could notice a visible change after the act of confirmation. Until then, boys wore blouses and knee pants; after that point, they were dressed like little gentlemen in jacket, vest, trousers, starched shirts, and loose cuffs. Elegantly they went to dances and the theater, posing as men of the world with pomaded hair and cigarette holders.

Frants was fifteen years old, and that very fall the handsome and charming boy supposedly impregnated a maidservant five years older than himself. This, at any rate, is what Blom's alleged grandson tells us.

In early August 1909, a baby boy was born on the island of Falster in Southern Denmark to a 21-year-old unmarried mother. The paternity was officially fastened on a worker from Copenhagen; but it was not uncommon that wealthy families thus paid their way out of the responsibility and scandal, by paying a young man who needed the money to assume the official paternity. The young woman who had ended up in this unfortunate situation had served at the estate of Gjedsergaard. We do not know if the fifteen-year-old Frants Blom visited Falster and Gjedsergaard in the fall of 1908, and we will never be able to get definite proof of whether he really was the child's father. We do know, however, that Frants's father was chairman of a business

company in the town of Nykøbing Falster just ten miles from Gjedsergaard; and Frants was to live and work in Nykøbing for quite a while a couple of years later. He may very well have visited Falster in 1908.

According to the illegitimate child's family, the boy was presented to Frants and his parents a few years later at the Blom country estate. The child was taken from his mother and grew up first with his maternal grandparents, later with his mother's older sister. As an adult, the man is said to have felt great bitterness against not only the mother he had not known as a child, but also against the famous Danish-Mexican archaeologist Frans Blom. Apparently, he reacted strongly and vehemently when Blom's name appeared in Danish newspapers and magazines.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, possibly, young Frants fathered a child just a week before his sixteenth birthday, in August 1909. He was still in high school.

It was at this time that he finally managed to find a youth movement where he felt at home, where he could give vent to his energy, maybe forget the forbidden desires and raging hormones. And where he did not feel so lonely. In 1908 Baden-Powell's influential book *Scouting for Boys* was published in the U.K., and it was not long before the scouting ideas came to Denmark. In November 1909, the first Danish scout patrol was formed at Gammel Hellerup high school just north of Copenhagen, and about the same time Frants Blom helped found a patrol at his own school, Rungsted Boarding School. Later, Blom remembered: "Never will I forget the day when my troop worked its way through a winter blizzard and was suddenly confronted with another group of scouts. That meeting did much to stimulate the movement in Denmark."<sup>23</sup>

Visionary and pedagogically interested principals such as the two from Rungsted and Gammel Hellerup perceived scouting as an excellent activity for school boys, in line with the discussion club, school orchestra, theater, lectures, football, sports, and the school library – and no doubt also as one of the assets which would make parents choose their particular school. Scouting soon became immensely popular among the young boys of the upper classes, who found in scouting an opportunity to act out some of their boyhood dreams, fueled by James Fennimore Cooper's novels about the heroic Pathfinder and Deerslayer and a life in harmony with nature.

It was all very new and untested. The first uniforms had to be imported from the U.K., and the eager boys and their teachers had to spell their way through Baden-Powell's book in English; the Danish edition (freely translated and adapted) was not published until August 1910, and in December 1910, the Danish Scout Corps was founded. Principal Skovgaard-Petersen from Rungsted Boarding School was – along with a number of other prominent pillars of society, cultural figures, and educationists – a member of the highest authority, the corps council.

Baden-Powell's purpose with the scouting movement was partly to strengthen the British Empire against internal and external enemies and to turn boys into strong young men – to counteract the softness and decadence of modern society and its lurking dangers such as tobacco and sexuality, by means of patriotism and sense of duty, outdoor life, and healthy interests. The same ideas prevailed in Denmark. The corps commander and the chairman of the corps council wrote in a joint letter to potential donors shortly after the formation: "The Scouting Corps has set forth the goal to educate the

rising generation in its civic obligations, to develop the boys' senses, their character and their body, as well as provide them with the moral qualities which characterize any good citizen."<sup>24</sup>

There was a strong element of conservative militarism in Baden-Powell's ideas, and the first Danish corps commander, Lieutenant Cay Lembcke, was a most nationalistic and militaristic man; he was later to found the Danish Nazi party in 1930. In contrast, principal Hartvig-Møller from Gammel Hellerup high school, who was one of the driving forces during the first years of the scouting movement in Denmark, tried to keep Danish scouting free from all political, military, and ecclesiastical interference, saying: "the most important thing is that the boys get a place where they can romp and frisk, and an environment where they can feel completely free and at home."<sup>25</sup>

Frants Blom found just such a sanctuary in the scouting movement, and later it proved to be of vital importance that he had learned from an early age to be out in the wild, to camp, and find his way in the woods. Not only did it equip him, from the moment he arrived in Mexico in 1919, to effortlessly swap his European upper-class lifestyle for strenuous expeditions in the mountains and jungles, but as a patrol leader and scoutmaster he had also learned to lead an expedition with natural authority. Therefore as an adult, he often wrote about scouting life and what it had taught him.

From an undated diary entry from around 1910 it appears that only as a scout – and in the company of the younger, admiring boys – did the insecure sixteen-year-old adolescent Frants feel truly happy. His relationship with his classmates was not good:

The only pleasure I have here is my work as a scout. I think that the six boys that I have under me have some confidence in me, and I will do everything to make them happy with me as their leader, so that my troop will not dissolve next year. I have a feeling that my classmates look at me and say, "What do you want here, you self-centered and unpleasant guy." They are probably right: self-centered, unpleasant, unfriendly, mischievous, conceited, it all applies to me.<sup>26</sup>

A patrol leader had to be fifteen years old and was given command of six or seven young boys. Addressed directly to the patrol leader, corps commander Lembcke writes: "You must therefore realize that a great responsibility rests upon you, that you must at all times be the one who leads and shows a good example, and you must make it a point of honor that your patrol shall be the best trained and shall consist of the best scouts for miles around. Throw yourself into the training with heart and soul. Do not demand more of your subordinates than you can do yourself, be patient, teach your boys to take everything in good spirit – and never forget that they are your comrades."<sup>27</sup> It was a lesson that Blom many years later, with varying degrees of success, tried to follow as an expedition leader in the jungle and as director of the Department of Middle American Research at Tulane University in New Orleans.

At school, things apparently did not go too well for the sensitive boy; he isolated himself increasingly from his peers. "The principal once told me that I would be lonely in life. I think that he's right. Friends here at school, I have none. Friends in general, none. The few that have made the attempt could not stand me in the long run. I can understand that! [...] I am so self-centered,

I love to tease others, but get offended and insulted when others tease me. I am very fond of commanding, of playing a big role. I'm somewhat too insignificant for that. I think that I would do most people a favor by quietly disappearing. Get out into the world and suffer a real blow, that *might* help.

"I wonder what the boys say about me. The principal is kind because he has to be, as long as I, for the time being, have not done anything wrong. I think that he looks down on me. Everybody does, except my family who has such a high opinion of their own Frants. If only they knew me! [...] My acquaintances in the last year have left a mark on me. I can feel it. The mark is not a good one. [...] No one understands me. Everyone despises me. With the very best reason. No, I will stand alone. Later, it may be hard, but then I must take the consequences. Dash it all."<sup>28</sup>

What is it that bothers him? What is it in himself that he cannot accept?

In the summer of 1911, Frants Blom graduated from Rungsted Boarding School. The examination result was reasonable but not flashy; he was right in the middle of his class, number five out of ten. The students were feted appropriately, and one of the fathers offered his yacht for a student tour on the Sound, where the frisky young men popped their champagne corks in the bright summer evening.

Now we would have expected Frants to enroll in university, perhaps study law like his father. But apparently he did not want to. Instead, he studied, according to his own accounts, partly trade, partly art history. Perhaps at this point Frants followed some of the famous philosophy professor Harald Høffding's lectures at the university, although he was not enrolled. Maybe he continued his private studies in art history. And there was also still time for his vocation as a scout.

On September 4, 1911, there was a great parade north of Copenhagen with four hundred Danish scouts. Baden-Powell himself, who after a holiday in Norway had visited the scouts in Kristiania (now Oslo) and Stockholm, continued to Denmark and inspected the Danish scouts. Thanks to Frants's good English skills he apparently had the great honor to be appointed as Baden-Powell's adjutant, and it was with pride that Blom later recalled the event: "Those three or four days were days of hero-worship for me. I actually felt hurt when he wanted to retire, and thus deprived me of his company."<sup>29</sup> That fall Frants, together with the other instructors from summer camp, was responsible for the formation of a scoutmasters' association. This was a protest against the militaristic corps commander Lembcke, whose leadership had created discontentment among the young scoutmasters.

In 1911–12, we find Frants on the island of Falster in Southern Denmark, where he belongs to the local scout patrol in the town of Nykøbing Falster, and he is among the very first Danes to be awarded the prestigious Silver Wolf "for excellent scouting."<sup>30</sup> As mentioned earlier, he lived this winter in Nykøbing, probably in trade apprenticeship with one of his father's business connections. Alfred Blom was chairman of a machine business in Nykøbing Falster, and it was no doubt here that young Frants was put to work since he wouldn't enroll at the university immediately. It is also in Nykøbing Falster that he is photographed as a young student in December 1911.

It was near Nykøbing, at the estate of Gjedsergaard, that Frans may have fathered a child in 1909. And now, two years later, the handsome young man



Frants Blom, December 1911.

experiences yet another love story.

“Do you remember?” he wrote 30 years later, thinking of his young love, Ellen. “We were kids and we did not think of the future. Do you remember that little Nykøbing was gossiping?” Apparently they had unexpectedly met again, and he is trying to write a letter to her in his old language, Danish. He stops however, switches into English, and continues with something that is more a recollection sketch than a letter – and which was never sent. “Nykøbing. There we met. There we had our youthful love. We disregarded the narrow-minded community. We spent days together, and we went to the picture show together. We had drinks together and we danced together. But we never became intimate physically. Gossip did us plenty of dirty tricks.”<sup>31</sup>

In August 1913, Frants attended a large English scout camp in Belgium, on the beach at the coast near Ostend. After Frants’s work as an interpreter and adjutant for Baden-Powell during his visit to Denmark, the young Dane with the excellent language skills had been invited as an interpreter and liaison at this Anglo-Belgian scout camp. In the summer of 1913, during the trip to Belgium, twenty-year-old Frants also visits the Royal Library in Brussels, where he studies medieval manuscripts with great interest and reproduces in neat little watercolors some of the miniature paintings from the old manuscripts. His beautiful little notebook from this summer’s studies at the library in Brussels is now at the University of California, Berkeley.

In December 1913, a young English scout from Windsor writes to the Danish Scout Corps: “Last August I met a Danish Scoutmaster at a large English camp at Nieuport, Belgium. His name was F. Blom, and he then resided at Brussels. Since then he has moved to England. I should be very pleased if you could aid me in locating his address, as I want to renew our acquaintance.”<sup>32</sup> So we know that Frants is living in England in the fall of 1913, but we do not know whether he is studying art history or trade. The notebook from Brussels shows that it is art and beauty that attract the young man above all, but despite his family’s expectations it seems that Frants has still not decided on an actual field of study or career.

The decision will be conveniently deferred for a while, since in the spring of 1914 it is time for Frants to do his military service. His position is indicated as “clerk,” so he probably continued to work at an office in a trading company with one of his father’s acquaintances and business associates. Frants is noted to be of medium growth, with blue eyes and light blond hair.<sup>33</sup> Blom’s American naturalization papers later give his height as five feet nine inches.<sup>34</sup>

Conscript no. 5098 Frants Ferdinand Blom met for service in the Navy barracks at Holmen in Copenhagen on April 15, 1914, and after less than two weeks he embarked on his first expedition with the cruiser Hejmdal – a grand voyage since Hejmdal had the honor to serve as escort ship for the royal yacht Dannebrog on the royal couple’s voyage to England, France, and the Netherlands.

In May and June, the cadets and conscripts were trained on the cruiser in the inner Danish waters, learning the disciplines of shooting, fencing, swimming, rowing, and torpedo shooting. In July, they went south to Gibraltar and Málaga, from there up to Scotland and the Faroe Islands, and then back to Denmark.

But in the meantime, crucial events had taken place in Europe. There had long been tensions in the Balkans, where the competing interests of the Great



Frans and "the cobbler" on the cruiser Hejmdal, 1914–1915.

Powers collided. On June 28, 1914, the Austro-Hungarian heir presumptive Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo, and a month later Austria-Hungary declared war against Serbia. In early August, the World War was a reality when Germany declared war on Russia and France, and the United Kingdom in turn declared war on Germany.

Denmark was neutral during the war, but the fear of a German invasion was great, and training ammunition was replaced with live ammunition so that the Danish fleet could take action against any violation of neutrality. The Danish straits of Øresund, Lillebælt, and Storebælt were international straits which formed the gateway to the Baltic Sea, and sounds and straits were blocked with mines at Germany's insistence. The mines had to be guarded, and during the war this occupied most of the Danish fleet.

Frans aboard the cruiser Hejmdal, 1914–1915.

On March 25, 1915, Frants's time at sea was over; the rest of his navy service took place in the barracks at Holmen, where he served as a clerk at the radio station, and after eighteen months in the navy, he was discharged on October 22, 1915. The assessment from the barrack service only says "Able and reliable," but for his time on board Hejmdal: "Very able and reliable, both for deck service and office work. Lively and interesting."<sup>35</sup> The refreshing life at sea was clearly more appealing to Frants than life in the barracks and office work as a clerk.

After his military service, Frants finally decided to enroll at the University of Copenhagen. He began in January 1916 at an age where his old high school friends already approached the end of their studies, and he had now chosen his field of study, namely art history – not exactly a study aimed at the trading business. But first he had to take the philosophical examination, which at that time was mandatory as the first exam for all university students. Later, Blom prided himself on having studied philosophy under the internationally renowned professor Harald Høffding. This is evidenced by his own resumé, and has been repeated numerous times. But it is not true. It is a later invention, made to cover up his quite deficient academic education.

Of course it is not impossible that Frants out of pure interest attended some lectures by the legendary Høffding while he still taught, together perhaps with classmates who had already enrolled at university in 1911, for several of Frants's schoolmates were in Høffding's class. If Frants did attend a couple of times, he can just barely justify his claim to have studied under Høffding – while it is pure fiction when he claims to be the "last pupil to be examined by Harold Hoefding [sic] before he retired."<sup>36</sup>

For when Frants finally enrolled at the university in January 1916, Høffding had recently stopped teaching. And it was consequently another professor, Starcke, who examined Frants on May 25, 1916. Frants was at the very bottom of his class. The grade corresponds to a D according to U.S. grading.<sup>37</sup> Thus, Frants just barely passed his philosophy exam and received what was then the lowest academic title, cand. phil. Thereafter he seems, after only one semester, to have given up his studies and dropped out of university altogether.

It was around this time that young Frants Ferdinand Blom changed his first name. Sharing the name of the assassinated Austro-Hungarian heir presumptive was perhaps a bit of a nuisance during the war, and especially the German-sounding "Frants" seems to have vexed him. In the photo album from his time in the Navy, he in one place writes the more neutral "F. Blom." In official documents he still appeared as Frants Ferdinand Blom and he did not officially change his name. But around this time he began calling himself "Frans." And so will we, from this point on.

How Frans Blom otherwise spent these youthful years cannot be followed in detail. When he later describes his own education, he mentions: "Trade education in Germany and Belgium; Art studies under Emil Hannover."<sup>38</sup> In other documents, he lists the city names Brussels, Berlin, Paris, and London. As mentioned, we know that Frans looked at medieval manuscripts in Brussels in the summer of 1913. But whether he really studied trade or art in Berlin, Paris, and London – or was just there on holiday visits – we do not know exactly. In Berlin he claims to have studied under the renowned German art

historians Max Friedländer and Wilhelm Bode.<sup>39</sup> Whether this was more than a meeting at their office or perhaps a personal guided tour remains unclear. Frans was good at getting his resumé to look impressive. A brief list of Blom's biographical data, compiled shortly after his death based on his own information, states: "Studied History of Art in Denmark, Germany, Belgium, Holland, France and Italy."<sup>40</sup> Some of these so-called "studies" may just have been ordinary tourist visits to some of Europe's leading art museums until the First World War put an end to his many travels.

In 1914, we also know that Frans was fascinated by an exhibition of Chinese arts and crafts at the Art Academy in Stockholm. Here Frans says that he "was confronted with an artistic expression of vitality and power"; this is the first time it occurs to him that there are ancient cultures outside of our own civilization with artistic and aesthetic creations of the highest value. "That was an awakening that stirred my imagination towards a broader curiosity about the comparative civilization of peoples, near and far; recent or remote in time."<sup>41</sup>

But where Frans "studied" most during these years seems to have been with the other young sons of wealthy barons, counts, and merchants in the Hotel d'Angleterre's famous Palm Court, refurbished in 1916, "a true palm tree orchard in a golden and elegant frame."<sup>42</sup>

One of the most famous journalists of the time, Christian Houmark, wrote in the newspaper *B.T.* on September 12, 1923: "A little mournful sigh went through all the hearts of the young ladies at the Palm Court, as it was rumored that Frans Blom had left. He was so faithful to his tea dance, he danced so ravishingly, they said, and there was something so exciting about him. Adventure lay in his blue eyes. [...] Many eyes looked longingly towards his empty seat. Would he not one day turn up just as suddenly as he had disappeared? That would be typical of him – but he did not show up ... For many long years, he remained absent."<sup>43</sup>

During the Great War, Denmark remained neutral. Huge fortunes were made at the Stock Exchange, and the nightlife of Copenhagen resounded with music, dancing, and popping champagne corks. Tango, the new dance, had aroused a sensation in Paris in 1913 and had rapidly spread to Copenhagen, and the Palm Court was teeming with hedonistic young men who strenuously tried to spend what their fathers had earned at the Stock Exchange.

Meanwhile, Frans's parents, and perhaps especially his uncle and aunt went to great lengths to make a good impression in the finest circles, hoping to get their children married well. One of the purposes of the great balls and dances was to get your offspring married, to create suitable alliances between wealth and gentility. But social life was expensive, new dresses for the lady of the house and her daughters had to be purchased, and it was hard for the new business bourgeoisie to live up to the great financial magnates and the old aristocracy. Aunt Ellen wrote: "Remember, we are not rich, we only imagine ourselves to be rich these days, I think."<sup>44</sup> A Danish writer famous for his portrayal of the Victorian age, Otto Rung, made the same point: "We were hardly well-to-do. But everyone of the finer segment of that era found themselves forced to live far beyond their means."<sup>45</sup> Court dances and the balls of the nobility were necessary, however. It was important also for the Bloms to appear at the right places, especially so their children could marry well – so that the daughters could perhaps even get married into the nobility.



Ferdinand and Ellen Blom succeeded in getting their daughter married to a young baron, Wedell-Wedellsborg. Alfred and Dora had Esther married to a solid young lawyer, while Vera was matched with a finance-heir and estate owner.

And what about Frans? Could he not have had a young countess or baroness, although he was not a nobleman himself? Perhaps. If he had attended his studies seriously, had had an education and led the family business on to new growth and expansion. The cheerful life at the Palm Court was not recommendation enough when it came to finding a suitable wife.

Otherwise, Alfred Blom was at the peak of his power. Business went swimmingly, assets grew, and from 1914 he was even co-owner of the manor of Nørlund in northern Jutland, a magnificent Renaissance castle from 1597, which the Bloms could now use as a holiday home, surrounded by the vast forests where Frans and his father went hunting. This pastime, the love of hunting, had long been the one true bond between father and son.

In 1915, Alfred Blom also bought the country house Sømmandshvile, which the family had only rented until now. And at the impressive Nørlund castle, Alfred and Dora Blom celebrated their silver wedding anniversary with a grand dinner on May 20, 1917, surrounded by the bright green foliage of spring's new-leaved beech trees. The future looked bright, and perhaps 23-year-old Frans could still be persuaded to pull himself together and enter the family business.

According to the historian Robert Brunhouse, Frans ran an antiques business for a while but without success; he even accumulated a loss that his father had to cover.<sup>46</sup> We know that Frans's school friend Eddie Salicath had an art and antiques business at this time, and Frans may have been his business partner. It also seems that he dipped into the oil trade a bit. Shortly after his arrival in Mexico when he was still trying to find work, he wrote from Mexico City in July 1919: "I'll probably enter 'the oil game,' but it is indeed quite different here than oil trading back home in Denmark. The little I know of that matter, I will not need much."<sup>47</sup>

And apparently, he did not succeed in either art or oil. One can almost hear the deliberation between Alfred and Dora. What should we do with Frans? How can we put him on the right course? How can we keep him away from the expensive shops and from roaming the Palm Court at d'Angleterre?

Initially, Frans is sent to Stockholm, but the stay does not have the desired effect. Many years later, in the notes for a lecture on his youth and his way into archaeology, Frans mentions the bar at the Palace Hotel in Stockholm – and it was probably there, in the bar, that he spent a great deal of his time in the spring of 1918.

Frans had already traveled to Sweden several times in 1916 and 1917, presumably to work for his father's business associates, and he wrote about his stay in Stockholm in 1918 that he was "assigned to Stockholm" to work. However, he still spent a great deal of his time consorting with the young, rich, and attractive – among others a young Swedish Count Hamilton who took him to the painter Anders Zorn's studio. Zorn was undisputedly Sweden's greatest, most technically brilliant painter at this time. In the studio they surprised "the Master" in the company of two naked models, five long-stemmed glasses, and two bottles of champagne, and Frans questioned the



Serge Koudacheff, Frans Blom, Myra Koudacheff and Hugh Tennant in the Stockholm archipelago, summer 1918.

famous painter about his paintings, technique and style. "To me his words and movements were a lesson to any person who wanted to learn the technique and the mastery of painting. Furiously he would work, and then there was a rest pause for the models during which we had a drink of champagne. [...] Imagine what such a contact would mean to a youngster keyed up with desire to see and to learn."<sup>48</sup> During his stay, Frans visited Zorn's studio several times to watch the master at work.

And in Stockholm Frans also met two persons who both made an indelible impression on him – the young British diplomat Hugh Tennant and the 22-year-old Russian Princess Myra Koudacheff.

Myra remembered it 65 years later as if she had possibly first met Frans at a dance at the residence of the Danish ambassador in Petrograd (now St. Petersburg) in 1916, that is, before the Russian Revolution.<sup>49</sup> But there is no evidence that Frans has ever been to Russia. Later on, Frans Blom on several occasions listed the many European countries he visited on his travels when he was young, but he never mentions Russia. There are no photos of Russia in his photo albums. And neither a thorough review of the papers of the Danish Petrograd Embassy in the National Archives in Copenhagen nor a request to the Russian State Historical Archive in St. Petersburg has revealed the name Frans Blom, which would have been expected, since national police (not least during the First World War) kept an accurate index of admitted foreigners. The National Archives in Stockholm, for example, provide us with detailed dates of Frans's many visits to Sweden. There is nothing to suggest that Frans has ever been in Petrograd. Is it far more likely that the old lady's memory was at fault and that in fact she and Frans first met in Stockholm where Myra and her family had fled after the revolution in 1917. Frans spent most of 1918

in Stockholm, and it must have been here that Myra and Frans danced and flirted with each other.

Myra (pronounced, and sometimes spelled, Mira) was born in 1896. She was the daughter of Prince Sergei Vladimirovich Kudashev (in the West known as Serge Koudacheff) and his wife Vera Maximiliovna, of the Swedish-Russian noble lineage Nieroth. Myra's mother was reportedly dazzlingly beautiful, and Myra herself was known for her beauty, her humor, her brilliance, and wit. A relative, Prince Ivan Koudacheff, had been Russian envoy to Copenhagen, where Frans's parents had attended a costume ball at his residence. Already in the spring of 1917, after the February Revolution and the fall of the Empire, Myra, her parents and her brother Serge had fled to Sweden via Finland. At first, they stayed at the Grand Hotel in Stockholm, later in a huge luxury villa in Saltsjöbaden, a fashionable seaside resort in the archipelago outside Stockholm.

Hugh Vincent Tennant was born in 1891. He was a gentle young man from the English upper classes, interested in the arts, music, and drama, educated at Harrow and Cambridge. Both his brothers were killed in the First World War. Hugh himself was gassed in the trenches in France and discharged in 1917. That same year he became a secretary in the British Foreign Office, and beginning in February 1918, he was a temporary secretary at the British

Embassy in Petrograd. On his way there, he put himself up at the Grand Hotel in Stockholm. He returned to Stockholm in the summer of 1918, and it must have been there that he met Myra and Frans.

Myra remembered Frans "for his charm and cheerfulness and also for being a very resourceful sailor. At times he could be obstinate and occasionally a certain loneliness would descend upon him. Myra and he talked together in English, and she often wondered what he was doing in Copenhagen, since he talked little about himself."<sup>50</sup>

Holiday pictures from the summer of 1918 show Myra, Hugh, and Frans together with Myra's brother and a Russian Prince Galitzin boating in the archipelago of Stockholm. Frans kept one of these photos to his dying day, no matter how many of his personal belongings would later vanish when he lost



Hugh Tennant in his uniform, c. 1916. On the verso is written: "Mr. Hugh had this taken just before he went out, and we think it very good."



Frans and Hugh, 1918.

nearly everything in New Orleans. It is a tiny picture showing Frans and Hugh in light summer outfits, casually lying next to each other on the deck of a small sailboat.

The picture exudes holiday idyll and close friendship – and perhaps a bit more than that. Perhaps. The American film director Jaime Kibben who researched Frans Blom's life meticulously for more than fifteen years and who was the only one to have interviewed both of Frans's wives, believed that in 1918, Frans fell in love with not one, but two people at the same time. Myra and Hugh.

It is surely not impossible that what happened between Frans and Hugh that summer in Stockholm was deeper than just an ordinary friendship. However, Frans was certainly also interested in women. He had possibly already fathered a child out of wedlock at the age of fifteen. Later, there were several other women, native girls in the jungle, hookers in the oil towns, prostitutes and society women in New Orleans. Not until 1932 did Frans finally marry; he was then 38, his young bride Mary was 19. Almost 60 years later the distinguished old woman confided in a whisper to Jaime Kibben that Frans, in her opinion, was bisexual. "He certainly had enough of *them* hanging around," she said – referring to the artist types and bohemian friends with whom Frans surrounded himself, and who may have been wider in their sexual orientation than convention allowed at the time. In any case, Frans kept that little photo of Hugh and himself throughout his life, and many years after Frans's death it was given to Jaime Kibben by Frans's second wife, Trudi. "Take it!" she said. "You may know what it means."<sup>51</sup>

We cannot know exactly what that picture means and what Frans and Hugh shared. A platonic infatuation? A short, intense love affair? Or just a

deep friendship?

According to Kibben, Frans's first wife, Mary, said that Frans had to leave Denmark because of a "homosexual affair." When Kibben objected that the established view was that Frans had to leave because of his "wild life" as a playboy, courted by a swarm of women, Mary replied that those affairs would have *annoyed* Frans's father, but would not have been truly *embarrassing* – as was the case with the love for another young man.

Six months after his arrival in Mexico, Frans describes himself as a young man who "does not for certain reasons want to tell too much about his past."<sup>52</sup> We just don't know exactly *what* reasons.

Frans stayed in Stockholm from March to November 1918 with another short visit there in December. And it must have been that fall that Frans proposed to Myra.

Myra Koudacheff respectfully declined Frans's marriage proposal. A handsome and charming Danish playboy without any education or career was not an entirely appropriate match for a Russian princess. And perhaps she simply did not share his ardent feelings. Instead, Myra married the American diplomat Norman Armour, who worked at the U.S. Embassy in Petrograd during the turbulent years from 1916 to 1918. Armour had helped Myra and her family flee to Sweden, earning him a month's detention by the revolution government. He escaped to Sweden, however, disguised as a Norwegian courier, and in 1919 he and Myra married.

Frans met Myra and her husband again in December 1923 in Washington, D.C., where he was invited for tea and dinner, talked about his experiences in Mexico, and showed the Armours moving pictures of various Mexican ruins. Later, in 1935, when Frans was Head of Department at Tulane University in New Orleans and Norman Armour was American Envoy to Haiti, Frans renewed contact in a few letters. At that time Frans had married a coveted young heiress, so he could show Myra with pride and self-confidence that he had done well after all. However, they never met again. Myra Armour lived to be a very old woman, residing for the last many years in a luxury apartment on Fifth Avenue in New York City, where the former Russian princess died in 1990.

Hugh Tennant, on the contrary, never married. In 1919, he was appointed secretary at the British Embassy in Washington, D.C., where he might have met Frans again in 1923–24. He resigned from the Foreign Service in 1924, and in September 1925, he became private secretary to the director of the British-owned mining company Rio Tinto in Spain. His health had been delicate ever since the war. His parents' only surviving son, he died of pneumonia on May 22, 1927, at the age of 35.

Frans's proposal to Myra in the fall of 1918 was perhaps due to a certain pressure and expectations from his family's side. Both his sisters had married well; only he remained. But it may also have been a way to stop any speculation about his close friendship with Hugh.

In March 1918, Frans's oldest sister Esther had married the young lawyer Jørgen Kiær. And just as Alfred Blom in his day had joined the family business as the serious son-in-law, it was now Jørgen Kiær who came to the company's rescue, as the family's own son had shown no interest or ability to lead the company forward.

In August 1918, the youngest sister Vera married Sigurd Andersen, who owned the impressive manor house Oxholm in Northern Jutland. Andersen was born in Bangkok, the son of H. N. Andersen, one of Denmark's wealthiest, most powerful men and founder of the East Asian Company, at one point Denmark's most important business. The marriage between Sigurd and Vera was not happy, however; she left Oxholm in February 1943 and moved to Copenhagen alone.

And what about Frans? Art history, business studies, antiquities, and oil trading. None of it really caught on, there was no field where Frans persisted. In February 1919, he then sailed off to Mexico, of all places. Was he sent away by his family? Was he expected to return home as a mature and focused grown-up? Was it because he had become, as he said, "the black sheep of his domestic circles"?<sup>53</sup> Or did he simply want to get out and try something else?

Frans once expressed the desire to "get out into the world and suffer a real blow." Maybe that is what it takes. But is there an explanation other than just his "too wild life"? Is it also his reluctance to follow the beaten track, study law like his father, join the family business, end his days as a well-nourished businessman? Is it the boyhood dreams about foreign countries and peoples, Siberia, America, the "savages" on display in Tivoli and the zoo? Is it the longing for another, larger life outside the narrow circles of Copenhagen and the solid mahogany desk at the office?

Frans was not the only one who rebelled, or longed to travel in these years. The Great War had caused a collapse of the old social structure; for many young men, the established values had to be rejected and new ones set instead. To replace the tight leash of bourgeois society there was the temptation of freedom in the wilderness, in foreign lands, or deep inside one's own soul. "And why do we still seek out new heights, sunsets and campfires?" asks the Danish explorer Henning Haslund-Christensen, who explored Mongolia in the 1920s and 30s: "It is not to win glory and easily found riches, because out there not even a reassuring pension awaits you. But if you ascend the right peaks, if you see with the right eyes, and listen to the right tones, then you have a chance to win your own lucky stone."<sup>54</sup>

When Frans returned from Stockholm in December 1918, he had one or maybe two recently wrecked love affairs behind him. Hugh had traveled to Petrograd to work at the embassy, Myra had rejected his proposal. Frans had long since given up on university after having almost failed, and whatever else he had touched of the oil and art trade had also failed. His stay in Stockholm had been spent with expensive sociability, champagne, and socializing with artists instead of serious work. Now Alfred Blom had had enough, and Frans no doubt felt the same way. Somewhere, there had to be something he was good at. Somewhere, there had to be something greater and more exciting waiting for him than the desk at the office and the fashionable idleness of the cafés.

"Why did you leave?" asked the journalist Christian Houmark in 1923, when he interviewed Frans at the old hunting grounds, in a corner of the Palm Court.

"Because I was nothing and because I said to myself that if this should not go on, then I had to break it off. I was going astray, and that's no good."

"Did you not do anything here at home?"

"Well ... not particularly... nothing to brag about."

But why did he choose Mexico of all places? He did not know anyone in the country, could not speak the language, had no recommendations, no job waiting for him. In the interview with Houmark, Frans explains: “Well, in the States, there was nothing to do. All the soldiers began to come home from the War. [...] And why shouldn’t Mexico be just as good as any other country. In any case it was unknown territory for me, and that was what I longed for.”<sup>55</sup>

On February 6, 1919 the twin-screw steamer United States sailed out of Copenhagen harbor. Twenty-five-year-old Frans Blom was comfortably accommodated in first class; his parents had paid for the ticket. Frans was finally on his way to a new life.



## Chapter 2 Revolution and Rebels (1919)

*“One time I had five days to find out if I was going to be shot or not.”*  
(Frans Blom, 1919).<sup>56</sup>

“The journey from Veracruz has been the peak of the adventure,” Frans wrote to his mother in his first letter from Mexico when he was settled in at the Hotel Cosmos in Mexico City, on March 25, 1919.<sup>57</sup> The peak of the adventure – an adventure that began when he left Copenhagen with the Atlantic steamer to New York, but which became definitely more colorful when the ship aptly named S.S. Mexico took Frans south to Charleston, Havana, and Veracruz.

“Traveling is the most delightful thing that exists,” Frans wrote home enthusiastically. And though he was accustomed to travel, nothing in his cultured childhood home or on his business and educational travels in Europe could have prepared him for this – a vast, unknown country on the other side of the world. An unknown language, Spanish, of which he understood at most a few words. And not only that: a country ravaged by civil war. The revolution in 1910 had thrown Mexico into a long and bloody fight between rebels and rapidly changing governments. The civil war, still raging, had devastated Mexico’s economy and cost at least one million lives. As Blom said many years later in a radio talk to Danish listeners: “No man in his right mind went to Mexico then. Either you were shot or you died from malaria.”<sup>58</sup>

What did he want here, the elegant young man from Copenhagen with his expensive habits? One possible answer is: oil and trade. Another is: adventure itself.

The great voyages of discovery were barely over, the exploration of the world barely completed. In 1919 it was only ten years since Peary had allegedly reached the North Pole, and eight since Amundsen had set foot on the South

Pole. And although Mexico had been “discovered” by Europeans 400 years before Frans Blom got there, there were still large parts of the country which remained unexplored. The great forests, the tropical jungles, were largely still blank spots on the map, and fate would have it that Frans was about to become one of the last explorers, when as an oil scout and archaeologist he mapped the unknown parts of the jungle.

He did not know this when he disembarked in Veracruz, and everything was still just an adventure. But he knew that he had begun a new chapter of his life, far from his home country, in a foreign world. In the beginning, he mustered no great understanding of the culture he entered, or the foreign peoples he encountered. Frans Blom, who would later become a strong defender of the rights of native Mexicans, may at first have appeared almost racist in his opinions, but we have to understand that this was something innate in his background and culture. This is how a young European greeted the world in 1919. To him it was all just an exotic adventure.

Frans had arrived in New York, in first class, on February 19. On March 1, the S.S. Mexico departed bound for Veracruz via Charleston and Havana, and this time there was no single cabin for young Blom. The money from home had to last until he found a job, so he was forced into a culture clash right from the beginning.

“Well, I am always lucky,” he writes sarcastically to his eldest sister, Esther, “I share a cabin with a small toreador-type, a doctor from Veracruz. He is exuberantly loveable, but has two flaws. One is mandolins and banjos, the other cocks.” Frans was supposed to have the top bunk, but it was already full of various stringed instruments, as well as two tall wooden crates, which (when he managed to fight his way to them) turned out to contain no less than a big beautiful fighting cock each. “After some palaver, I have had the chicken yard moved out into the hallway outside the cabin and the little Mexican is very pleased that I bring lettuce for the animals after every meal.” Later, Frans describes how the Mexican in the other bunk plays and sings long soulful love songs, while the crowing cocks chip in with a kind of chorus.<sup>59</sup> Frans calls the ship a “Noah’s Ark,” not only on account of the fighting cocks, but also due to the strange people, Mexicans and Cubans. Short, large-breasted women with their throng of children, “men who play dominoes, and lots of jet-black (that is, hair and eyes) kids are making a hell of a racket while their parents sit peacefully and think their brats are wonderful.” How long the journey will take is not certain, but he must reckon with about three weeks in all. “Nothing is urgent, we are now dealing with Spaniards – if we don’t make it tomorrow, well, then in any case it will be at some point in the course of the month.”

On Friday, March 21, 1919 in the morning, Frans Blom arrived at Mexico’s main port Veracruz. It is a moist, hot, tropical city by the Gulf of Mexico, founded by the conqueror Hernán Cortés 400 years earlier, on Good Friday 1519, when he took Mexico into possession in the name of the Spanish king.

Ever since, Veracruz (the “True Cross”) has been the gateway to Mexico, but in 1919 the grandeur of the colonial period had faded, and Frans’s first sight of Mexico did not impress him: “The town is small, built on sand banks. All the houses give a very decrepit impression, they are also very badly kept. Here and there a palm tree, gray and dusty. [...] The hotel? Well, a dirty box.” But the central plaza just passes muster:

In front of the hotel lies the Plaza. It was the only well-kept thing in the entire city, with the loveliest flowers and palm trees. Everywhere along the sidewalks, Indians are sitting selling fruits, cigarettes, candied oranges and tomatoes, small baskets and newspapers, and as soon as you sit down at a table in a sidewalk café, you will be attacked by an army of dirty little Mexican boys who want to polish your boots. If you say no, they will provide their opinion about the nature and state of your footwear.

This is the country that Frans now has to live in. Here he has to find a job, make a career, so he can return victoriously and show his family what he is worth. "There are opportunities in this country," he writes home. This is Mexico.

The next day, he heads from Veracruz westward over the mountains to the capital, the same way that the Spanish conquistadors advanced 400 years earlier. The train was scheduled to leave on Saturday morning at half past five. Frans was already at the station at four forty-five, and barely got room for himself and his luggage. It was still dark, and in the early morning the station was full of armed men. The train had to have armed protection to make the trip over the mountains: "It did not take long before I discovered that on the train we had three cars with soldiers. Well, call them soldiers – they are almost a bunch of dirty robbers, armed to the teeth. We left precisely on time, and the train was packed. Every fifteen minutes, we passed a fortified blockhouse – the garrison of robbers stood parading in front. It sometimes happens that the train is retained by bandits." Indeed, the civil war is still not over.

In September 1910, Mexico celebrated the centennial anniversary of the beginning of the war of independence against Spain, and Mexico's eighty-year old dictatorial president Porfirio Díaz took the opportunity to be feted as the father of the country. The anniversary celebrations were so grandiose that they cost more than the annual education budget in a country where illiteracy was at 77%. In fact, there was little to celebrate.

Mexico was in a difficult situation, for admittedly industry and exports had increased over the past three decades, but the population had also increased explosively – almost doubled in the same period – and there were enormous social inequalities. Economic growth had only increased the disparity between rich and poor, and labor conditions, particularly in the large haciendas, underlay the social conflicts leading to revolution and civil war.

General Porfirio Díaz became president for the first time in 1876. According to the constitution, he could not hold his seat as president two terms in a row, and therefore he stepped down in 1880. Nonetheless, Díaz retained power behind the scenes and allowed himself to be re-elected in 1884. Then he changed the constitution and succeeded in remaining president until 1911.

Díaz's 35 years in power are called "El Porfiriato." Díaz was a mestizo (mixed Spanish and indigenous), the son of poor innkeepers, but with fierce willpower and self-discipline he had fought his way up to the rank of general, and it was certainly not the interests of the native rural population that he intended to protect. During Díaz's reign, economic growth and modernization

went hand in hand with growing dictatorial power. The political system was paralyzed, freedom of press curbed, and the opposition persecuted. The country's ruling elite, however, was satisfied with the modernization of industry, economic efficiency, and good earnings.

Nevertheless, foreign interests in particular were behind the industrial expansion. Many coffee, cocoa, and sugar plantations were in German, Spanish, and French hands. Banks, mines, railways, and oil fields were owned by the British and Americans.

"Order and progress" was Díaz's motto, and he was admired in the U.S. and Europe for his policy: peace, stability, and economic growth. U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt called him the "greatest statesman now living,"<sup>60</sup> and even the most colonialist Britons wholeheartedly accepted Díaz despite his indigenous blood; they described the industry-friendly dictator as "having the soul of a white man under his brown skin."<sup>61</sup>

During Díaz's reign, the ownership of Mexico's land had been concentrated in a few hands. A small elite of rich families owned huge farms, cattle ranches, and plantations. The land had been confiscated from its original owners, the poor rural population. Therefore there were local rebellions around the country during the 1880s and 90s, when poor farmers and landless laborers ("peones") tried to reclaim their land from the large haciendas. All rebellions were quelled, however, with a firm hand, and rebellious indigenous groups were seen by the government as enemies of progress and civilization, to be sacrificed for the sake of development.

Industrial production grew, but so did the population, and food production declined. Several years of harvests failed and food had to be imported. Maize, the main food source for the Mexicans, nearly doubled in price between 1900 and 1910. In 1905, Mexico implemented a monetary reform and devaluation in order to rise to the level of the world's strongest economies. The ambitious desire was that Mexico, after a long-term growth and a decade of financial stability and balance of trade surplus, would take its place in the world economy. But things went wrong. Export prices fell and import prices increased. Social conditions worsened. There were lengthy and bitter strikes in 1906–07 in the copper mines and in the cotton industry. In 1907, the stock exchange in New York City collapsed, and this had a significant impact on Mexico's economy. The price of copper fell dramatically, and the same year the harvest failed again. The economic crisis made Díaz's regime falter.

In 1908, Díaz stated that he would retire in 1910, which led to hopes of genuine, democratic elections. But the following year he announced his decision to re-run, and thus be re-elected for the seventh time. Subsequently, resistance increased. Among the opposition leaders were Francisco Madero and Venustiano Carranza. However, they disagreed politically and were only united in their opposition to the Díaz regime.

Shortly before the presidential election, in June 1910, the opposition movement was banned and Madero imprisoned. Striking workers were shot and opposition politicians murdered by the police. The re-election of Díaz took place while Madero and five thousand of his followers were imprisoned. Now the elite who had benefited financially from the Díaz regime began to get cold feet. The dictatorship had become too stark, and the broad, legitimate opposition to Díaz threatened to undermine social order and economic

prosperity. An uncontrolled resistance was in danger of becoming an uprising of workers and an armed rebellion. It would therefore also be in the interest of the elite if Díaz could be replaced – that is, without changing the existing social order and power structure.

Madero declared himself Mexico's legitimate president and called for an armed uprising against the regime. The people's rebellion began on November 20, 1910, and was initially a failure. Yet, rebel leaders like Francisco ("Pancho") Villa in the north and Emiliano Zapata in the south continued the fight, and in the end Díaz, whose army was small, outdated, and poorly equipped, had to resign in May 1911. He fled to Veracruz and sailed to Europe, where he ended his days in exile in Paris. Madero was victorious but did not take power immediately. He wanted to be elected democratically, and after a landslide victory in October 1911, he became Mexico's new president. However, Madero was politically inexperienced and did not manage to unite the various conflicting factions of the opposition, just as he underestimated the continued strength of Díaz's conservative supporters. At the same time, Madero's generals oppressed the ongoing revolutionary rebellion in rural areas with great brutality; Madero was overthrown in February 1913 and murdered a few days later together with his vice-president.

The ten days of fighting in February 1913 meant enormous destruction and thousands of dead in Mexico City, and the result was that a new general took power. General Victoriano Huerta and his military regime held power from February 1913 to July 1914. The good, old social order thus seemed to be secured, to the great satisfaction of the foreign powers, and it meant new opportunities for both domestic and foreign businessmen. Only the great neighbor, the United States, opposed the new regime. Secretly, the U.S. ambassador played a very active role in the coup against Madero, but officially the U.S. took a strong position against Huerta and his chaotic dictatorship, and the United States even seized and occupied the port of Veracruz from April to November 1914. The alcoholic Huerta was certainly no ordinary president; the German ambassador reported home that Huerta "holds his cabinet meetings primarily in taverns and restaurants. Since no one really knows where he is, this protects him to some extent from assassination."<sup>62</sup>

The assassination of Madero and Huerta's takeover initiated the bloodiest period of the Mexican civil war, and when the Huerta regime collapsed in the summer of 1914, Mexico also ceased to function as a unified state. It was local revolutionary leaders and rebels who took power in different parts of the country, and the government army forced thousands upon thousands of men to be drafted and end as cannon fodder. Venustiano Carranza was installed as a temporary president, but when Huerta was defeated, the internal disagreements of the opposition broke into flames. Carranza was moderate and appealed to the middle class, while the revolutionary leaders Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata demanded social reforms. The colorful bandit and rebel leader Villa had his base in the countryside and among the urban poor. At the peak of his power, he had an army of about 40,000 men. Zapata was, above all, a revolutionary peasant leader. His main demand was land reforms for the poor rural Indians. Zapata's base was a peasant guerrilla movement, which at its peak amounted to about 20,000 men in total. His movement did not, however, operate as a unified army, but in small guerrilla groups of two hundred to three hundred men.

In late November 1914, Zapata's guerrilla soldiers entered Mexico City, and in early December Villa's army also marched on the capital, which was devastated and looted again. In the long run, the two rebel leaders could not agree on an alternative to Carranza, and the government forces led by General Alvaro Obregón defeated both Villa's and Zapata's armies. It was Obregón's army and its victories that allowed Carranza to regain control of Mexico City and the political infrastructure in the summer of 1915, and Carranza was democratically elected in the presidential election of March 1917. That same year, Mexico got a new constitution, which admittedly gave the president almost unlimited power, but also posed the promise of major social reforms. This constitution forms the basis of modern Mexico, a strong nation-state with a strong president and firm central power over the provinces. As a novelty in Mexico it also upheld the federal government's responsibility for the social, economic, and cultural well-being of the citizens. The new constitution gave the government the right to confiscate land from the big landowners, guaranteed workers' rights, curbed the power of the Catholic church, and promised compulsory, free education for all. There were rules on working hours, minimum wage, social security, and welfare. Furthermore, the right to strike was secured; however, this did not prevent the army from crushing the strikes of the oil workers several times during 1917. On the whole, the moderate-conservative Carranza and his government did little to carry out the ambitious social program of the constitution. Only half a percent of the land was given to the landless, only one per thousand of the state budget was spent on the education system. And soon Carranza began using methods resembling Díaz's: control of the press and political life. He also tried to impose his own docile candidate as successor for the presidency, which led to new discontent and popular support for the opposition under Obregón's leadership. Thus, social inequality persisted, year after year, president after president. For Carranza and his successors Obregón and Calles, land reform was not really important, but merely a means to get the peasants on their side.

This was the Mexico that greeted Frans Blom in March 1919. The civil war had devastated and exhausted the country. The economy had collapsed, thereby destroying much of the economic progress made since the 1880s. In 1918–19 only twelve percent of the mines and twenty-one percent of industry functioned, and at the same time silver and copper prices dropped dramatically on the world market. It is estimated that at least a million – perhaps two million – people died during the revolution and the civil war, partly due to starvation. And if Mexico's poor lived precariously before the revolution, things had certainly not improved.

Only the oil industry kept the country's economy going. The oil fields were far removed from the battlefields; on the Gulf Coast and the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, and fairly untouched by revolution and civil war, oil production experienced a real boom. In 1910, Mexico produced only one percent of the world's oil, in 1920 the figure had risen to twenty-three percent. The oil industry was therefore the largest source of export earnings during the civil war, and it was precisely the oil industry that would be Frans's line of work during his first years in Mexico. But so far, he had neither work nor connections.

"It is not that easy to get a job here. Perhaps it is better in Tampico, where

there are many Americans, and where the major oil center lies," Frans writes home on April 3, after a few weeks in the country. To reassure his parents, he mentions that he has met several people who (rather non-committally, it seems) have promised to look for a job for him. Frans has already made friends in the small colony of foreign residents: "I have come to know an elderly English lady here, a Mrs. Nuttall[!]; she has the most beautiful old house outside the city with a garden abounding in roses. I am going to visit her tomorrow Sunday for lunch." This was none other than the wealthy American (not English) archaeologist Zelia Nuttall, whom Frans had met here after less than two weeks in Mexico. According to Brunhouse it was Frans himself who with "some boldness" wrote to Zelia Nuttall, subsequently receiving an invitation to visit her.<sup>63</sup> She would prove to be a very useful and inspiring acquaintance. She introduced him to Mexican archaeology, and became a loving and motherly support for him in the years ahead. Frans later called her his "Aunt Zelia."

Blom later claimed to have visited the National Museum in Mexico City immediately after his arrival; the train passengers celebrated their safe arrival in the capital with a party Saturday evening, and on Sunday morning, Frans rushed to see the National Museum and its riches, which he had never dreamt of back home in Denmark. Or so he claims much later in a radio talk: "I strolled through the galleries filled with magnificent sculptures, wonderful ceramics, jewels of jade and gold. This was a revelation, and on Monday morning, I bought my first book on Mexico's ancient cultures. This visit changed the whole course of my life."<sup>64</sup>

Another acquaintance is a Mexican whom Frans has met on the boat from New York, a politician and a member of parliament, elected for the state of Veracruz. He lends Frans a room in his apartment, and has advised him to initially take whatever job he can get, then he will help him to get a good position later on. Frans is also shown around the city by the M.P.: "The other day I walked with him, suddenly he entered a house, we went up a few flights of stairs where some soldiers were drifting around – I thought we might visit one of the country's many generals – (Mexico possesses 2,200 generals) – and I was introduced to an elderly gentleman who fleetingly resembled grandfather – I was rather impressed to learn that it was President Carranza. He was very charming, eager to hear what was known about Mexico in Denmark and gave a very positive appraisal of the situation here; too positive, as far as I can tell."

So the young Dane meets none other than President Carranza himself. And Frans has already, perhaps from his new American friends, formed an impression of the situation in the country: "Before he [Carranza] gets rid of a part of his generals, who are pure robbers, and the United States steps in with investments, it will not go forwards. But when it gets going, oh boy, what opportunities! The generals do as they please, they have the soldiers and are at the President's service when he is in trouble. It is not in their interest that peace and tranquility befall the country, as they will then become redundant. Conditions here are now and then quite strange – the other day in Vera Cruz they shot one of the generals of the previous government – without orders from the President or the courts – and afterwards exhibited his head on a pole. Medieval."

The "very charming" Mr. Carranza only barely remained in power through

brutally defeating his opponents, not least the revolutionary leaders Villa and Zapata, who were both disappointed with the outcome of the revolution and the way that the new constitution was exercised – or more precisely, with the lack of comprehensive land and social reforms. On April 10, 1919, only a week after Frans wrote home about the "charming" president, Zapata was ambushed and murdered by Carranza's soldiers. That was the outcome of the agricultural workers' and small peasants' demands for "Tierra y Libertad," "Land and Freedom." In return, Carranza himself was assassinated the following year and only then did the civil war come to an end.

Frans is initially offered a position in northern Mexico, and he travels up there to have a closer look at it, but decides to decline, since it is in one of the most troubled parts of the country. Then he gets a temporary job transporting machinery for a mine in the mountains. Frans and an American become supervisors for "a bunch of Indians & mules." The wording is not quite accidental. As a European, Frans, the upperclass boy from Copenhagen, shares the Mexican elite's view of the country's indigenous population: Indians rank on a par with mules, hardy and enduring draft animals. "They are extremely inoffensive when they are sober, and very polite, they never talk to a white man without keeping their big sombrero lifted obliquely over their head." In fact, Indians are cheaper to run than mules, and therefore almost preferable as working animals: "The Indian is cheap labor, he gets barely 1 Danish krone per day and can carry as much as a mule that costs 2½ kroner. [...] They can walk behind your horse a whole day without tiring, up and down the mountains. In the beginning I felt sorry for them, but soon I forgot them."

Later, Frans would become an outspoken critic of the destruction caused by the Europeans and by so-called civilization, and an ardent defender of the indigenous population. But he is still just a young European adventurer in foreign lands, and the trip into the mountains is right up Frans's alley. He is an outdoors man, and he enjoys the opportunity to go hunting. Some nights they sleep on haciendas and farms, other nights they lie under the open sky, around the campfire. "The trip was like a wonderful adventure, and on top of that I was even paid for the delight."

One and a half months later Frans still has not found a permanent job, but he has had another temporary assignment as a supervisor on a transport in the mountains, this time on a ruined hacienda near the small town of Orizaba in the state of Veracruz. He had already passed through this country on the train when he first came to Mexico. Here lie beautiful old colonial towns such as Córdoba and Orizaba, fertile valleys with fields of bananas, maize, coffee, and sugar cane. Steep, green, forested mountains with rocky outcrops and deep gorges. And behind the mountains to the north, Mexico's highest mountain majestically rises (18,491 feet above sea level), the breathtakingly beautiful snow-capped volcano Pico de Orizaba or Citlaltépetl, The Star Mountain.

This was a longer assignment that was meant to last for a month. Frans had to ride up through the mountains to the burned and looted hacienda, get workers, and break up the remains of an old railway. The rails that could still be used were to be transported down through the mountains to the main railway line between Veracruz and Mexico City.

But the civil war is still not over; outside the large cities bands of rebels operate, they aim at attacking the railways, mines, and the large haciendas, and it must have terrified the Blom family when Frans remarks about the rebels that “they especially have an eye for foreigners.” After all, if the journey from Veracruz was “the peak of the adventure,” then the adventure has new depths now: “If you want adventure, you just have to come out here and travel a bit around in the country. You do not have to wait long before you get to experience the most exciting shocker stories.”

When you sit at home in well-organized little Denmark and read about strange incidents, then you do not really understand the implications of the events which you read about. You doubt, or perceive it as fiction, as a novel. But once you have been to the countries where life is so brisk and where a human life is not worth many pennies, then you understand that the incredible can happen.

And in this country Mexico, anything is possible. Consider that in the year 1919, one month ago, I passed through the city of Córdoba in the state of Vera Cruz. The government troops had just caught a rebel leader, decapitated him and exhibited the head in the town square in the blazing sun. I shall not describe what it looked like when I saw it on the third day after the execution.<sup>65</sup>

This is how Frans Blom writes home to the scouting magazine *Vor Ungdom* [Our Youth]. If he had gone to Mexico to seek adventure, he certainly had his yearnings satisfied for some time. But with the experience at a distance he can tell the magazine’s young readers about his strange life in the new country: “Mexico is probably one of the world’s most beautiful countries, in addition to being one of the richest. It would be pure paradise if the good Mexicans could avoid fighting among themselves. But they cannot. Every one of the country’s provinces has its bands of rebels.”

Frans’s report was called “Blandt mexikanske Røvere” [Among Mexican Robbers], and the boy scout magazine printed it in October and November 1919. In the November issue there is also an enthusiastic review of a brand new boys’ book, *Tarzan of the Apes* by Edgar Rice Burroughs. But unlike Tarzan and the other adventure novels, Frans’s adventure is not pure imagination – although he no doubt dramatizes quite a bit for the sake of his young readers.

The hacienda where Frans had to work had been looted and burned by the revolutionaries in 1912, and since then the property had alternately been occupied by rebels and government troops. When Frans arrived there in May 1919, three quarters of the land was in the hands of the rebels, and just as he arrived at Orizaba, the rebels had attacked a factory outside the town and killed five soldiers. “This was encouraging,” he writes with his characteristic deadpan humor, “because the rebels came from the part of the country where I was going to work.” But after a few days, he nevertheless ventured up in the mountains. The job had to be done.

Again, Frans enjoys being outdoors: “The horse worked steadily forwards, and I was sitting comfortably and enjoyed the view down the valley to the right. Suddenly the horse started and reared; instantly and instinctively I had the revolver in my hand.”

A real Mexican rebel comes out of the bushes: “His face was nut brown, edged by a gray beard, on his head he wore a big wide-brimmed pointy hat

of reddish-brown felt with gold embroidery. His suit was made of deer suede with silver embroidery and silver buckles. He carried belts with rifle bullets over both shoulders, on his waist a belt with a revolver and revolver bullets, in his hand a rifle. He looked formidable enough, almost like a picturesque brigand in an operetta, the difference was just that this bandit was for real.”

They assess each other and cover each other with rifle and revolver respectively. Frans feels fairly safe, since he has the advantage: “A Colt caliber 41 is not a toy, it has six shots ready, whereas his Winchester 30-30 has only one bullet in the barrel and must be reloaded for every shot.” However, they put their weapons aside and Frans must accept that he is now a sort of “guest” on rebel territory. The rebel (or “bandit,” as Frans calls him) is a very talkative gentleman who kindly but authoritatively escorts him all the way to the hacienda: “I must not try to run away, then I would just be shot. In a polite and explicit way he let me understand that I was under guard until ‘The General’ had made a decision about me.”

They continue up through the mountains with a view of the snow-capped volcano Citlaltepetl. In several places they see small wooden crosses erected in memory of fallen soldiers and rebels, and the “Bandit” shows Frans a steep cliff, Eagle Point, from where the rebels reportedly used to throw captured soldiers into certain death on the valley floor some 600 yards below. It saved bullets.

When they arrive at the hacienda, Frans examines the ruined houses: “So these were to be my headquarters. I immediately looked for a place to sleep. In one of the houses there was a room which still had a ceiling, I took it into possession and in addition, I found a table, two chairs and a worn-out field bed.” The bed had been used two years earlier by a wounded general; in the morning his soldiers found him murdered with a bullet through his head. “The bullet was still in the wooden frame of the bed. I took it out and now I have it as a memento. By the way, I slept very well in the bed, much to the horror of the Indians, who are very superstitious.” Frans may have been accustomed to luxury and comfort from home, but he has also been a boy scout, and he has always been drawn by the outdoors. He enjoys impressing the Indians as he adjusts his little camp: “They did not believe that a white man could acclimatize himself out in the wild.” But that’s not a problem for a swift boy scout. As an inspiration for his young readers, Frans relates how he makes himself a mattress of pine branches, puts together a small fireplace, and makes a poker and a meat fork out of a few branches: “in short, I had used most of the small tricks to make life in a camp more pleasant just as I had learned in my scouting days.”

A message comes from the rebel “General,” who is astounded that Frans has ventured into the mountains in rebel territory. “He was going to come and visit me in a few days; in the meantime he was engaged in an attack on the railway between Mexico City and Orizaba. Until that was over, I was allowed to break off rails, but I could not leave the woods until he had seen me. He sent me two of his ‘soldiers’ for ‘protection’ – nice protection.”

Frans prepares himself for work as if nothing has happened. He gathers the Indians who are fit for working and offer them work during the next month or so, to their great pleasure. They have not had any work since the hacienda was destroyed. That evening the Indians sit around Frans’s campfire. It’s a starry night, only the howling of a coyote is heard now and





Frans among rebels, Sierra de Agua near Orizaba, May 1919.

then, the river's roar in the distance, and the crackling of the fire. It almost seems too peaceful, considering that the place is "inhabited by ruthless and raw bandits." Frans asks the Indians to tell him stories; he has now been in the country long enough to understand at least a little Spanish. They pitch in with dangerous stories about "brisk assaults on towns and railways – about the ruthless treatment of prisoners," but they can tell him more than that: stories about "the great forests and the animals therein. They firmly believed that the deer could hear with their hooves. They told me about mythical creatures and ghosts they had met in the woods at night. It was like a strange fairytale to sit there as the only white man among them and listen to their tales. [...] But despite the calmness they displayed, and the courtesy with which they treated me, I now and then caught myself wondering whether I was ever going to get back down to the valley again."

Frans settles in for the night with rifle and revolver at his side, and outside on the doorstep the two "bodyguards" go to sleep with a rifle each. Frans must not try to escape.

The days go by, and work is almost finished when one day, Frans is told that the rebel general has summoned the Indians that night in order to carry out an attack on the railroad early next morning. But the Indians are superstitious, and they are dissatisfied with the attack taking place on a

Tuesday morning; Tuesday is apparently an ominous day. In the evening the Indians come by, heavily armed, to say goodbye: "I had to shake the hand of each one of them before they went off into the darkness and rain. Only a few old men and my bodyguard stayed behind to protect me."

In the morning, work stands still. "At 8 o'clock we heard an explosion and gunfire, right on time; this was the time that the freight train from Mexico City used to pass by." And in the afternoon, the wounded are brought back from the morning's battle. Frans finds iodine and bandages, and has to create an emergency first-aid station. "The bullet had grazed his left shoulder and had landed in a rib; there it sat ever so neatly. He had been on his way for five hours and had kept a dirty cloth pressed into the wound to stop the blood. I removed the cloth and bathed the wound with iodine and cocaine. Using a hunting knife and nail clippers, I extracted the bullet and some bone splinters, then a cotton ball dipped in iodine on the wound, bandage around it, 2 aspirin powders and a cigarette, and the man was happy. I assume that a doctor would shake his head at that operation, but it went well and my reputation as a surgeon is rooted in the mountains at Orizaba."

In the evening, the rest of the Indians came home discouraged. They had indeed managed to interrupt the railway line, but the train was largely empty, so there was no particular loot. And the losses had been great. "Two of theirs were dead and five wounded, it was pure misery, and Tuesday was a really bad day for fighting. Long after I had gone to bed, I could hear them discuss the day's events outside by the fire."

The next day, the rebel general finally arrives to take a closer look at Frans; therefore work is at a standstill for yet another day. The general arrives with an entourage of sixteen picturesque and heavily armed men, including two generals and two colonels. "I must honestly admit that my heart was in a tremendous hurry to change places between my trousers and my throat." But Frans does his best to look brave and show that he has the situation completely under control. First he is interrogated by the general himself, which goes fairly well when Frans explains that he is neither on the government's nor the rebels' side, but a neutral foreigner who is merely here to do a job. When Frans praises wonderful Mexico to the skies it also helps, and more than anything, the general is grateful that Frans has provided such a distinguished medical treatment for his wounded soldiers.

Tequila and pulque (fermented agave juice of beer strength) is drunk, and a real Mexican feast is laid out: tortillas, frijoles, and turkey in mole, a dark brown, heavy, sweet, and spicy sauce of powdered chilies, nuts, and chocolate. Frans is not so enthusiastic: "Mole is an unusually hot Mexican sauce, and Mexicans devour it with great pleasure, many complaints and much moaning. To me it almost seemed like getting a red-hot iron rod stabbed down through my throat."

The meal progresses, generals and colonels are digging in, and the atmosphere is warm and cordial. "I gradually began to feel more calm, although not a word had been uttered about what 'the General' intended to do with me. It did not appear that I would be shot."

After lunch there is a shooting competition, and maybe the tequila has taken effect; at any rate, it seems strange that the rebel officers should be as miserable at shooting as they prove to be in Frans's little story. Frans is puzzled: "I have never seen worse shooting, right and left of the target, above

and below it, now and then one of them was fortunate enough to hit the target. And I thought they were pure devils at shooting.”

In the rifle as well as the revolver competition, the experienced hunter Frans therefore takes first place with ease (or so he tells his young readers), which further enhances his reputation in the eyes of the rebels. “The ‘General’ came and shook my hand. ‘Mucho hombre’ (a real man) he said, which is a great praise in this country.”

Of course, one must remember that this is Frans’s own portrayal of the events, written as a thrilling story in a scouting magazine; maybe the tale is a little too good to be true; and no doubt, the rebel general would have told the story differently. At any rate, Frans admits that it is with a sense of relief that he can finally say goodbye to the rebel officers and watch them disappear into the woods again, though only after having photographed them first. Frans is a keen photographer, and he will not let such a chance pass by to get a self-timed picture of himself among such colorful rebels.

Finally, the job is finished. But before Frans Blom leaves rebel territory, he has to report to the General one last time to return the “bodyguards” and get an exit permit. Frans claims that the general is so impressed with him that he offers him the rank of colonel in the rebel army. However, Frans politely declines and rides off down towards the valley.

“The adventure was over – or so I thought. My horse slipped and slid down the steep path. I had just looked at my watch to find out if I could catch the afternoon train up to Mexico City. Then, slam, bang, a dry crack of a bullet that struck a tree.” The next bullet grazes Frans, and he feels the blood beginning to flow down his leg. This time, it is a government soldier in uniform, imagining Frans to be a rebel since he is coming down from rebel territory. “I yearned to shoot, right in his ugly mug he would get it. But no, that wouldn’t do, he was a soldier, and there were probably more of them. If I shot now, I might as well immediately go back to the General up there in the mountains and accept my officer’s rank.”

But Frans’s Danish passport unravels matters: “It was full of stamps and visas, and it seemed to impress them. Then they found the Spanish text which they understood. So I was not a rebel? No, I was not, and when I reached Mexico [City], I would have the Danish Consul complain to their General and have them punished, and I would have the Danish King complain to their President, so they would be shot. They believed it, those simple souls, and became quite amenable. They asked me not to report them and they helped me dress my wound, a superficial little shot that had brushed me just above the hip bone. And in unison we went downwards. Without further adventures, I arrived here in the capital that evening, one more adventure in the bag, but frankly speaking, I will not play that game again, if I can avoid it.”

Frans probably wouldn’t have accepted the job in the first place if he had been aware of what it entailed – to work for a month on the very battle line between rebels and government soldiers. His employer was also quite surprised to see him back alive: “The next day when I showed up in front of the man who had given me the job, he said, ‘How the hell did you do it?’ and immediately sent off another man to bring the rails the final stretch down into the valley.”

Yes, the picture that young Blom paints of himself as an adventurous, almost fearless boy scout must have made many young hearts beat faster when the magazine *Vor Ungdom* brought his story in the fall of 1919. But it is clear that the experience has made a deeper impression on Frans than he is willing to admit at first. Some months later he writes to his father that he had five days to find out whether he would be shot. And again, more than two decades later, Frans returns to the event in a short story that he writes, in his somewhat broken English, around 1941. Here, the atmosphere is a bit different than the light tone of *Vor Ungdom*. The narrator curses the cigar-chewing businessman who in his comfortable office lured him into taking the job, and when he hears that the General will arrive, he thinks: “So this might be the last day. Would I be shot against a wall, or dispatched over the edge of the Eagle Point? ‘Quien sabe?’ [Who knows?] The sun was shining, the trees were green, ‘Look at them and enjoy them while you have a chance’ were my thoughts.

After the meal the General stands up, takes his revolver and says:

“Vamos a tirar al blanco.” “Vamos – vamos – let’s go.” “Tirar – shoot.” “Blanco – white – blond.” “That’s me,” I thought, and I looked out over the sunshiny valley. The soldier and a couple of lieutenants went to the charred wall of the burnt saw mill. They cleared the bush in front of the wall, and with charcoal they drew a square. So that was where I was going to stand, I could at least look up to the great snowclad giant, and enjoy the pine clad mountains when it happened. [...] The soldier started to count paces from the wall towards us. Sixty, seventy, eighty, ninety, one hundred. He stopped. The chief stopped, and started to load his rifle. The “Army” loaded their rifles. Politeness to the last, I thought, and I marveled at these men. Then the Chief stepped aside, and with a broad gesture of his hand he ushered me to step forwards. I headed for the wall. “Stop there,” he said when I reached the soldier, and then handed me his rifle. “Vamos a tirar al blanco.” “Let us shoot at the target.”<sup>66</sup>

Appropriately enough, Frans Blom has entitled this little sketch *A Lesson in Spanish*. He has probably made it out to be a bit more dramatic than the events themselves; this version has a tinge of shocker story. But it is also clear from the early version which appeared in *Vor Ungdom* that the Spanish language caused some problems during the rebels’ visit. He misunderstood them. *Vamos a tirar al blanco*. “My heart made a convulsion and went straight up into my throat.”<sup>67</sup> Frans learned a new expression. And he did think for a moment that he would be shot.

The pampered young merchant’s son has come out into the world to face reality. He still does not have a job, and on July 8, he is told that the job he has been hoping for will not be his after all. The same day, Frans writes a long and bitter letter in English to his father – as though the foreign language gives him the necessary distance to say the unpleasant truths:

Then another thing, neither you nor I have forgotten my wild, mad behaviours in Denmark, and never will forget them. So let us get at the heart of it, and get clear.

How much of your money have I thrown away? I would like to know it for times to come. I would like plain talk. Don’t consider me rude, and

please do not treat me with kid gloves. I was a moral coward. In the time I have been here I have found out so much. My small vagabonding jobs here, have more often than I have told put me out for situations where your brain works quickly, where life depended on seconds and one time I had five days to find out if I was going to be shot or not. Specially this last instant gave me plenty of time to think.

It took a good lot of weakness out of me, and I found out that it does not help you to play hide and seek with people. So in your answer to this letter give me the blow. Don't play hide and seek with me.

I have had one on the top of my head this morning and took it standing. So in the coming week I am going to sell every thing I can spare of clothes etc. and as soon as possible go to either one of the mining camps or to the coast. I don't like the idea of the coast with its tropical climate, and diseases, but so many fellows have gone alive through it before, so why shouldn't I. Some where there must be a job for a young man, that does not for certain reasons want to tell too much about his past, though it looks pretty hard to find the place.<sup>68</sup>

In Mexico City, Frans still lives at Hotel Cosmos, but in the hotel's cheapest room, all the way up on top of the roof. "From the outside it almost looks like a shed. It is constructed on top of the Hotel Cosmos. Inside it is really nice. And above all – it has windows to all four corners of the world and it is great that it is high up."

In 1919, Mexico City was a wonderful place, a beautiful and charming blend of Spanish colonial style and Parisian boulevards, a cosmopolitan city with a rich cultural life. With only 800,000 inhabitants, it was a very liveable city; the air was clear and pure, and from his room on the roof, Frans could see the twin volcanoes Popocatepetl and Iztaccihuatl, just as he had a clear view of the entire city with the impressive central Zócalo Square, the old colonial buildings, the flower-clad patios, the church domes, the boulevards, the parks, and the mountain ranges in the distance, on all sides. Frans himself called Mexico City "one of the world's most beautiful cities," and although the civil war was not yet over, it could no longer be felt in the capital. Hotels, theaters, and luxury shops had reopened, the pianist Arthur Rubinstein played concerts, the Russian ballerina Pavlova appeared with her ballet company, and the new Chaplin movies were shown in the cinemas.

Frans still has no job, so he has enough time, and among other things he visits the ruined city of Teotihuacan, just north of Mexico City. "It was exceedingly interesting to see this ancient city, many lovely sandstone reliefs and fresco paintings are brought to the light of day." Moreover, he has his books: "I spend most of my day up here reading and writing. [...] When I get hungry, I climb down to the ground and am happy to eat in any small restaurant or tavern. Partly because it is the cheapest, and moreover, it is the most enjoyable. The Indian and the Mexican are very funny to look at, funnier than the gang of faux highlife society that frequents the best restaurants here."

Significantly enough, Frans does not write home to his family about his friends, the two young Mexican artists Alva and Cueto, with whom he associates during this period. Vis-à-vis his family, it is wise to keep a low profile when it comes to continued artistic ambitions and bohemian friends. Now Frans has to appear serious and hardworking, on his way to making a

career for himself in foreign lands.

But in the early summer of 1919 he writes a sketch for a short story about a young Scandinavian in Mexico. A highly romantic and pretty high-strung story which under its fictionalized emotional woes has a barely concealed autobiographical touch. In the first draft, the protagonist, the young Dane, is called "Francisco" – i.e., Frans. Later, the name is slightly changed to the more anonymous "Per," a short form of Peter. His two Mexican artist friends are the painter Alva and the sculptor Cueto. The title of the story is "Las Chinampas," named after the raised fields and picturesque canals in Xochimilco, south of the city, where Per, the young Dane, experiences a tragic love story.

In the short story we find Alva and Cueto in their studio, struggling with their works of art in the confounded heat. It could be a scene from Puccini's *La Bohème*, with the poor young artists in their loft studio. Here, Paris's winter cold is simply replaced with the heat of Mexico City. The two young artists toil, but neither painting nor sculpture will toe the line. "The only thing that was in harmony with the temperature was Per. He lounged on a couch, smoking cigarettes."<sup>69</sup> Alva and Cueto throw away their tools. As a sort of Indian incantation, they both say the word "Xochimilco," and bring Per with them out to these "Montezuma's floating gardens. There one can drift all day long in a canoe, along narrow canals between flowers and green trees."

After a long, hot trip they finally reach their goal. A true adventure, "a multitude of flowers, an orgy of colors," with wording we also know from Frans's letters home. The flowers impress him above all, large poppies in bright colors and clusters of white lilies. Off they go, the water splashing against the sides of the canoe.

Alva and Cueto lay in the bottom of the boat. Per sprawled in the bow, now he was quite alive, forgotten were the heat and the dusty road. Here was beauty, here was life.

An outcry from Per made the other two lift their heads. In front of them the canal curved, and a canoe came slowly gliding around the point. Its entire bow was a wealth of red poppies. They shone like fire in contrast to the green banks of the canal and the azure sky. In the stern of the canoe stood a sturdy young Indian woman. She was dressed in a long white robe. Her shiny black hair hung down over her shoulders, and in it she had placed a red poppy.

As a vision she slid out from behind the green point, a masterpiece of nature in colors and lines. Enchanted, the three young men stood and enjoyed the sight. Every color, every line burned itself into their beauty-craving artist's hearts.

Alva finds his pastel colors and sketchbook to paint this dazzling Indian girl, Ozomatli. Afterwards she glides up next to their canoe to talk to them. It is not easy for Per, the Dane, who still doesn't really speak Spanish: "He only knew a few words, it amused her just as he himself amused her. He, with his blond, almost white hair bleached by the sun, his blue eyes and fair, just slightly tanned skin, was something she had not seen before." By nightfall the three young men return towards the city. "On the way home Alva and Cueto were very talkative and excited. This sight would yield paintings and fame. Per was silent."

The next day, Per does not show up in the studio. This does not

immediately concern the friends, for they are accustomed to his disappearing for a few days now and then. But this time, several weeks pass by. "He must have suddenly been homesick, must have gone home to his country far to the North." The next time they visit Xochimilco, however, they see a brief glimpse of Per in a canoe. They are then told that the young blond foreigner settled out there on one of the "floating gardens" with the young Indian girl. They were happy together and could often be seen with their canoe full of flowers. But then one day Per came up to the church with Ozomatli over his shoulders. "She was dead, drowned. She was buried the same evening, and the whole town followed her to her grave." Since that day, the Indians only see Per sailing restlessly around at dusk. "We never see him in town, but every morning there are fresh flowers on Ozomatli's grave."

A few weeks later, Per returns to his artist friends' studio. He says goodbye, he is going home to Denmark, but he leaves them a little book. "I would like to take it with me, but it will only keep a wound open. Take it, read it, and save it as a memento of a friend."

In this small diary, embedded in the story, Per pours out his unhappy feelings. He envies his Mexican friends their artistic abilities. While they can vent all their emotions in their art, Per himself can do nothing.

Oh, blissful man who with your hands can express your feelings, who can shape your thought and your impressions on paper. [...] I envy you, friends. With my hands I cannot express my feelings. Nor can I do it in verse. I will try in words. I have not succeeded before, I ardently wish I may succeed now. Today we enjoyed nature in all its beauty and wealth of color. You enjoyed it and it gave you impressions that you transfer into oil and clay. I enjoyed it and it burned itself into my soul.

Per's story is not finished, Frans never finished it. The remaining pages of the notebook do not contain "Per's" diary, but a kind of short story with fine observations from the outskirts of Mexico City, written in the first person, about a young man without a penny in his pocket trying to seek employment with a coffin joiner. Unfortunately, this story is not finished either. In addition, the papers contain Frans's own notes about characteristics of life in the villages around the capital, and the things he sees when wandering about. Churches and monasteries he has visited. And an artist's studio, the model for the studio in the story. On March 30, 1919, that is, shortly after his arrival in Mexico, there is an entry revealing Frans in the company of Cueto and Alva on a Sunday afternoon in their studio. "Cueto and I spoke a mixture of Spanish, English, gestures and drawings." Together they visit an old, lavishly decorated monastery, "making an art lover's heart beat faster."

The painter Ramón Alva de la Canal (1892–1985) and the sculptor Germán Cueto (1893–1975) were soon to become leading Mexican artists, members of the important avant-garde movement "Estridentismo" (1921–1927), a revolutionary artists' group influenced by Cubism, Dadaism, and Futurism. Moreover, Germán Cueto was to cross Frans's path once again later on.

Perhaps the tragic love story of the Indian girl Ozomatli is Frans's attempt to process his unrequited love for Princess Myra? Or possibly the forbidden and impossible love for Hugh? In any case it is a desperate attempt by Frans to find his artistic voice and vocation. He did not have the talent to be a visual artist; he had to settle for studying a little art history and painting

a few watercolors. He does not have his friends' ability to translate feelings into pictorial art. But maybe he would prove to have a talent as a writer? It is still the arts that enthrall him, not business or the oil industry. He has been sent out here to become a man, get a career. But he is still struggling with his "beauty-craving artist's heart."

The short story "Las Chinampas," however, does not reveal Frans Blom as a great writer. He left it unfinished, he did not succeed in releasing pathos, tragic love, and romantic tension in a vivid and personal language. But Blom's dreams of writing fiction never disappear, and when his academic career disintegrates around 1940, he begins to write small stories again.

Frans celebrates his twenty-sixth birthday on August 9, 1919 with other Danes from the small Scandinavian colony in the city. Several of the Danes in Mexico seem to have left something unpleasant behind them in Denmark, as if they have fled from something – quite like Frans himself, who "does not for certain reasons want tell too much about his past."

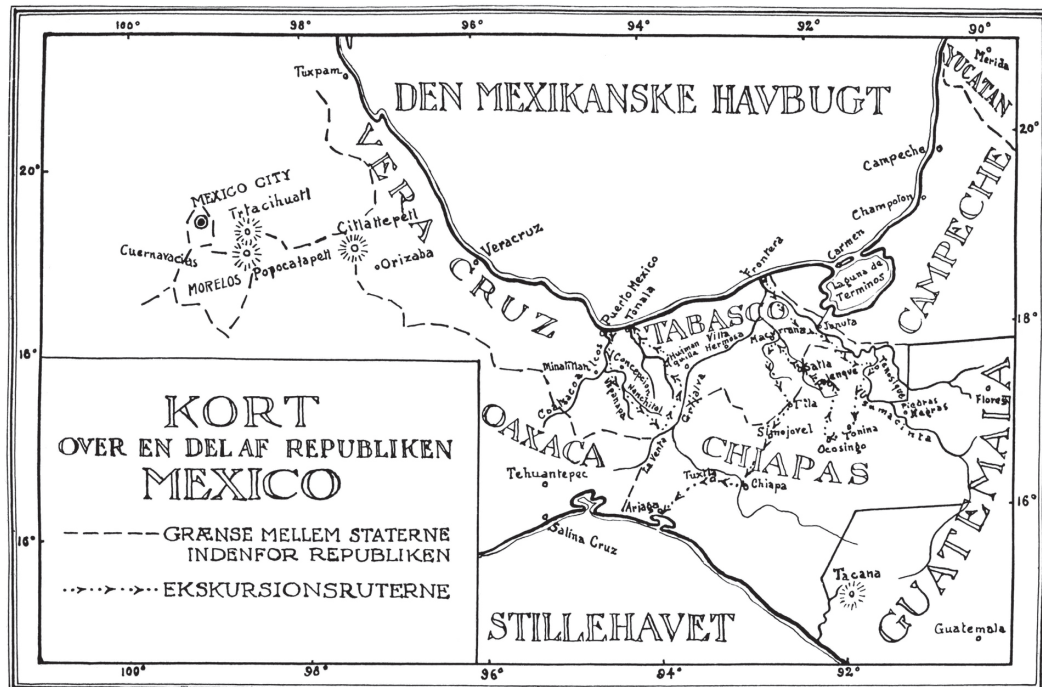
There is, by the way, a significant question that one is asked out here, now and then: "What was your name before you left home?" Most expatriates come out here to bury themselves or bury their past under the money they make here. And when they gather, they sit and talk about Copenhagen and the Tivoli Gardens, steak and Old Carlsberg beer.

Nostalgia runs high. These Danish expatriates, whether they have ended up in Mexico voluntarily or involuntarily, whether they have changed their name or not, assemble over their smørrebrød (Danish open sandwiches) and think of the old country: "While we were sitting there around the table, 14 Scandinavians, Don P. tapped his glass and said quietly: 'Boys! Our fatherland!' And in the deepest silence each of us emptied our glass in the name of our country. I felt that in that brief moment, we all had our thoughts with our loved ones back home."

In July 1919, Frans plans to travel to the oil city of Tampico, in a swampy area by the Gulf of Mexico, ravaged by malaria. The oil industry was, as mentioned, fairly untouched by the civil war and for a foreigner like Frans this was where money could be made. At least that is what he expected.

Thus far, however, things are not going very well. He has had typhoid fever, the medical bill has been costly. "And there is no work here. The thing is, out here a white man can't really take a worker's job. There is a class of workers here, the Peones [laborers], the Indians, who do all the rough work for a very low pay, a salary that a white man cannot even live on." So the oil industry lures him. "I'm not so happy about having to go to Tampico, since everyone tells me that the climate is so unhealthy there and living costs are very high. But since there is nothing for me here, I have to go there [...] If I don't get work there either, then all looks bleak. And I have had enough of my small casual jobs."

Frans does not go to Tampico the first time around. The big oil companies are not interested in him, he has no references or recommendations. On the whole, the days when a young American or European without any education could easily get a job in the Mexican oil industry are long gone. In 1919, the American consul in Tampico advised young men not to come there to find work, since no work was to be found. Frans should perhaps have thought



Frans's own map showing his travels in Mexico 1919–1922 (from his book *I de store Skove*).

about this before he chose to travel to Mexico without any arrangements or connections.

"Promises of work, waiting day after day, vague answers and then finally a no." Frans does not – as he is used to – have his family to back him up, and here in Mexico no one knows the name Blom. Here it makes no difference being the son of a family of great builders and businessmen; on the contrary, it is considered suspicious that he has left his country, like those who change their name and bury their past: "Who are you and why have you come out here? It is the constant question, and what should I answer?"

Yes, what should he answer? That he drank too much champagne, squandered his family's money, had not completed an education? That he fled from two impossible love affairs? That he was forced to leave?

Finally, in early August 1919 Frans gets a modest office job with the large American-owned oil company Waters-Pierce in Mexico City. Maybe it is not exactly what he dreamed of, but at least it is not an office in Copenhagen. In mid-September he gets a better position as manager of one of the oil company's gas stations, and at the same time a small raise in pay: "It was not much, but every cent is welcome. I now have two men and two boys under my command, and it is incomparably more fun than sitting and scribbling figures in a big book in an office."

Frans tends to his job at the gas station:

It is not an amusing task to take the night shift here in a big half-empty and cold garage. High up in the vault hangs a lone light bulb, which provides a sparse light. Once every hour an automobile comes in and makes

a din that resonates in the great hall. I have made myself a bedroom inside a large, roofed Packard automobile and will be comfortable there. My two Indian boys – "Gasolineros" as they are so beautifully called – lie asleep on some boards on top of the oil barrels. That way they make sure that nothing is stolen from the barrels.

It may not be the most exciting work and shifts are long, but Frans seems to notice that his superiors at Waters-Pierce begin to take an interest in him. He is suddenly offered several other posts, on a ranch, with another oil company, and several of them are even better paid. But he knows it will look wrong to change jobs now. When he was unemployed for months, it was precisely because he did not have recommendations and references, so for now he will stay with the same company: "What I mainly want is to work at getting some decent recommendations. Then I will have more choice later on."

But deep down it pains him to say no to the new and exciting job offers, and at the same time he is feeling restless again. "I am hanging in the best I can, in order to get out and travel again as soon as possible." Frans cannot stand being in the same place for very long, he wants to move on and see something new. And he cannot refuse the next enticing job offer.

It is the big oil company "Mexican Eagle" (in Spanish, "El Águila") which invites him to enter into its service. As mentioned, in 1920 Mexico produced almost a quarter of the world's oil, and at the time Águila was the second largest oil company in the country, previously owned by the wealthy British businessman and politician Lord Cowdray, but recently taken over by the British-Dutch conglomerate Royal Dutch-Shell. "They need me at their refinery in Minatitlan and offer me work, they pay 300 pesos per month (190 pesos more than I have), free room, board and washing."

It is a job that will take him to completely new territories, to the jungle in the southern part of the state of Veracruz, by the Gulf of Mexico. Now he will really get to see the great forests, the tropical jungle. "Luckily I have brought a lot of white clothes from home, so I will not have that expense; it is quite amazing what I managed to compress into my suitcases when I left." He also packs his books, "I have a small collection of books – only about Mexico – and I will bring them with me, there will probably be plenty of time for reading down there in the backwoods."

But it is one thing to work for a company. Another, and more attractive, is finding an oil well yourself!

One of the reasons why I have taken the position in M[inatitlan] is that I will now get out to the oil fields and even one of the lesser known ones. Among other things I will spend my time studying the oil country and keeping my eyes open for a piece of land that shows the right signs and is without "lease." If I can get hold of a piece of good land, I will grab it and go to the States and sell the lease."

Now things are brightening. His parents can be reassured. "I've finally got a good start here and will hang on to it."



### Chapter 3

## Oil, Jungles, and Idols of Stone

### (1919–1922)

*“And then, where does this restless blood come from? Much has changed in me these past 18 months, but the wanderlust still lies within me.”*  
(Frans Blom, 1920).<sup>70</sup>

On October 26, 1919, Frans Blom approaches the port of Puerto México situated where the Coatzacoalcos River flows into the southern part of the Gulf of Mexico. Large birds are swimming around the ship, and the proximity of the river is clear: coconuts, branches and – as beauty-craving Frans remarks – piles of green floating plants with splendid light purple flowers are drifting about in the water.

Puerto México has since regained its original name, Coatzacoalcos, like the river. Today it is an important port, and from here the railway also crosses the narrow isthmus and runs to the Pacific coast. It was not least the oil that caused the town to emerge and grow, and at the highest point in town, Frans says, lies the oil company Águila’s office building. “On the streets one sees many horsemen, all heavily armed. There are rebels here, for sure, if anywhere in Mexico! The river runs by, yellow and lazy [...] Every now and then you see the dorsal fin of a shark shooting past or a tree trunk becoming alive and turning out to be a crocodile.”<sup>71</sup>

We are on the border of the jungle, on the edge of civilization, near the Klondike of the oil fields: “This must be what a gold digging or mining town looks like. Very wide streets of soft sand or dirt. Houses and stalls of corrugated iron. Bars, full of workers in blouses, canvas trousers, wide-brimmed hats tipped down on their necks, all armed. Outside the bars stood clusters of horses.” But Frans has to go further up the river, further into the jungle, and the next day he arrives with one of the company’s tankers at his future workplace: “The forest recedes from the riverbanks, and here, on some large hills in the heart of the tropical jungle, is a modern industrial center.” This is where Frans is going to live. The oil company has its own small railway that leads up to the houses of the employees, an entire little town in itself, the “European town” of Tacoteno with fine single-storey red brick houses, surrounded by wide verandas. “I have a room with a bathroom, large and comfortably furnished.”

The town is located above the refinery and is therefore less humid and unhealthy. The region is otherwise plagued by malaria, yellow fever, and dysentery. But here, in the middle of the tropical jungle, is a small modern town with clubhouse, gymnastics hall, restaurant, and cinema, full of Britons

and other Europeans in white tropical clothing. “It is a strange little kingdom on its own, surrounded on all sides by large forests and swamps it lies with its railways, telephones, electricity plant, ice factory, waterworks, its own post office which distributes messages all over the large area, a large department store, where everything can be bought, clothes, furniture, food, tobacco, tools, etc.” Even women’s clothing and corsets can be bought at the store; some employees have brought their wives with them out here in the tropics.

On Mondays there is bridge playing at the club, Tuesdays Spanish lessons, Wednesdays cinema, Thursdays gymnastics, and Fridays dancing: “14 unfortunate, more or less attractive English ladies who are moved around by approximately 50 cavaliers, danced tired to the bones and are happy about it.” Saturday and Sunday there are small gatherings. But outside the narrow circle of the Europeans, the great mass of underpaid native workers can be found. A Mexican government official described the refinery in Minatitlan in 1916 as completely controlled by Europeans who kept their knowledge and skills for themselves, without giving the Mexican workers the opportunity to learn, improve their skills, or rise in the hierarchy.<sup>72</sup> The native “peones” just had to do the hard physical work.

And down by the river, at a suitable distance from the European town, lies the refinery itself – Mexico’s first – with its oil tanks, boiler systems, large smoking chimneys, pumping stations, cargo space, storage facilities, and offices. The oil in the area is of high quality, but the wells yield almost nothing, and therefore the refinery in the jungle especially processes oil shipped in from other fields: “pipelines run all over, and in and out small locomotives drag and grunt, hauling long rows of tank wagons. The steamboat anchors at the pier, a bulky hose is fed from a pipeline ashore, the pumps are set in motion, and in about 2½ hours the steamer is empty and returns to the wells to get more oil.” Today, Minatitlan still lies with its large refinery right next to the river; cooling water is pumped into the river in a large constant stream like a small waterfall. The flame burns above the plant, large tanks and pipes everywhere.

Back then, in 1919, the jungle around the town was still mostly untouched. Today, the town around the refinery lies as an open wound in the jungle, connected with the outside world by wide asphalt roads, and further up the river small huts lie along the way. In Blom’s day, long stretches of the riverbanks were deserted and quiet, now man has left his mark almost everywhere. Here is a little hut, here a cow and a pig, here laundry is hanging, here a father and son are out in a canoe fishing. Further up, the jungle is cleared for grazing by large cattle ranches. A dead horse is floating in the water, a flock of vultures gorging on it. But sometimes, in a bend of the river, you can get the feeling that you are experiencing a bit of what Frans saw. Now there is silence, now all is green and lush, now the only sounds are the water splashing, insects humming, and birds calling. The white herons sitting in the reeds and on the branches of the trees, at the edge of the water. And the lilac flowers floating lazily with the stream downriver.

In Blom’s day there were manatees in the lagoons, turtles, and lots of crocodiles in the Coatzacoalcos River. They still they show up occasionally, but rarely. So-called “civilization” is eating its way into the jungle, man needs space, the oil pollutes, and Frans Blom himself was part of this process when he worked for the oil company in Minatitlan. But for him, so far, all is just an

exciting adventure: "The experience of following such a mighty organization in its details, hear its heartbeat out here in the tropical forest." And he can report to his family that he is now well underway with his career, far away from the Palm Court in Copenhagen: "Things are going well for me now, I have got the right start." As a schoolboy, Frans was painfully aware of his own so-called "selfishness," the spoiled upper-class boy wanted to get out into the world and "suffer a real blow." From Mexico City, he wrote home that "the experiences and adversities of the past months have marked me." And the first day in Minatitlan he can add: "Life is wonderful and rich, and I feel sincerely sorry for all the young men who wander around back home in little Copenhagen and never get further than promenading and 'society.'"

If Frans had dreamed of going out in the oil fields and discovering a profitable piece of land for himself with an untapped oil well, he would be disappointed for some time to come. There is another office position in store for him: "I was quite astonished when the chief accountant asked me if I knew anything about cash. I said absolutely no and was appointed cashier."

This is not quite what Frans had in mind. Once more he is faced with the dreaded accountancy books; he might almost as well have stayed in Copenhagen and gone into the family business: "Life is wonderfully ironic – bookkeeping and accounting have never been my strong point – and now I am sitting in the middle of it and am confoundedly forced to learn it." The work includes paying out the wages to the refinery employees. The 3,000 local workers must receive their wages every Saturday, the 200 engineers and clerks every fortnight, and since there is no paper money, the payments are made with heavy gold and silver coins: "I am learning 'cash' by doing this, but not much oil."

There are four paymasters, each bringing the money to his section and distributing it to the workers there. Already after a few weeks, Frans experiences a highly dramatic incident as one of the four paymasters is attacked immediately after Frans has given him money for the workers. "There are some 500 meters [approx. 550 yards] from my office to his – and on the way, he was attacked by seven thugs armed with machetes. [...] In the heart of the refinery in broad daylight they chopped him and his men down, stuffed the envelopes in their sacks and ran off; they fled into the swamps along the river where no devil can follow their tracks." The money is gone, but the workers have to be paid nonetheless, and it does not take more than fifteen minutes before they agitatedly besiege Frans in the cashier's office; they are in a rebellious mood and they demand their money here and now. "I had about 2,000 pesos in a safe and must pay out 9,900 pesos. Under the pretext of having to count the money, I made them wait for 20 minutes." And while efforts are made to find a little cash locally in the village, the oil company's motorboat is sent down the river to Puerto México to get money – a trip that is around 18 miles each way.

"Then I opened shop and began to pay them, with a revolver under a newspaper, slowly, procrastinating, counting the money two-three-four times before it was paid out. The accountant, my immediate superior, that cowardly beast, had run off to Tacoteno, where he hid in the bar and shrouded himself in a fog of whiskey, while the manager persisted. A man came in from the village with 60 pesos, one with 100, another with 1,000 pesos. We didn't have time to count that money, outside the workers were pushing and were paid.

At six-thirty the motorboat arrived, it brought 12,000 pesos, but at that point I knew we could make it. At 7.10 I closed the payment hatch, deadly tired from the heat, work and tension." Fortunately, Blom had not needed his revolver. "Then I closed the safe, and the manager and I drove up to Tacoteno on a trolley; he didn't utter a word to me on the way, but when we arrived, he said: 'Come to my house and have some supper!' Then I knew he was happy."

Frans is settling in well in Minatitlan. He goes hunting in the jungle every Sunday, goes riding two or three times a week, and participates in the sporting activities of the European town: tennis, soccer, and gymnastics. The British oil steamers, which come to town to load, all have their own soccer team, so there are often matches and Frans soon becomes a member of the refinery team. "Without this sport – and books – one would either become batty of boredom or a drunkard, and neither option is appealing to me. I perfectly understand that many of those who live in the tropics succumb to drinking. The heat makes you thirsty and torpid, and a large part of the people who work in the tropics are stranded out here." This is how Frans soothes his parents, who – with good reason – may worry that Frans himself will end up as a drunkard in the tropics. They know his habits with champagne and cocktails, and he employs all means in reassuring them: "With regards to drinks, the water is excellent and we have a large ice factory; oranges and lemons are plenty, and that is the kind of drink I stick to mostly. Of course I am not abstinent, but there are so many examples of tropical sponges that it can make one pause and consider a few times before taking to drink."

The small colony of European engineers and clerks is a study in itself. The most eminent are "two dozen Englishmen, conservative and highly distinguished." All others count as next to nothing – but being a Dane, Frans Blom is good enough. "The English are a strange people, but thanks to my parents, I speak English so well that I almost belong with them, and when they discover that I am not English, they say, he must be a hell of a bloke when he speaks English so well! The little ones become friendlier and the big ones add \$5 to the salary." Additionally, there are Russians, Romanians, Dutch, French, people from the farthest British colonies, and "young boys, straight from London with their pith helmets, typewriting and kicking the Indians." This is how Frans Blom writes in November 1919. Only six months earlier, he had hardly regarded the indigenous peoples as more than colorful and cheap draft animals. Now it is they who catch his interest, not the smug Europeans. "The Indians do not exist in the eyes of the distinguished gentlemen, and yet they are the most interesting of all things here, except maybe for the rainforest, which is even more interesting."

And yet the local inhabitants remain, to Frans, most of all colorful touches in his adventure, not really humans and individuals, but specimens of an alien race, categorized by the condescending stereotypes of the Europeans: "The pure-blooded Indian is good enough, harmless and lazy and only dangerous when he is drunk. The half-breed, the mixture between the Spaniard and the Indian, is a dangerous man, hot blooded, cruel and bloodthirsty, unreliable and vindictive. Not a week passes by without one of them pulling a knife, and we all have to go around armed."

Between the European town and the refinery are the humble adobe huts, "real Minatitlan, Indian Minatitlan." Draisine wagons go back and forth,

but Frans prefers to walk. Partly, he gets exercise, partly he gets to see the indigenous town and its inhabitants. "Along the bank lie rows of canoes, made out of hollowed tree trunks; they are made with incredible skill, light and beautiful in shape. Every morning, people come from across the river with canoes full of bananas, oranges, vegetables and fish. [...] the Indian type here is purer than up on the Mexico plateau, and one often sees beautiful, sometimes astonishingly beautiful faces." Every morning and evening Frans walks through the village. "Great, fat pigs rummage about in the ponds; turkeys, dogs and chickens run among each other; some soldiers that resemble bandits come galloping down the street. An Indian sits on a stone, in front of him on the ground is his shop, neatly placed on banana leaves: fruits, eggs, coconut shells or hand-woven cloths."

But even more exciting for Frans is the rainforest itself – the great forests with their wildlife, the rivers, swamps, and lagoons. Since his childhood Frans has, as he says, been a "nifty hunter," and he writes enthusiastically to his father, his old hunting companion, about his hunting excursions. "It is my best time here." Frans has bought himself a nice little Mexican horse, and as soon as he gets off work he rides out across the savannah and into the forests, since "there is plenty of game here as soon as you get a few hours away from the refinery. Roebucks, wild boars, tigers [i.e., jaguars] and wild cats. Countless birds." And the long hunting trips up the river are something special: "The river actually teemed with crocodiles [...] And nearly every tree trunk that came drifting with the current was filled with turtles [...] I shot a couple of them, and they are very fine dining." Great flocks of monkeys also come down to the river, sitting in the trees and observing the hunters in the boat. But Frans will not shoot monkeys: "The Indians kill and eat them. I cannot bring myself to shoot at them – they are all too humanlike." Many years later, Frans will, however, have to eat monkey meat.

Frans and his friends are armed with rifles, shotguns, machetes, and revolvers. They do not have the jungle to themselves; there are rebels in the vicinity, and the revolver is not for hunting, it just may come in handy. "Firearms are plentiful and cheap here," Frans says. "Of course, every man carries his revolver, it increases his formidable appearance; here it is just as natural for a man to don his gun in the morning as to put on his pants."

It is the jungle itself that is so appealing; and the love of the great forests will follow Frans for the rest of his life. A love of the outdoors and of hunting going back to his childhood. Jaguar hunting, wild boar hunting, crocodile hunting, even the rare manatees – this is something other than back home in little Denmark. "Here there are no limits and no hunting rules, large, free hunting country." One has the feeling that Frans could very well have ended up as a big game hunter in Karen Blixen's Africa if he had not by chance ended up in Mexico.

Soon they ride across open savannahs, then through dense jungle. The dogs drive the game together on a headland facing the river, then Frans and the other hunters dismount and chop their way through the undergrowth until they come within range of the animals. "Life is an adventure for those who have open eyes. But it is very few civilized people who experience this adventure; they travel from hotel room to hotel room, one like the other. No, out where the convenience is lesser, the wonder is greater."

One evening in February 1920, Frans attends a dance in a nearby larger

village: "I have danced with the Queen of the Zapotecs. Wham Bam!!," he writes home to his family in his grandiose manner. Along with a Mexican colleague he rides there through the dark night, and already half an hour before reaching the village, they can hear the orchestra play: "They played everything from long excerpts of 'Carmen,' the latest New York jazz to Mexican and Indian melodies."

In the middle of the town is a great dais, and the beautiful Zapotec women impress Frans. "I came up where I could see properly and immediately became delirious with joy. [...] Their hair is jet-black and glossy, their skin a nice light brown color. In their hair they always wear ribbons and bows in bright colors. Everything was in strong colors, but not a single false color – a pure wildness of colors – all glowing and warm – a feast and pleasing to the eye. And around their necks they wore gold chains, long, thick gold chains of the finest quality – and U.S. gold dollars."

First, Frans dances with one of the most beautifully dressed women, laden with a chain of gold coins: "She waltzed as I have seldom waltzed, easy and smooth as the best dancer in the best society. The waltz was followed by a two-step that I danced with the prettiest little Indian girl I have ever seen. She was not so laden with gold, but then she had the loveliest brown eyes with long, soft eyelashes. Barefoot she was, and she could dance. Waltz, foxtrot and Zandunga [the most popular song at the time on the whole Isthmus of Tehuantepec], I danced and enjoyed to the full this strange spectacle that I was suddenly part of. Indians waltzing, it sounds strange, but they are so full of music, these people, that they grasp the rhythm of every melody. I marveled at my little brown-eyed friend's beautiful arms and delicate hands, these are pure-bred people."

The months pass by, the tropical heat increases: "It is an everlasting Roman bath," Frans writes home in March 1920. "The heat is oppressive, you lie on your bed, covered only by a sheet, and gasping. The mosquito net is pulled close together everywhere. Now and then I stand up and take a shower – it is refreshing, although the water is lukewarm. If you do fall asleep, you sleep heavily and uneasily. The morning is the best time, it seems to be cool and everything is shrouded in a mist. I like to walk in the daybreak and go to the office early. Later on during the day it is harder to work; the brain is spinning in your head in tune with the electric fans." But: "The evenings are wonderfully beautiful, the sun sets in an unimaginable flamboyance, at this time of day the parrots fly, the little green ones always fly in pairs, screaming and croaking, the larger red and blue ones fly away like flashes of fire with loud screams. It gets dark quickly; the sky is a soft, black color with thousands of stars. The chirping of the cicadas and the croaking of the frogs blend into one."

On May 12, 1920, Frans writes home from Minatitlan about the unrest caused by the upcoming presidential election. The "very charming" president Carranza, whom Frans had met a year earlier in Mexico City, had retained power by defeating his opponents, but was about to meet his fate. Carranza tried to decide who would succeed him as president, but now his own men turned against him, not least the talented general Álvaro Obregón, who had led Carranza's army during the civil war and had ambitions of taking over the presidency himself.



Carranza went so far as to arrest Obregón. He escaped, however, and soon had almost the whole army behind him. At the same time, popular resistance against Carranza reached a peak when he forcibly tried to defeat a railway strike in the state of Sonora in Northern Mexico, and Frans wrote home: "One state after another rose against Carranza, formerly called 'Mexico's liberator'; now he is only spoken of as the 'tyrant' and 'dictator.'"

One Friday night, all sorts of rumors resounded in Minatitlan: would the government forces surrender to the rebels or not? Was it true that the rebel general Cástulo Pérez and his men camped just outside town? Would Minatitlan be burned down by incendiary bombs?

Well, that's nice to hear when you have 50,000 pesos piled up on tables and chairs. My boss ran away as usual and a few of the armed guard I had with me at the counter on Fridays and Saturdays found the atmosphere better elsewhere. Well, there was no doubt about what I had to do. I filled the envelopes for the workers, as if nothing was wrong. [...] At eight in the evening I had finished my job, and when I left the refinery, I was told that everything was calm, the garrison had surrendered, and C. P. [Cástulo Pérez] would be in town within half an hour.

When I was about midtown, I met the entering rebels. It was an exceptionally picturesque sight: all on horseback with their rifles resting on their thighs, every third man carrying a torch. In perfect peace and order they entered the town and were received enthusiastically. [...] We changed government in the course of half an hour and without a single gunshot being fired, which is very uncommon here.

Three officers were court-martialed, they came from a small gunboat that had been on the river for a long time. It was discovered on Saturday morning that they intended to bomb the town with incendiary bombs. The trial was summary. Their graves were dug in the cemetery, and on Sunday morning, they were made to stand, each one in front of his own grave, and shot. It all went on the quiet; I happened to pass by just at that moment. I must admit that it didn't make much of an impression on me, since one sees a bit of everything here.

Now we are safer than we have been for a long time, and everything is quiet. Obregón is reported to be in Mexico City and Carranza is said to offer the last resistance at the railway station of Esperanza on the line Veracruz-Mexico.

Yes, Carranza fled with his entire government from Mexico City in special trains bound for the port of Veracruz, carrying the government archives and the treasury. The train was attacked, Carranza himself fled on horseback into the mountains with a few companions, but in the early morning hours of May 21, he was betrayed and murdered. An interim government was appointed, and in September 1920, Álvaro Obregón was elected as Mexico's new president. This, most historians agree, finally put an end to a decade of revolution and civil war. One violent and bloody revolt in 1923-24 was defeated, and when Obregón resigned in 1924, handing over power to his successor Plutarco Elías Calles, it was the first time in forty years that a Mexican president had not been deposed or assassinated.

Obregón survived at first, but four years later, in July 1928, he too was murdered just after his re-election as president. Over the next six years, three rather weak presidents succeeded each other while the conservative

and dictatorial Calles remained in power behind the scenes. Sporadic clashes between government forces and rebels still occurred until 1934, when the popular reform president Lázaro Cárdenas finally began to carry out the ambitious social reforms of the 1917 Constitution.

While the rebels so bloodlessly took over Minatitlan in May 1920, Frans changed jobs. He had now been a cashier with Águila for about six months – quite in line with the usual turnover rate, since the refinery had had no less than seven cashiers in just three years. "I have rarely felt so relieved as when I handed over the treasury, free from the pressure that weighs on you when you're responsible for large sums, and particularly under the pressure of the constant insecurity. I am now working for Chas. Martin & Co., petroleum inspectors, my work consists of controlling all the loads which leave from here for export; I shall stay here in Minatitlan for the moment."

Now that the civil war seems to be over, the oil business is booming. Oil wells that had been shut down because they were in rebel territory are being reopened. "But with peace in the country comes the battle between the petroleum companies," Frans notes, and his plans of finding an oil well of his own are shelved so far, now that he has seen how the oil business actually works.

Otherwise, he spends much of his time making small trips into the jungle. This is something else than the cashier's office! There are only between four and six export boats to inspect every month, and therefore, the rest of the time, Frans is sent out to inspect oil wells and do reconnaissance for the company. It is now that he really discovers the jungle; it is now that it really gets hold of him. "Sometimes, these are tough trips, sometimes they are not without excitement – but one thing can be said about this life: it's a man's life. How wonderful life is out in the wild, and how interesting the various Indian tribes are. Of course, there are unpleasant things such as ticks and mosquitoes, dense thickets of palm trees with long thorns, and poisonous plants; but with good Indian guides you make it through and forget it quickly because of all the new things you see. I tolerate the climate excellently, and I feel healthier and stronger than ever before."

But it is evident that Frans is still, from time to time, troubled by his restless and divided mind. He may be physically strong, as he writes to his parents, but how is he doing mentally? And what is it he wants out here? What is he looking for?

To his mother, he confides in June 1920:

Some wise men speak of a dualism in man, that there are two people in every human being. I have tried to analyze myself, and I cannot get it down to two. There are many more.

Impressionable I live among *and with* the people around me. I have lived like a dog out here for a while, and despite fleas and vermin, despite the Indian diet and the filth, I enjoyed life. I have lived, though only for a short while, among pure-blooded Indians; lived their daily lives between the magnificent mountains, slept besides them and seen them come home from their battles; I've lived with them, *been one of them*; and every time that life has shown itself to me in a new shape, I just want to see more of this wonderful world, to live with and among several kinds of people.

And then, where does this restless blood come from? Much has changed in me these past 18 months, but the wanderlust still lies within me.<sup>73</sup>

In November, 1920, Frans can proudly write home: "I have shot my first leopard [jaguar] and several wild boars and lived amongst strange Indian tribes. One place, I met a small tribe that still use bows and arrows for their hunts." The oil in itself is not very interesting to Frans, it is mostly a pretext to get out into the jungle. But now it is no longer just the wildlife, nature, and hunting that count; the indigenous peoples and their culture are beginning to interest him increasingly. Not only the Indians he meets and stays with, but also those who in ancient times have left their temples and cities in the vast forests. Frans is becoming more and more fascinated with finding ancient monuments and archaeological objects. "We passed by a mound, Diego [the indigenous guide] told me that some years ago, a beautiful earthenware bowl was found in this mound. We stopped and I dug a little, found only potsherds and a few of the so common obsidian arrowheads." Obsidian is a black volcanic type of glass which the Maya and Aztec used, along with flint, for making scrapers, knives, spears, and arrowheads. "There is something immensely alluring about wandering in these great, lonely forests and to follow life in them. Even if you do not see game, there are thousands of signs that wildlife is stirring. And once you have gone through the forests with an Indian, you quickly learn to read signs that otherwise you would not notice." They set up camp for the night by a small stream: "Soon the fire was burning, and while I cut palm leaves to sleep on and hung up the mosquito nets, Diego prepared a simple dish consisting of boar brain and turtle eggs, served with toasted tortillas (not unlike Swedish crispbread) and spring water. Madam Mangor [influential Danish nineteenth-century cookbook writer] and Escoffier could not in their wildest dreams have cooked anything more exquisite."

In January 1921, Frans Blom returns to the oil company *Águila*, not to the refinery however, but the geological department. "I am learning surveying, and at the moment I work only 1½ day's journey by canoe from Minatitlan. We are two white men here deep in the forests. I am an assistant to the geologist and life is quite to my taste. [...] Our work is to chop our way through the forests and find out where there are chances of finding petroleum. We have 8 canoes and 15 Indians and move forward in short day trips. According to all estimates we shall be underway for two or three months."

Frans now knows how to survey and map, and it is an irony of fate that he, who had such a hard time with mathematics in school, now works as a surveyor. "I used to hate difficult calculations and arithmetical problems, and after I left school, I saw very little of numbers. Then, here in Mexico, I learned how to make maps, and measure land, and now it is thoroughly amusing to count and calculate all the measuring which I turn into maps. It is pure joy when it turns out that days and weeks of work has been accurate."<sup>74</sup> If he and the geologist find oil wells, they mark them on the map and lay the groundwork for future drilling. "I am engaged as an engineer – of all things – but you can understand that it is not so much my knowledge of this science as my knowledge of Spanish and a few Indian dialects that has gotten me the position."

Frans enjoys being out in the forests again: "In the afternoon I either go hunting or lounge comfortably with a glass of orange or lemon juice reading novels." Frans has previously said that he brought his books on Mexican history and archaeology with him down to Minatitlan, but now he has expanded his book collection, and his family has sent him books from home. Moreover, Frans adds: "My Indian school is going well every night." He is teaching his two houseboys how to read and write. He, who wasn't always fond of going to school himself, knows which doors can open up for someone who masters the art of reading and writing. So when the day's work is done, when the peaceful evening darkness has descended, the two boys are made to sit down in the light from the kerosene lamp. Initially, they learn to write their own names. "I have provided them with paper, pencil and [their names to] copy, and their small, hard hands have great difficulty in using the pencil."

Frans has gathered himself a gang of native workers. He treats them better than most other Europeans would do, but there is still no doubt about who is the white man in power, "they are pure devils at work – but also when they are let loose. They have no respect for any man among foreigners here; my boss tried to get them to do something the other day – but no, they had to first receive the order from Don Pancho (that is me). They do everything I order them to do. The reason may well be that I treat them humanely and politely. If one of them is refractory, I have found a very refined punishment – I send him to Minatitlan by canoe. It is 8 hours downriver and 12 hours back. I order them to be back within 24 hours, otherwise they lose their jobs. Beating does not make them nearly as manageable." And Frans enjoys assuming the white man's burden: "There is something touching about these Indians around here. They are quite primitive, and when they like a white man, they slowly become trusting; the white man becomes a kind of father to them."

Later, in one of his little stories written in English around 1941, after his dismissal from Tulane University, Frans describes his camp here by the *Uspanapa* River in a slightly romanticized light. "Located in the heart of a rich tropical valley, abounding in game, and on the banks of a river teeming with fish, one can hardly imagine a place more like paradise. I was the only white man there, and what counted more among the natives, I was the boss from whom they got their pay. My position was, therefore, a combination of a king and a god. The 35 Indian men which I had employed lived at some distance from my hut with their families. They came to me for orders, supplies and medicines. When they disagreed I was their judge, when they celebrated and enjoyed themselves I was their guest of honor."<sup>75</sup> But one day another white man arrives at the camp, an unpleasant American whom the narrator suspects to be working for a rival oil company. He turns out, however, to be a missionary for some Protestant sect. The missionary finds a bottle of rum among the narrator's belongings and has a drop too much. When the narrator politely asks him to disappear as quickly as possible, the drunk missionary scolds him violently: "Do you call yourself a white man, you who are taking the side of the savages? You side with the natives; you have gone native, and nothing is lower and more to be despised than a white man who has gone native."

Frans himself detests Christianity and its institutions; at one point he writes to his mother: "I do not understand that people will let themselves be locked inside a house to worship their god, when they have the greatest

church ever built out in nature, under the canopy of heaven. If I go to a church, I immediately object, I protest, I am disgusted."<sup>76</sup> But Frans does not try to impose his outlook onto others, and he leaves it to the natives to decide their own religion. No one should interfere, and especially not a missionary. In the little story, he writes: "I thought of those pious, stupid, and well-meaning people, somewhere far away, who were paying this trash to spread the gospel at the rate of \$250.00 a month and all expenses."<sup>77</sup> And the Indians don't want to work until the missionary has left. They are also afraid that he will attack their boss. The next morning, the narrator makes sure that the missionary's canoe is packed and ready to go. Outside the hut, the Indians stand with sharpened knives, and the narrator himself has his gun ready. Finally they succeed in making the missionary sail away, as he heavily curses the white man who sided with the natives.

In March 1921, an entry in Frans's diary reads:

The white race is such an obtrusive race. Here, as everywhere, it dominates in its smug superiority; it spreads all over the world, forcing on all other races and peoples its customs, religion, etc. Always, from its self-righteous point of view, the white race assumes that all other peoples are nonentities and pagans. [...] The pure-blooded Indian hereabouts is a peaceful puny devil who drifts through life by nature's gifts. Centuries of foreign domination have driven him to regard himself as an inferior creature. Where the white race gathers – here in the petroleum industry and sugar refineries – there all the half-breed rabble throngs. A rough and drunken gang that can't help giving the white man an impression of the Mexicans' backward level. Only when you get far away from the beaten track into the small Indian villages out in the forests, you get to know and appreciate the Indians.<sup>78</sup>

Frans has always been something of a loner; it suits him best when he can decide for himself, and life in the palm hut by the river fits him splendidly, far away from the "petty quarreling and strife" of the European colony. "It is a pure blessing to live in peace and quiet out in the forests." Your outlook on life also changes, Frans says: "Your conceptions transform, you let your neighbor do as your neighbor pleases (at times he is a little far away), and you do as you please yourself." He does not really care to keep up with what is happening in the world, or back home in Denmark, in the way of conflicts and newspaper polemics. These things diminish in importance when one is by oneself, far out in the jungle: "I do not even read newspapers anymore. I so seldom see any, and if I finally get a hold of a newspaper, the news is so old that I don't even bother to read it. In contrast, I read quite a few books, Mexican archaeology, Indian languages, oil geology and surveying."

It is probably T. A. Joyce's relatively new book *Mexican Archaeology* (1914) which is Frans's main source of archaeological knowledge, exciting his imagination with its descriptions of ruins scattered in the jungle beneath the almost impenetrable green canopy. We know that he had Joyce's book in his collection and that he probably bought it immediately upon his arrival in Mexico City two years earlier. Frans certainly has the time to read, not only in the afternoon, but also in the evening before sleeping: "Because it gets dark here at six thirty, and mosquitoes are attracted by the lamplight, you worm your way under the mosquito net with your books, put the lamp on a crate

close by, outside the net, and let the mosquitoes sing their serenades outside."

One day Frans attends a funeral with the locals. In his diary he notes at one point: "Personally I am opposed to funeral cults (and even more opposed to the religion of which the Cross is a symbol)."<sup>79</sup> But Frans has a great ethnographic interest in religion. As he has already noted, the beliefs of the peoples he encounters are a mixture of their own pre-Columbian religion and the Catholicism of the Spanish conquistadors.

The Indians around here call themselves "cristianos" – Christians – and are thought to be Catholics. To the random passer-by they also appear as such; they often have an oleograph or two of saints on the wall of their huts, adorned by a few flowers and candles – but there it stops. At such important events as marriage and death, they fall back into their old ways.

This kind of syncretism is widespread to this day throughout Mexico and Guatemala. Several of the ancient Maya deities have been given the names of saints, but have otherwise retained their power and attributes; and both deities and ancestral spirits are given offerings such as chickens, eggs, soft drinks, or alcohol. Offerings are made, candles and incense (copal) are burned, just like the Aztec and Maya did long before the Spaniards arrived. Frans is deeply interested in these customs, the beliefs, rituals, and myths that he meets.

All Indians revel in stories of revolution and murder, but it is very difficult to get them to talk about the forests and the animals, the mystical side of forest life, their medicinal plants, etc. I've succeeded in getting quite a few things out of them, but there are many mysterious things I would like to have sorted out. They still firmly believe that individuals can transform themselves into animals, and I have pretty good evidence that the chiefs of a few Indian tribes worship unknown gods at night, deep in the forests. Recently, I came upon an old idol in the dense jungle.

We are now in March 1921 and Frans still lives in his little camp, Vista Hermosa, by the Usapanapa River.

So you would like to know if I live like a vagabond or a gentleman, and the answer is: a vagabonding gentleman for the time being. I live in a tent with an awning. My furniture consists of various empty crates of soap, bacon and canned goods. My Indians have made a fine rack along the back wall of the tent; this rack supports my rifles, shotguns, revolvers, fishing lines, lassos, etc., and on the wall behind it hangs my Danish flag, all very picturesque. I sleep on a camp bed, beautifully draped with mosquito nets like a canopy bed. [...] Along the sides of the tent are crates of food (canned), instruments and tools. On the floor lie hides of strange animals. The lighting consists of kerosene lamps of the cow barn family. This is my bedroom.

Outside the tent, I have built myself a palm roof, passing as dining room, living room and kitchen. The stove is a common Indian campfire. Under the ceiling all my food is strung up in nets and tin cans, so the ants will not get hold of it. [...] The whole caboodle is situated on a small

hill with views over the Uspanapa River, some large, flat meadows, and far, far away you see a blue mountain range, the "Sierra Madre." At the foot of the hill, I have a gorgeous spring and my shower; the latter consists of a floor of logs and an Indian with a bucket.

My work, you ask? A cross between a surveyor, geologist, wood cutter with small splashes of naturalist, ethnographer and hunter; some gentlemen are sitting in Puerto Mexico, and they figure out that now Blom must walk eight miles in direction N.S.W.E. and dig a hole of so and so many meters and send in samples. It is easy enough to come up with that kind of idea, but it's another matter to walk the eight miles through the jungle. If the Lord would send the mosquitoes and ticks to the North Pole and send us some ice instead, then this would be pure Paradise. By the way, one sometimes imagines to be in that zoo of Eden on the day that Eve washed her only fig leaf. It is not uncommon to see the whole "fair sex" of a village in that very costume. "Fair" is not far off the mark, by the way; at 14 or 15 years of age, the girls here are extraordinarily beautiful. Fear not – I will not bring one of them home. My health is good. I seem born for this climate. The only thing that bothers me from time to time is my ailing teeth. Damn them, they cost me a tidy sum of money in Puerto Mexico some time ago.

Soon the surveying job is done, and now preparatory work for the oil drilling has to get under way. On March 21, 1921, Frans writes home to his family: "And so peace disappeared. 50 lazy Indians, now a boat full of geologists, now one full of engineers, then an inspection committee from London, followed by a steamer full of supplies and more workers. [...] The people in Puerto Mexico throw 3000 rails on the riverbank, the ties still grow as trees in the forest."

Frans does not much consider the fact that the arrival of so-called "civilization" also means the destruction of the pristine jungle. What matters is that his own adventure is destroyed, peace is over. Frans can leave the oil camp with its inferno of people, he can go further into the forests, seek new tasks, new adventures: "Soon I have completed my work, and then once more deeper into the forests – where peace is."

Life in Mexico is not completely peaceful, however. In the aftermath of the civil war and the various insurrections, Frans hopes for a strong leader who will ensure decent working conditions for the large foreign companies: "Everybody hopes – and everything suggests – that the current president Obregón is a strong man, and that conditions will now improve; if Mexico is entering another Porfirio Díaz era, then it will be a wonderland. I have been in a few close corners – except for my trip near Orizaba, I have not written home about them – and have escaped them relatively unscathed. They have only seemed alluring to me – there is something tantalizing, appealing about sudden, immediate danger."

As an expedition leader and a surveyor, Frans has already been given new tasks. "It seems that my bosses always seek out the most remote places for me, but I'm not complaining – the more remote, the more interesting it is." First he has to go "further up the Uspanapa River in a district where no foreigner has set foot for the last 11 years. I must reach a place 20 kilometers [12 miles] inland from the river and find some abandoned oil wells – when

they were in operation, they delivered the finest oil ever found – nearly pure lubricating oil. The place is called Tecuanapa."

And after the first short expedition to the abandoned oil wells, Frans returns to his former idyllic camp by the Uspanapa River in mid-May. It is four and a half months since he began surveying, and only two months since the oil workers moved in. Now everything has changed:

When I came here, everything was dense forest with narrow, almost closed paths. Now houses, narrow-gauge railways, tanks and derricks are shooting out of the ground. All kinds of Whites lead the infernal dance. Mechanics and derrick-builders, drillers of the "1 gallon rum per day" kind, wild-west gunshots, swarming everywhere. A motley crowd of Indian riff-raff works hard during the day, drinking and fighting at night. Yes, civilization is a beautiful thing. It sounds so good to talk about civilization and progress – it is just an embellished term for greed.

In July 1921, Frans is once more sent to the abandoned oil wells at Tecuanapa. It becomes him well to be back in the jungle, and he is supposed to stay there for two or three months. "Unfortunately, I have an American greenhorn with me – and he is very green. But a few months up there, the somewhat rough life and a couple of Indian boys I have, should probably bring him up."

By the end of July, he has installed himself in his house and made himself as cozy a little camp as the one he had before the oil people moved into Vista Hermosa. He has two houseboys to help him, a dog, a coati, and two parrots, one of which can say "Damn!" in Danish. "I subsist on hunting, fishing and nature's other gifts in the fruit dealer and greengrocer business, and it's all for free. I have a large crate of books and an Aztec kitchen midden to while away my afternoons and evenings; and I cut roads that people can't walk in the mornings."

It is striking that Frans describes as "Aztec" nearly all ruins and artefacts that he encounters, even though they are more likely to be of local Gulf Coast origin. He does not yet distinguish closely. "I have once again made quite an interesting find of Aztec antiquities in the forests and a quantity of pottery, unfortunately mostly in sherds; but they still give an idea of the high level of the people who once lived here." The wording is strongly reminiscent of Joyce's *Mexican Archaeology*, which Frans is studying diligently. "I read quite a bit of Aztec history, mythology and the like – extremely interesting; more so, the more you read." In his diaries he also jots down "Indian customs, myths, superstitions and linguistic notes." He has a small amulet made for himself, a jaguar tooth against evil eyes and a crocodile tooth against plague, joined in a silver chain.<sup>80</sup> He draws and describes meticulously the things he finds, potsherds, clay flutes and more. It is interesting that Frans, paid by Águila to carry out geological studies and surveying, spends so much time on his own hobby: archaeological notes. He writes in detail about every object, although he still knows fairly little about archaeology. He draws, measures and describes the material, shape, and condition. And guesses at possible uses: "Perhaps neck of jar," "Musical instrument?," etc.<sup>81</sup>

When the work in Tecuanapa is finished and the oil people can move in with their machines and drilling rigs, Frans has to go even further up the river, further into the jungle.

A few high dignitaries were here the other day and tried to go inland – but had to turn back. They landed here, thrilled by the country upriver and decided to send me up there to open up the way for them. Now they are probably sitting in Puerto Mexico having great fun that “Blom’s got another dirty job.” Let me just get more of those. It is full of tapir up there, and the Indians hereabouts mysteriously murmur about ruins and ancient idols of stone.

On August 9, 1921, Frans celebrates his twenty-eighth birthday in his small hut in the jungle. His family have written letters well in advance, and the day before, he writes: “I got all my birthday mail yesterday in the night. There was lightning, thunder and rain, and the river rose 7 feet in a few hours. Out of this storm came one of my Indians, whom I had sent out for mail; he was stark naked, he had taken off his pants and shirt and wrapped them around the letters so that they would not get wet. [...] Tomorrow I intend to celebrate by myself in the forests with a gun over my shoulder. [...] I will see if I can come home next year – but don’t tell anyone, so as not to arouse hopes. If I come, well, then I’ll be there one day, quite simply – and I will not stay long. I don’t want to stay home in Denmark just yet.” No, he still has not really found what he is looking for in foreign lands. Not yet made a successful career for himself, not yet proved his father’s distrust to be groundless.

But the jungle taxes the young man’s health, and in his letters, he does not tell his family everything. In his private diary, Frans writes on August 29, 1921: “I have again, for a long time, let down my diary. I don’t know why, or rather, moods and events, external and internal influences have played a role. I’ve had plenty of time, but no desire to write. This, the lack of desire and energy, is a typical tropical disease, and you have to be on guard against this disease. It takes hold of you, insidiously and naturally. The white man is not created for the tropics – the heat forces him to work less vigorously than in the North. You burn yourself out by working too hard, therefore, gradually you take it more and more easy. You are waited on by natives hand and foot; they do every little trifle for you, and you have to be careful, or you will end up lying in your hammock all day. The heat takes its toll on your nerves, they become frayed and easily react to your changing moods. The countless annoying little insects fill you with their poison and wear you down, too. And you don’t notice that you’re getting worn out, it happens drop by drop.”<sup>82</sup>

The jungle eats away at Frans, physically and mentally. His strength dwindles. At one point, he simply collapses due to heat and exhaustion: “that night, the next day and the next night I do not know what happened. Then I gradually woke out of my torpor, confused at first, then I realized that I was ill and pretty far away from any kind of help. For a brief moment, horror struck me – but then came a blessed peace – what was there to get excited about? If I were to kick the bucket, then preferably out in the great nature, among some Indians who cared about me, than among the Whites who only care about their own little selves, who with their greedy eyes keep a close watch that the others don’t outrun them in the pay raise race. There is peace in the great forests.”<sup>83</sup>

At the same time, Frans is still struggling with his old low self-esteem, his lack of confidence in his own abilities. This deep insecurity that he has struggled with since childhood. He has so many dreams, but he is not equal



Watercolor by Frans Blom, view of Río de la Venta, 1921.

to them. He feels inferior and incompetent, like “Per” in the short story draft “Las Chinampas,” who unlike his artist friends could not express himself artistically. Blom’s diary again: “I wish every day that I had the abilities, that I knew a thousand things – I wish that I could paint and draw well; that I could write a vivid account of things here; that I knew botany, zoology and geology; that I had better mapping skills. Every day I certainly learn more, yet I miss studying – and out here it is somewhat difficult to study, since books are few and collections nonexistent. I feel like an amateur – and a very mediocre amateur at that.”<sup>84</sup>

Life in the jungle leaves plenty of time for Frans to think and ponder. Nearby, the clear water gurgles as it makes its way over the stones of the river; far away, the calling sounds of a flock of birds can be heard. As the last rays of the sun play over the treetops, the air seems to hold a special, fragrant goldenness; and in a quick flash of color, parrots fly by before settling in the crown of a huge ceiba tree. Darkness descends quickly around his palm-roofed clay hut on the Uspanapa River. In the evening darkness, under his mosquito net with the swarming mosquitoes and the singing of frogs and cicadas gushing forth from the deep of the jungle, Frans again lights his kerosene lamp and writes in his diary:

Today, I stopped at some distance from my house and looked it over thoroughly. The high palm roof, the mud walls, a small fenced-in courtyard – the kitchen hut, some chickens, a pig, a monkey, a tejón [coati] and a gaudy parrot, an Indian boy sweeping the courtyard with a besom, a woman grinding maize on her primitive Indian grinding stone metate, all this brought back memories of a group of savages on display at the Copenhagen Zoo when I was a boy.

And in these surroundings lives Frans Blom, cand. phil., considered

intelligent, a once much sought-after party-goer, then the black sheep of his domestic circles. He lives there, and feels satisfaction with living there.

Had I gone the direct route, I would now have been co-owner of a reputable firm, sitting on various boards, on my way to becoming a sedate pillar of society, perhaps even married. Whereas now, I am a low-level employee in a large oil company.

One thing is certain. If I had gone the direct route, I would not have seen the thousand sparkling flashes of light in the diamond called life. I would never have known the depth and power of nature, I would never have learned to enjoy solitude and the ensuing peace of mind.

In the eyes of the masses, it is something to be a pillar of society – but I doubt that these people ever get the opportunity to reflect on their lives or find the time to give full consideration to just one particular thing, without worrying about tomorrow and without being distracted by the restless city around them.

When alone, it is only natural that you tend to be very preoccupied with yourself. You cannot help looking closely at yourself when exposed to so many different influences. But this self-study does not lead to self-centeredness, rather to self-evaluation and self-criticism.<sup>85</sup>

Perhaps, this continuous self-criticism, this everlasting lack of self-esteem, is one of the keys to understanding Frans Blom's life. An insecure and solitary soul who felt most at ease when alone in the jungle. Doubting his own abilities, but very charming and good at convincing others. And later, when the alcohol did its job, he could almost convince himself. But maybe, he was just a little boy – unable to live up to his father's demands and expectations – who throughout his life sought recognition and love.

How did he get here? And where is it all going to lead? He does not know himself as he puts aside his diary, blows out the lamp, rises from the hammock, and slips past the mosquito net out into the open air. Accompanied by the familiar sounds of the jungle, Frans lights another cigarette and thoughtfully blows out the smoke towards the velvety black sky with the thousand bright stars.

Then, in late October 1921, Frans's work in Tecuanapa is done, and he soon has to leave his cozy little house and his voluntary solitude. In November, Frans plans a vacation for the first time in years. He is entitled to a month's holiday every year, with full pay, but he has to have the time to take it. His plans include a week in Mexico City, where he will "enjoy music and once again delight in the splendid museum – ancient Aztec artifacts." From Mexico City, he plans to travel slowly south, "visiting, on my way, different cities with a reputation for beauty or ancient ruins."

His holiday plans fall through, however, because there is frantic activity in the oil field Vista Hermosa-Concepción by the Usapanapa River.

One year earlier, the jungle here was untouched. In January, Frans came and built his camp. In March, the geologists, engineers, and oil workers moved in, and Frans moved further into the jungle. In August, he wrote home: "They are said to have found oil [...] I am very pleased since I did all the preparatory work in the district." And now, on December 7, he can jubilantly write:

Before we expected it – and more than we anticipated – the big moment – petroleum came this morning at 3:45. Of course, I was sound asleep at the time. At 4, I was awakened: "Blom! Gas is coming from number eighteen!" Wide awake, waterproof boots, pajamas and sweater. It was pitch dark when I came out. There was a hissing sound from the derrick, increasing in strength. We ran down towards the derrick, people came running from all sides, more or less dressed. It was raining stones and the hissing sound became stronger and stronger – the people from the derrick came running towards us and shouted: "Put out all lamps!" There was a stench of gas – we were about 100 meters [110 yards] from the derrick – the derrick was raging, and soon we saw in the dark a black cloud rising around the derrick. The ground trembled beneath us – it was raining oil – the result we have all impatiently and anxiously been waiting for – petroleum.

At daybreak, they can see the oil gush forth as a fountain reaching some 30 yards above the derrick, a mighty, roaring jet of oil. "Trees around were weighed down by sand and oil, bent and were broken. The air was full of sand, stones, oil and dirt; and gas surged in a vapor across the forest." And now, work really starts:

Dams were thrown around the derrick to contain the oil, fire guards were placed in position, small gasoline locomotives struggled about with planks for the dams, and the monster raged and spewed – 40,000 barrels a day and very fine oil. For five hours it raged and roared, then it stopped – suddenly, all seemed silent as the grave after the deafening pandemonium. However, it only lasted a moment – with a clamor the oil gushed forth again, into the skies again – it stopped again a few times – finally it stopped altogether. The mighty force had detached a rock deep in the ground, flung it into the drill hole and "turned off the hot water" as we say in Copenhagen. Nature came to our aid, taming the monster. Now the derrick and the drill hole have to be cleaned, a tap put on, and soon the monster will supply oil, nicely and tamely, according to what "Old Man Aguila" wants. It is the first major well in this district, and everyone here is thrilled. It means success and great progress for the region.

The field in Tecuanapa, where Frans did preparatory work from July to October, is also to be opened up as an oil camp. The two assignments he has had have led to good results for the company. "Every little bit helps to strengthen my case – yet there's still a long way up." It must be said that Frans has no formal education, neither as a geologist, an engineer or a surveyor. His assets, and his only qualifications, are his love of adventure, his stamina and drive. Whether the oil company will let him rise through the ranks, or continue merely to use him as an odd-job man to clear new oil fields, is uncertain. In any case, Frans is not suited for a job behind a desk in Puerto México; his place is in the jungle, and he fills this position so well that he gets both appreciation and a wage increase.

Just before Christmas, on December 20, 1921, he explains in a letter home:

My work is exactly what I could wish for. Most of the time I travel around, often through utterly unknown regions, wonderfully beautiful, with rich game and now and then the opportunity to find old Aztec idols

and other highly interesting antiquities. One might say that I have now come back to where I started out as a boy – from January 1, I am a “scout” – not a boy scout, but belonging to a small group of the company’s men, whose main occupation is expeditions into unknown regions.

The deal is in the bag: “scout” may not sound too fancy, but in reality it means explorer and expedition leader, which is right up Frans’s alley.

The company only has 15 of them and their work consists in obtaining information about unknown regions, all kinds of information, partially about natural oil wells, ownership of oil districts, plans, geographical information – and keeping track of what other companies do. [...] I will save my holiday for another time – in a way, this will be pure holiday for me, this long journey into regions said to be rich in game; described, by the few Indians who have been there, as a wonderland.

Soon the expedition, led by Frans, departs for the interior of the jungle.

It seems that it will be a constant battle against all kinds of difficulties – but that is my act here. [...] We shall have to go up the Uspanapa River, then cross overland to another river that is *said* to be among the mountains and try to reach Frontera in Tabasco – a trip of 7 weeks to 2 months. I am looking very much forward to this. The expedition will consist of a geologist, a surveyor and myself, plus 6–8 Indians.

The day before his departure, January 7, 1922, Frans reports from Puerto México:

I spent Christmas with friends in Minatitlan and New Year here, both extremely enjoyable. I wore a tuxedo for the first time in 2 years – a strange, but definitely not an uncomfortable feeling. Thank you for the package of books and magazines, I will read them on my trip. My head is full of paddles, canoes, dried meat, tinned food, instruments and all the other things that one must get together in order to make a trip of a few months without any connection with the outside world.

The trip goes up the Uspanapa River, past the oil field of Vista Hermosa-Concepción, and past the camp in Tecuanapa. From there up along Río de la Venta and Río Grijalva and finally along the narrow and deep Río Pedregal, which flows into the Gulf of Mexico just 15 miles from Puerto México. Frans and his companion, a Filipino geologist named Quirico Abadilla, will have to map the area and examine soil conditions.

It is a tough expedition through trackless jungle, across torrential rivers and rapids and past dramatic waterfalls. Supplies are running low, the men are tired. The canoe capsizes.

Our camp beds and pans sailed away down the river. The worst part was that our notebooks with all our maps and records sailed merrily downwards and away. [...] Abadilla and I got our clothes off in a hurry and fought with stones and the strong current to salvage our books and instruments. We managed to salvage everything – even the books. Things would have looked very bad for us, if they had been lost. Only a few films were lost.

In fact, all the photos from this expedition were destroyed by the water, but Frans managed to save the most important things, notes and samples.

But every bit of clothing was drenched, the sugar was liquid as syrup, and the coffee was mush. [...] We tucked ourselves in between the wet blankets to rest a bit. [...] Around midnight, one of the men managed to light a match, and I was awakened by the light of a blazing campfire. We managed to make ourselves a cup of coffee out of the coffee mush, then I fell asleep, feeling a bit better.

But through all the hardships, there are also glimpses of ruins. One of the men they meet in the jungle tells them that somewhere nearby there is an ancient ruin, and that “many years ago in the forests he found 6 clay idols lined up in a row.” The next day, Frans finds the ruins on a small hill by the river: “It appears to have been an altar or the foundation for an idol, built of flakes of sandstone, such as can be found along the river, mortared with lime and sand. [...] I found no remnants of sherds or anything; and lacking tools, I could not have my men dig.”

Several of the local Indians tell them about ruins in the forests and clay figures on the green hills and in the streams. “Unfortunately, the people of the region do not collect these things – and if they do, they bring them home as toys for the kids who quickly break them.”

On March 1, they stay for the night with a man who is the happy owner of a violin. Abadilla, the Filipino, turns out to be an excellent violinist, and Frans is happy to hear music again, after a couple of months in the wilderness:

He plays well, and here in the hinterland, in a palm hut in Mexico, “Meditation” from [Massenet’s opera] “Thaïs,” and the pretty little Mexican song “La Paloma” sounded like a stream of good music. It has been a long time since I’ve heard good music – and even though it was on a homemade violin, it was nevertheless a sample that led my thoughts back to operas and concerts, to friends who have played for me. Quirico and I sat late into the night, remembering music, and the Indians were squatting around us listening; the people here love music, and easily learn what they hear. The lady of the house sat for a long time enthralled and listened; in the end she heaved a deep sigh and exclaimed – “Es como en la iglesia” – it’s like being in church – that was her view of the, to her, so unfamiliar music.

The expedition is drawing to a close, and finally Frans provides a description of his travel companion. Before their departure, the young Dane was somewhat uneasy about having to work with a geologist who was not a European, or at least an American, but something as exotic as a Filipino. How would things go? Can a white man really work on a par with an Asian? The day before departure, Frans wrote to his family: “les extrêmes se touchent,” the extremes meet. He did concede, though, that Abadilla “is said to be very gifted and skillful, and we must therefore see what a Scandinavian and a Filipino can get out of each other by working together for two months.”<sup>86</sup> Along the way a crisis arose because Abadilla had a falling out with the Indians and sent them home in the middle of the jungle. But gradually a good relationship has built between the two, Frans and Quirico Abadilla. Now, after almost three months together, Frans writes that “he is a top-notch guy.



Frans Blom, 1922.

[...] He is good to travel with." That really counts as a compliment, coming from Frans, who otherwise prefers very much to be left alone.

On March 5, the expedition is almost over. The sea is not far away now, and instead of camping for the night, they continue ahead. "The sun went down in a splendor of violet, and the crescent moon took over the lighting. Only the scraping of the oars against the sides of the canoe and the water rippling on the bow could be heard. The Southern Cross crept up over the forest to the south. Quirico and I tried to sleep a little, but the Indians began to sing one of their long, monotonous Spanish songs. At around ten in the

evening we heard the distant roar of the sea, and as we approached the river mouth, the water turned salty, phosphorescence dripped from the oars and flashed along the sides of the canoe. At midnight we finally reached Tonala by the Gulf after 16 hours of rowing, having traveled 100 kilometers [62 miles] since we started in the morning."

The next day, March 6, they reach Puerto México and the office of the oil company. The expedition is over after three months: "Among my mail was an order to write my report in four days and then off again, this time Frontera and zigzagging through Tabasco and Chiapas. On this trip I get to see the ruins of Palenque, and after this trip another trip on the Grijalva – that is two big trips in store for me."

Already ten days later, on March 16, 1922, they sail by boat from Puerto México down south to the port of Frontera in the state of Tabasco. The largest town Frans has seen in years, there is asphalt on the streets, real stone houses and a plaza in the middle of the town, with sidewalk cafés, card games, and chatting. "As usual there are all kinds of rumors of rebels and bandits – and everybody complains about the government." The fact that the civil war has officially ended has not meant an end to the unrest in the country. And, as so often happens after a civil war, some former rebels have found it easier to just keep their arms and pursue a career as robbers and bandits. Frans writes at one point that there are "80% of the rebel officers who only call themselves rebels to conceal their main occupation, robbery."<sup>87</sup>

On March 20, they continue by wood-fired riverboat up the great Usumacinta River. Along the banks lie woodsheds and stacks of firewood so that the little river steamers can refuel. The next day, in the town of Jonuta, Frans immediately notices a large grass-covered mound "that looked exactly like an Aztec pyramid. As soon as we landed, I ran up to it. There is no doubt that it is a pyramid, about 60 feet high. Particularly on the west side the soil was full of red potsherds. In a hut by the base of the mound I bought five old clay figures of Maya origin [...] Unfortunately there was no time to survey the pyramid." In 1923, Frans Blom gave these clay figures to the National Museum in Copenhagen, where they are now kept.

On March 22, they reach the town of Laguna, apparently under communist rule: "Several red flags float above the town, since it is ruled by a kind of soviet, a workers' council." Frans goes out to have a look at the town: "In a pharmacy, I found a collection of antiquities, but unfortunately there was no time to have a good look at them. In the evening we went to the local cinema theater."

The next morning, on March 23, the steamer is supposed to leave early, "but thanks to the Bolshevik workers" it does not leave until a quarter to three in the afternoon. In Frans Blom's opinion, the pampered workers are paid way too much, and only "work when they care to – at most 5 hours a day. On the whole, working conditions are unbearable and all the big lumber, chicle [chewing gum] and banana companies have stopped working here. One thing is for sure, the petroleum companies will avoid this Bolshevik town." Frans's relationship with the Russian Princess Myra, who had fled Russia in 1917, certainly did not dispose him any better towards the Bolsheviks. And in a letter to his father in 1919, he warned that revolution could easily spread to cozy little Denmark: "Bad times will also come to Denmark, so close to revolution and Bolshevism."<sup>88</sup>



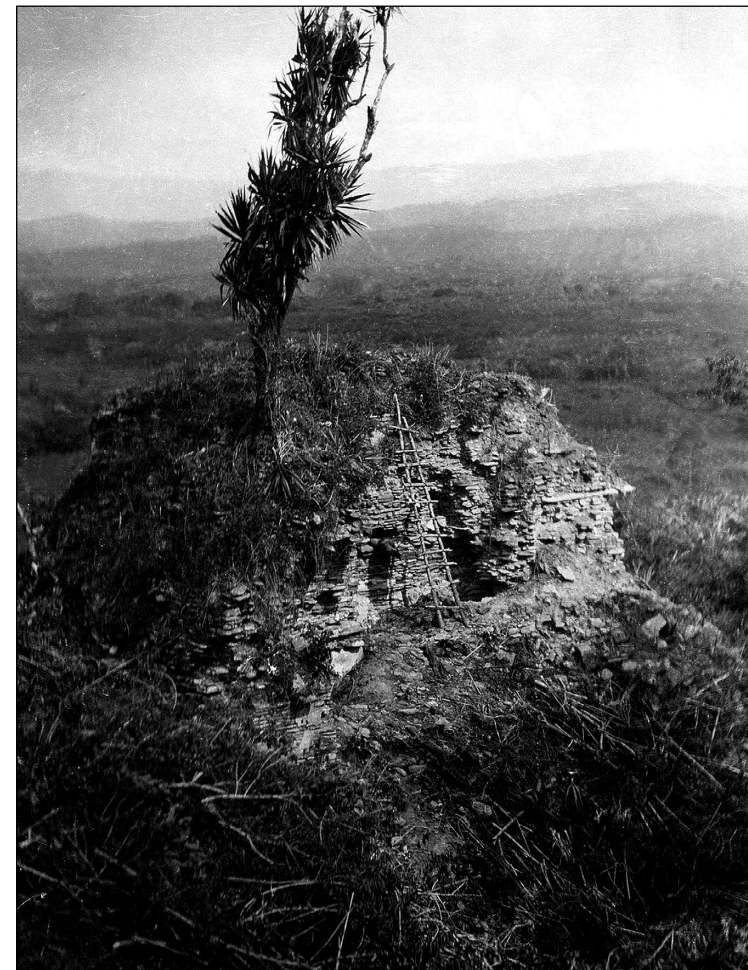
On March 25 in the late evening, they reach the town of Tenosique. "To the south lie the mighty Zendal and Caribe forests, inhabited by idolatrous Indians. It is the best way to get to the Maya ruins of Piedras Negras and Yaxchilan, only little-known – and a lot of other ruins. I got hold of a small clay vessel from Yaxchilan for 1 Danish krone, bought it from a chiclero [chicle tapper]." This clay vessel too is now in the National Museum in Copenhagen. The Zendales jungle would later become one of Frans's favorite areas. And the breathtakingly beautiful ruins of Yaxchilan in particular, by the banks of the Usumacinta River, with their finely carved limestone reliefs and stelae, were to become Frans Blom's favorite place among the Maya ruins of the jungle.

As the leader of the expedition, Frans quickly takes charge when it turns out that the preparatory work in Tenosique has not been done at all. "There we found Pike, Adkins, Wynne and Lesniak and everything in the most awful mess. L[esniak] has been here for 4 months – that says it all. He had received orders two weeks ago to have the horses here well fed with maize, have the saddles repaired etc., and nothing had been done." But on March 29, they finally take off, and Frans collects antiquities everywhere he goes. "Here I got hold of an obsidian arrowhead and four sherds, the base of a vessel with caricatured faces. One of the people in San Carlos told us about ruins perched along the ridge – walls with figures." Somewhere else he finds "a small Lacandon idol of burnt clay."

March 30: "At dawn I was up and dressed before I woke the men; I prefer to be dressed and have my things packed before the rest of the family wakes up." Every day it is the same routine: "As usual up at 4; and as we fumble around in the dark, the field beds are packed, the animals are gathered and saddled, the coffee brought over the fire, and it is my job to cut up the bacon. When the day begins to break, we go down to the stream and take a bath. Then coffee and off to the toilsome work of loading the mules." In the afternoons, they reach a hacienda, a coffee plantation or mahogany property, where the geologists occupy themselves with their fossils and mineral specimens while Frans arranges lodgings for his men and animals. He also gathers information on next day's route and local conditions, "everything of importance in case the company intends to work in the district." It is not always easy for the well-bred Frans to travel with a party of American oil people. "Strictly in parentheses, I must say that the good Americans are born devoid of tact and manners and I have my hands full smoothing out when their coarse manners offend the overly polite Mexicans."

Onward it goes, over steep hills, across streams and rivers. The big rivers must be crossed by canoes and rafts, the animals swim across, and then need to be saddled and loaded again. Along the way, they meet chicle tappers with their mules and their cargo of large blocks of solidified chicle, on its way to be exported and made into chewing gum. We shall later return to the strange relationship between chewing gum and Maya archaeology.

April 7: "On a savannah that we crossed, we met 3 Lacandon Indians – real genuine Indians. An old man and two boys, all three armed with bow and arrows. The old man had typical Maya features, a large hooked nose with raised nostrils and arched eyebrows – as taken straight out of the ancient Maya stucco ornaments. Their long hair hung down over their shoulders and all they wore was a rectangular blanket with a hole in the middle. We traded



From the ruins at Tonina, April 1922.

with them, and for empty cans and salt we bought two sets of bows and arrows, and two chickens – the old one spoke Spanish. These Indians live hidden in the forests here, and very rarely venture out. They count their time in moons (months) and suns (days), and are said to be sun worshippers."

On Good Friday, April 14, 1922, they reach Ocosingo, a town that Frans will return to several times, and which will later become the scene of a significant turning point in his life. This is the first time he visits the place: "The whole little town is a ruin and makes a poor, dead impression. [...] In front of the church, a pole was erected with a stuffed male figure slung from the top. At first glance, I thought that there had been a real party, Mexican style, and that they had hanged an Indian. This figure is called Judas, and with wild celebrations he is burned on Easter Eve."

On Easter Sunday, Frans gets the opportunity to visit the impressive Maya ruins of Tonina, a temple city rising in steep terraces up from the valley. "The front of a mound had been terraced by human hands, five high, wide steps; at the top are the temple ruins and at its base are quite a few idols –

overthrown and hurled down by fanatical Spanish priests. The heads of the idols had all been chopped off, and in most cases also feet and hands." Later, Frans would come to dig here, and already on this trip he makes extensive notes and draws several maps of the ruins, which for him "testify to the skills of the Maya architects."

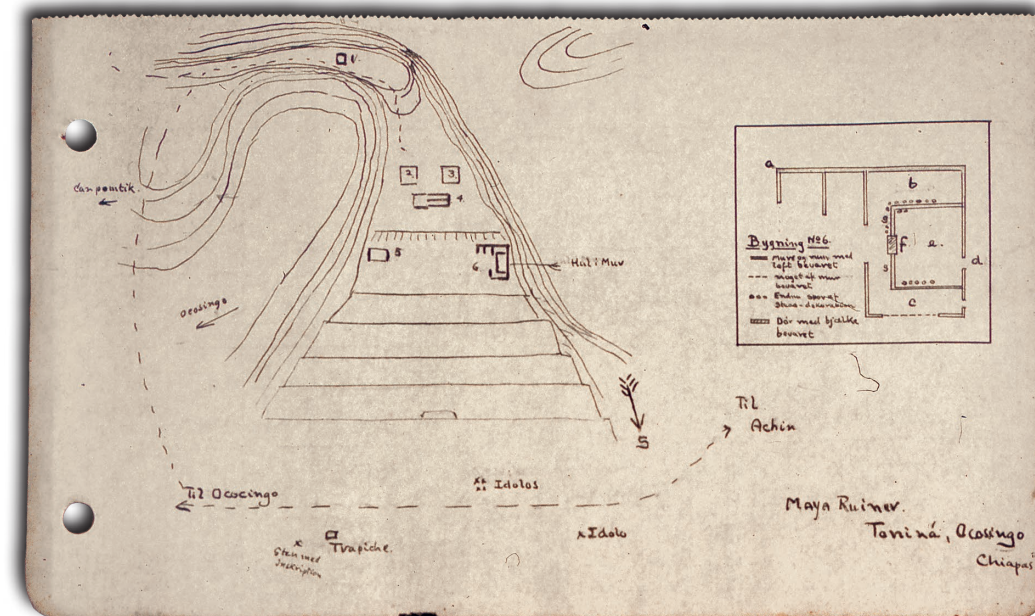
To Frans, this is the climax of the expedition so far, although it does not have a lot to do with oil geology. His guide is a local hacienda owner who even tells him that until very recently, the ruins of Tonina have played a religious role for the Maya in the area: "Even 15 years ago all the Indians gathered up on the Canpomtik pyramid by night twice a year and burned large bonfires. The priests put an end to this." But when Frans returns to Tonina three years later and investigates the pyramids himself, he finds fresh evidence of religious ceremonies. It seems that the Catholic priests had not yet succeeded entirely in defeating the deities of the Maya.

On April 20, they reach the coffee plantation of El Encanto. The flagged path leading up to the house consists of reliefs from a nearby Maya ruin. "Rain and footsteps unfortunately efface the figures more and more." But in the porch wall there is a more well-preserved relief that Frans draws. He and his men relax for a few days, bathing in the river in the afternoons, "and in the evenings, an Indian boy who had been taught the task took care of the gramophone. Although a gramophone is not music, it is nevertheless a reminder now and then."

Frans and the geologist Burnett ride out and collect fossils or examine sulfur sources to map local geological conditions. When the opportunity arises, Frans also examines the local Maya ruins, although they are completely overgrown by forest. "The walls are long, and the whole complex covers a large piece of land, so you can expect interesting results from excavations there. Timbler [= Timler, the German plantation manager] is talking about digging there – I wish he wouldn't, he can only do harm. [...] Half of the



Frans among stelae and altars, Tonina, April 1922.



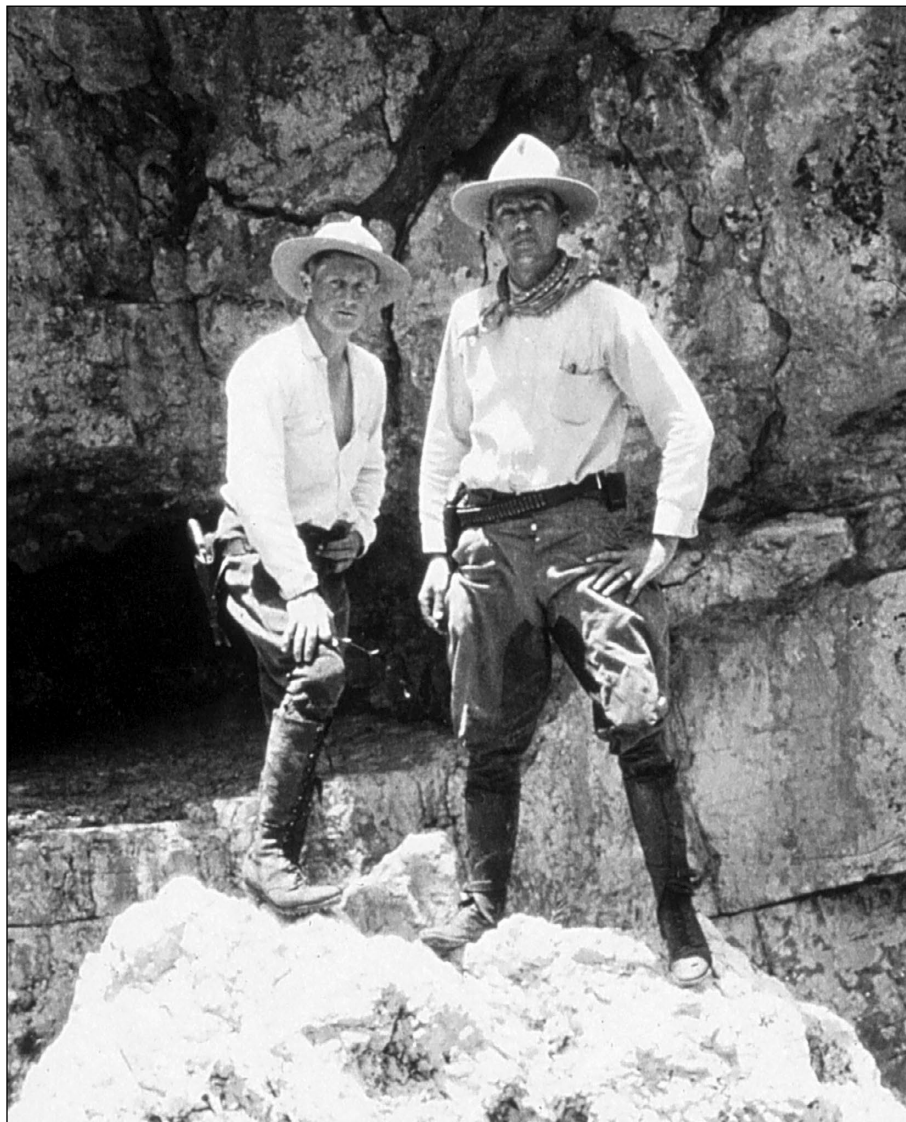
Map of Tonina drawn by Blom, April 1922.

night we developed photographs. Due to the climate we must develop our photos anywhere we find mountain creeks with cold water, or farms with refrigerating machines such as here."

And on Tuesday, April 25, Frans approaches the real highlight of the trip as he arrives in the village of Palenque, which at this time is no more than a church and a collection of huts. But nearby lie the ruins. Tomorrow it will happen. "Finally, I will get to see these famous Maya ruins." Today, Palenque is one of Mexico's most visited sites. The main ruins lie exposed on a neat lawn, and large groups of tourists circulate among the ancient structures. But in 1922, the ruins were overgrown by trees and flowers, the jungle stretched for miles, and only rarely did travelers and archaeologists pass by.

It is only after an hour and a half's ride from the village that Frans and his companions reach the foot of the plateau. Six months later, he describes the trip as follows: "From Palenque cemetery the road leads to the ruins. Through dense thicket, pretty good. Then you reach a piece of open savannah, and from there you get your first glimpse of the ruins. The Temple of the Cross glows white against the forest-clad mountains. Again you dive into the forests, riding across several small streams, then across the Mixol River, a small clear mountain stream, and shortly after across the Otolum, the creek coming from the ruins. Soon you reach the limestone foothills. The trail goes steeply over them, and when you reach a flat road again, you are up on the plateau where the ruins are found."<sup>89</sup>

On this April day, Frans sees Palenque for the first time, and he is particularly impressed by the "Palace" with its distinctive tower, the only tower of its kind in any Maya ruin. "All the walls were once richly decorated with colored stucco reliefs. The whole city must have been tremendously impressive when it was in full bloom. [...] All the decorations on the outside walls of the buildings are in the saddest ruinous state – only here and there one sees an arm, parts of a head etc., and outlines of figures that give a faint



Frans Blom and geologist J. B. Burnett during their expedition at the Usumacinta River, 1922.

inkling about the wealth of the decorations." Frans is overwhelmed by Palenque's beauty, and he spends many pages of his notebook describing the main buildings. He has brought archaeological books but feels that the details of the existing maps are wrong. Therefore he has "corrected in some cases, according partly to what I saw on the spot, partly what I think is more correct." Frans already knows more about surveying and mapping than most archaeologists of his day. He also draws and photographs many beautiful reliefs and notes architectural details that are not yet fully understood. "On the whole, the ruins are full of puzzles and wonders." But they are in a terrible state. "Small trees and plants grow between the stones, and their roots press



Temple of the Sun, Palenque, April 1922.

the stones loose, day by day the buildings collapse more and more."

On April 27, the expedition heads from Palenque further along the telegraph line over parched grasslands. "The sun burned and the animals swirled up the dust around us, not a breath of wind. As the day progressed it became a torment to ride, the dust mixed with sweat covered my face with a mask, my throat was dry and only now and then did we pass a small stream."

From Salto de Agua it is downriver by canoe until they are picked up by the oil company Águila's motorboat. The last stretch to Sarlat, one of Mexico's oldest oil camps, they have to ride on horseback. "Both Burnett and I felt a little ill on this trip, especially the heat was agonizing. [...] We both dismounted our animals, and crept to bed running a temperature – a nice one when you want to work."

"May 1, 1922. Fever – Malaria. Then came my turn. I was exhausted, and my body was not strong enough to keep the fever down. Of course my blood had to be full of malaria – you do not live here for two years exposed

to strenuous physical work, all kinds of sleeping places and drinking water, without getting it. And still, it annoyed me to have to give in. Both Burnett and I fought for a little while, but had to give up – Then we crept into bed and swallowed quinine.

“May 2, 1922. Still a fever in our bodies, we tried to eat a little, but without great results. Burnett and I hung around on chairs and beds and looked at each other with shining eyes.” In the afternoon, they are told that Burnett, who has previously had malaria and is therefore particularly badly affected, can leave by motorboat. However, it requires another ride: “It was the longest six kilometers [almost 4 miles] I have ever ridden. My waistline, my loin were aching; and for each step the horse took, a hammer dropped on my head. Finally, finally we reached the river – I rode into a shed and sat there and stared. Shortly before the boat was about to take off, I crawled on board to say goodbye to B. [...] I had a cup of hot coffee on board, then ashore, and the boat swung out from the shore and took off down the stream towards Frontera. I rode the six long kilometers back to Sarlat.”

Malaria has a characteristic course according to the cycle of the parasites in the patient's body, where intense febrile seizures interchange with temporary improvement. Therefore, Frans writes on May 3: “I woke up fresh and healthy, and felt as though I had never had a fever – I did not leave Sarlat, however, since my stomach was completely empty and I needed to be fattened a bit.” Yet the recovery is only temporary. Now Frans has the malaria parasites in his body for life. Nevertheless, the next day he can ride off “fresh and cheerful,” back to Salto de Agua, where he has to continue the geological surveys with Pike and Adkins.

On May 16, they are in the town of Macuspana, where Frans is busy pumping people for information.

When we arrive in a place, it is my job to gather the “dope,” the inside information about roads and oil deposits, local produce, telegraph lines, etc. [...] The population is slow to learn and must be treated in a special way – and this I have made my speciality – this is what I get paid for – a special kind of work – yet one of the many wheels that makes its small contribution to the fact that Aguila, of all oil companies, has the most complete maps and information about this part of Mexico.

Interestingly, it is a completely different story when other oil companies try the same methods with Frans: “A hopeful youth, McKay, who worked for International, pestered us with his arrogance and want of tact [...] His intent was to pump information out of us about Aguila's work and plans. It reached its climax when he bluntly offered us money for a plan of the last part of our journey – I will throw a veil over what then happened. We left Macuspana at eight this morning, and the young man had not yet shown his beautifully decorated face.”

If Palenque was the archaeological highlight of the trip, then, on the other hand, we now reach one of the major turning points in Frans Blom's life. Tortuguero is the name of a small place by the Macuspana ridge, where Frans sees a beautiful and well-preserved stela with a hieroglyphic inscription and makes a fairly good drawing of it. “Among the kids in the houses around here it was soon rumored that I paid money for small clay figurines, etc., and all the kids spent all day collecting for me. In the evening they showed up

with their catch, and I got no less than five small bags full of figurines.” On the hillside, he finds fossils useful for oil geology; after all, that is really why he is here. But the key thing for Frans is the stela bearing an inscription with eight groups of Maya glyphs, and beneath them a relief of a jaguar. This stela, as we shall see in the next chapter, will be crucial for Frans's future life.

The rainy season has started, every day torrential rains come pouring down, the paths are slippery and soggy. On May 23 they come to a place called Agua Caliente (“Hot Water”), named after the hot sulfur springs nearby. “On the top of the mound we found two palm huts – the shabbiest huts I have seen for ages. Four men and one woman stared at us, frightened. Could they put us up for the night – moyuk – could they give us maize – moyuk – tortillas for my



The stela from Tortuguero, drawn by Frans in May 1922.

men – moyuk – were there other houses nearby – moyuk – it swarmed with chickens and turkeys, would they sell us a chicken and some eggs – moyuk – this dismissive response means *no*. [...] Friendly hosts here. The house turns out to be a pigsty, during the evening the pigs were trying to encroach, and we conducted a brisk little battle against them. We made a roof out of our ponchos and our tent, since the palm roof was leaking like a sieve.”

The inhabitants of Agua Caliente have not exactly asked for a visit, and it does not even cross the mind of the expedition members that the Indians might need their sparse maize and chickens for themselves, though Frans is well aware that reserves are running low: “Last year, the maize harvest was very poor, it was destroyed by rain; and now just before the new crop is about to come, there is very little maize to buy; the Indians trudge whole days to get hold of their staple food. In addition, they look with suspicion on all foreigners.”

The next day Frans is bed-ridden with dysentery. Meanwhile his men resort to self-service. “While I was lying on my cot, reading a couple of old newspapers, I heard the short cackle of a hen, the blow of a stick, and some battering of wings. It was my men helping themselves to a hen for dinner. The hen was plucked, cooked and eaten without the Indians noticing the least bit; they will not sell us food – so we have to help ourselves the best we can.”

Next day he adds: "Our hosts became friendlier during the day, they sold us some eggs and promised us a hen for tomorrow."

On June 5, 1922 they arrive at the coffee plantation of Mumunil, also owned by Germans. "Pike had been here before and had no fond recollections of his stay. The reception was cool; a big, broad fellow with an enormous mustache and an Iron Cross; and a small, bony, lorgnette-wearing lady displayed no particular pleasure in seeing us – why should they – it immediately helped when I spoke German to them." Frans describes this visit with the fiercely German family, Kortüm, in one of his later short stories. It was written in 1941, and here Frans portrays the meeting with the German as follows: "Before the Indians stood a burly giant. Porcupine haircut all bristling, a flowing Cavalry Colonel mustache, and on the front of his shirt dangled an 'Iron Cross.'"

In the living room Frans, the flower enthusiast, is appalled to find German vases filled with artificial flowers. It is pure barbarism. "Artificial flowers in a place that is rampant with the most exotic and beautiful tropical flowers, and could be had merely by just going outside and picking them."<sup>90</sup>

This German family stranded in foreign lands has been affected by the damages of the Mexican civil war as well as the German defeat in the Great War. In his diary, Frans writes: "They are German, their house is painted schwarz-weiss-rot [black-white-red, the flag of the German Empire], and I am sitting under a large picture of Emperor Wilhelm, they only read German agitation magazines and hate the whole world." Now they pour out all their bitterness onto Frans; finally they meet a stranger who can speak German.

Here sit a woman and four men far from the outside world and "hate," they feed on hatred, their daily speech is hate and revenge. Two of the men were in the War, and they take the lead, singing of revenge against France and hatred of the United States [...] "Our goal is a new Greater Germany, we shall win back Poland, Elsass and Schleswig." [...] After listening to that kind of talk for a while, I said rather sharply that I was not interested in politics, and then retired to our room.

Tough listening for Frans, and on a June 5 (Constitution Day back home in Denmark), only two years after the reunification of Northern Schleswig with Denmark after 56 years of German rule.

In the short story, written nineteen years later under the impact of the Second World War and Nazi Germany's occupation of Denmark, Frans dramatizes the event further. Here the German colonel raises his glass for a toast:

"I drink to GERMANY of the FUTURE. Soon we will be back to take our revenge. We will not be satisfied with what we had. We will re-take all that was ours: Alsace-Lorraine, Austria; and to you, Sir, from Denmark, I say, that we will take back Schleswig-Holstein and perhaps your whole country, Denmark!" Then he lifted his glass and drained it. Somehow I dropped my glass, the glass broke, the wine was spilled. Somehow I by being awkward was unable to join this toast.<sup>91</sup>

They continue the expedition. Frans has dysentery, and malaria is still in his body. He runs a fever now and then. Pike too is suffering from malaria and experiences severe fever attacks. Frans rides out alone, carries out geological

surveys and draws topographical sketches.

They ride through the highlands of Chiapas, visit the state capital Tuxtla, and finally they reach Arriaga, a station on the railroad across the Isthmus. Now the hardships are over, the rest of the journey is comfortable by train north towards the Gulf, with eight crates of geological samples and notes, a total of 278 kilos (612 pounds), "quite an excess weight," Frans writes. And finally, on July 4, 1922, they reach Puerto México: "American National Day – a ball in the club; for me, however, it was the letters from home that were more appealing than anything else."

A week of silence, Frans does not write in his diary until July 12. "Days have gone, first the fever returned, and the doctor gave me some injections of quinine, that helped. Then feverish work writing the report. I am not going back to Chiapas as first intended, but finally off to find the sources of the Uspanapa River. We are leaving around August 1. [...] Otherwise, everything here is the usual mess." He longs to go out into the jungle again. "I wish it was soon August 1."

The next expedition, however, does not come off. Frans's health is far from good enough to cope with another expedition in the jungle; both malaria and dysentery have drained his strength. Six months later Frans writes, having returned to the jungle after all: "When a man comes to spend part of his life in the tropics, there are two things that will always follow him. One is the constant longing back to the sun-drenched, rich nature of the tropics. Its wonderful beauty that manifests itself in an infinity of plant and animal species. – And the other thing is the Fever.

"For a while you can stay healthy, then the fever comes suddenly. I feel it first by a disinclination to work, and a burning thirst, and a few hours later it is there at full strength. At this moment it still sits in my body after a 1½ day attack. Heavy-headed, tired in the loins. And with the fever comes strange thoughts."<sup>92</sup>

Exhausted, wasted by dysentery and malaria, Frans has to write to his parents on July 18, 1922; without mentioning how ill he really is:

"Originally, I was supposed to go on another trip – but since the last trip was somewhat hard, and my teeth are not in perfect order, I slammed my fist on the table this morning and arranged it so that I will finally travel to Mexico City on July 21. I am looking very much forward to it, and I think I must say that I also need it."<sup>93</sup>

It is almost three years since he was last in the capital. It has been a long time since he kept up with social life or the latest fashions. On July 26, he writes home: "The city is more or less just like the last time I was here, only it's full of Americans. Their ladies must be an especially select collection of the ugliest there are, dressed in the craziest fashion and painted to an uncanny degree.

"Nights are rather cold, and as expected, the fever returned yesterday, but now it is almost over. I have brought my notebooks from my last trip, as they document quite a few new archaeological discoveries I have made. [...] The city is teeming with young Danes. It is very hard for them to find work, and several of them have nothing to do."

Recuperating in the capital does Frans good; here he is far away from the unhealthy coastal areas. In August 1922, he attends lectures at the university, and decides that he will definitely not return to the oil fields until January.

And finally, on August 8, the eve of his birthday, he writes to parents to tell them how he actually feels: “Dear Father and Mother. Now that I’m cured, I can probably admit that I was anything but healthy when I arrived here in late July. And for that reason I have decided to apply for a job with Aguila here in town, and in case I cannot get it, elsewhere here. My doctor has strongly advised me not to return to the coast, now that the rainy season has begun; and there is not much idea in wearing yourself out down there, just to spend all your money on doctors here. I’d rather take a position with less pay up here, and be in good health.

“Otherwise, I spend my time reading in libraries and visiting museums; my years out in the forests have, indeed, yielded much yearning for books and educated people. And now that I am on my feet again I enjoy this glorious city, and the light fresh air.”

Furthermore, Frans is tired of the oil industry and has his head full of archaeological finds, temples, and glyphs. These are hectic August days filled with speculation back and forth. He writes to his sister Esther, on August 4: “Well, if I could afford it, then I would throw myself at Mexican archaeology, but I cannot afford it. The old love of art and beauty is still rooted so deeply in me that I can never eradicate it.”

Money or love, one could say. Which should he choose?



## Chapter 4 The Right Track (1922–1924)

*“My little specialty is unknown lands.”*  
(Frans Blom, 1923).<sup>94</sup>

In Mexico City, Frans first lodged at cheap boarding houses, but later managed to rent a third-floor room in an old and derelict but beautiful colonial building in the heart of the capital, at the corner of the two busy streets of Tacuba and Isabel la Católica, just a few blocks from the huge Zócalo square and the equally impressive cathedral. Until 1521, when the Spaniards conquered and destroyed the city, this had been the center of the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan, and Frans must have been intrigued by the fact that he now lived directly on top of the ruins of the Aztec empire’s administrative and religious center. Under his feet were the remains of enormous temples, palaces, roads, and market squares. From time to time, as workers were digging out foundations for new buildings, new discoveries were made, and large, beautifully carved stone sculptures showing strange and exotic gods appeared from the ground. Thus, convalescing in Mexico City may have assuaged Frans’s malaria, but certainly not his growing interest in Mexico’s Precolumbian past.

If the previous years had already turned Frans’s life upside-down, the next three years were to be the most decisive for his future. He was about to trade his job as an oil scout for a place at the prestigious Harvard University. And in less than two years, he would become a respected archaeologist specializing in the Precolumbian Maya culture. From then on the Maya would hold a central place in Frans’s life. Before we resume his dealings in Mexico City, we must therefore briefly pause to look at the dynamic research area in which he had suddenly become involved. How much was actually known, during the first decades of the twentieth century, about the ancient Maya? What books and sources would Frans be able to get hold of and consult, in order to satisfy the curiosity aroused during his first expeditions in Tabasco and Chiapas? As a matter of fact, not much was as yet known about the Maya.

The British archaeologist T. A. Joyce wrote in his *Mexican Archaeology* published in 1914 – a book that Frans acquired shortly after arriving in Mexico and which we know he read during his first trips into the Maya jungles, “The task [of the archaeologist] is one of far greater difficulty [in the Maya area when compared to central Mexico], since the ruined remains scattered over the country give evidence of a higher culture than that which prevailed at the conquest; but of the people who evolved that culture we know nothing except by implication.”<sup>95</sup> What little was known about the Maya came mainly from written sources dating back to the time of the Spanish conquest, among them the famous *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán* by the Franciscan friar and future bishop Diego de Landa, a collection of myths and history from the Guatemalan highlands known as the *Popol Vuh*, and finally the only three remaining manuscripts written in Maya glyphs. What had been deciphered from these screen-fold books as well as in the inscriptions of the ruined cities in the 1920s was almost exclusively the parts of the texts dealing with calendrical systems. Next to nothing was known about the Maya ruins in the impenetrable forests, and there had only been a few thorough, scientific expeditions into the vast wilderness. In the second half of the nineteenth century most scholars had changed their previous assumption that the ancient Maya cities had been built either by the Greeks, the Egyptians, or other civilized peoples from the Old World. It was now acknowledged that these cities had indeed been built by the original inhabitants of the American continent. Once this was realized, archaeologists and historians began a search for understanding the Native American cultures in their own right. The Maya, with their elegant architecture and refined art, were soon proclaimed to be the Greeks of the New World, as opposed to the supposedly more bloodthirsty and barbaric Aztec, who were compared to the Romans. But, as Joyce remarked, so much more was known about the Aztec than about the Maya because Aztec civilization was at its peak at the time of the Spanish conquest of Central Mexico in the 1520s. Despite the differences thought to have existed between the Maya and the Aztec, the descriptions of the more well-known Aztec often heavily influenced perceptions of the Maya. Perhaps this is why Frans so far had described as “Aztec” practically all the archaeological remains he had encountered during his first expeditions in southern Mexico – the Maya were not really part of his vocabulary or understanding of Mexico’s past. This was soon to change.

Among the earliest travelers in the Maya area were the American diplomat John Lloyd Stephens (1805–1852) and the British architect and

draftsman Frederick Catherwood (1799–1854), who traveled extensively in the region during the early 1840s. Here they rediscovered, described, and documented several of the archaeological sites, like Uxmal and Copan, that are so well known today. Later, from the 1860s to the 1880s, the Frenchman Désiré Charnay (1828–1915) visited several Maya cities and was the first to record them by means of photography. In Palenque he carved his name into the stuccoed walls of the Palace where it can still be seen, and where Frans undoubtedly saw it. Like Stephens and Catherwood, Charnay carried out few proper excavations, but he traveled widely, and just like Stephens's famous travel descriptions, Charnay's books were popular in Europe where they sparked a growing interest in the as-yet-mysterious and unexplored Maya culture.

Among the first to be excited by these early descriptions of the Maya ruins in Mexico and Guatemala was the Englishman Alfred Percival Maudslay (1850–1931), later to be acknowledged as the first real Maya archaeologist.<sup>96</sup> Charnay and Maudslay met each other in 1882 in the stunningly beautiful Maya site of Yaxchilan, situated on the Mexican side of the mighty Usumacinta River. Charnay reached the ruins only to discover that he was not, as he had no doubt hoped, the first to get there. Alfred Maudslay had made it before him. At first, however, Maudslay let Charnay take the credit for discovering Yaxchilan – and Charnay promptly named it Lorrillard in honor of his sponsor, the American tobacco manufacturer Pierre Lorrillard IV. In Charnay's version of the story, Maudslay courteously said: "I am merely an amateur, traveling for pleasure; you are a savant, and the city belongs to you. Name it, explore it, photograph it [...]: you are at home here, and with your permission I will be your guide [...]. I have no intention of writing or publishing anything. If you choose, don't mention me at all, and keep your conquest for yourself alone."<sup>97</sup> Maudslay's gentlemanly manners and modesty are absent, however, in his own personal diary when it comes to portraying Charnay: "He does not strike me as a scientific traveler of much class – he is a pleasant talkative gentleman, thirsting for glory."<sup>98</sup> In fact Maudslay himself gave the ruins a completely different name, Menche' Tinamit ("City of the Green Tree"), when, despite his promises to Charnay, he published his photographs, drawings, and descriptions of the site a few years later. The race to discover the deserted cities of the Maya had thus already begun eleven years before Frans Blom was born in Copenhagen. Nonetheless, Frans was to play a role in the continued hunt for the forgotten cities, and he would also, like Charnay, experience the humiliation of being overtaken in the race, namely in two of the most important archaeological discoveries of the twentieth century in the Maya area.

Maudslay continued with his excavations and mapping at Yaxchilan; he made plaster casts of several of the stelae and altars and had them brought home to the British Museum where some of them are still on display. Frans took the great Maudslay as his role model, and later enthusiastically adopted the idea of making casts.

In Germany, interest in the ancient Maya was also on the rise. Beginning in the 1880s, the immensely productive German Mesoamericanist Eduard Seler (1849–1922) published numerous articles on the Maya calendars, writing, iconography, and pantheon; and about the same time, Ernst Förstemann (1822–1906) succeeded in deciphering essential parts of the Maya calendar

system, making it possible to date and correlate the inscriptions. In this sense, Maya culture finally entered "real" history. Frans studied most of these books and articles eagerly, and in his readings of works by Charnay as well as Seler he found good use for the language skills which, thanks to his parents, he had acquired in his childhood and youth. However, most of these pioneering works raised more questions than they answered – questions which inevitably piqued Frans's curiosity and thirst for adventure.

By coincidence, Frans had arrived in the Maya area at a time when there was an explosive level of activity in the nascent field of Maya archaeology. This was partly due to the boom of the chicle industry during the first decades of the twentieth century. Hundreds of men were sent into the uninhabited jungle areas to tap the precious chicle sap used to produce chewing gum, which had become the latest craze in the western world. Time and time again, chicle workers came across the ruins of Maya cities: "Chewing gum and Maya archaeology are closely related, strange as it may sound," as Frans later wrote.<sup>99</sup> The growing interest in Maya archaeology was especially strong at Harvard University and the affiliated Peabody Museum, and in the first two decades of the century a small group of archaeologists headed by Alfred M. Tozzer, Herbert J. Spinden, and the young Sylvanus G. Morley published a number of innovative and important works about topics such as the Lacandon Maya, Maya sites in the unexplored northern jungles of Guatemala, Maya art, and the as-yet-undeciphered Maya script.<sup>100</sup> Essentially, it was as a result of the efforts of these three men and their students at Harvard and the Peabody that Maya research originated in the United States. From 1914 on, the Carnegie Institution in Washington, D.C., became the leading power in Maya research, mainly due to Morley's affiliation with the institution, and at Carnegie a scientific tradition developed that still influences Maya research today. In the course of a generation, a large number of reconnaissance expeditions were carried out as well as excavations of sites and ethnographic field work in remote villages, and the wealth of knowledge accumulated throughout this period is priceless. But how could a previous lounge lizard and bon vivant, a self-taught oil scout from Denmark, even gain access to all these learned men? And what did he have to offer that they did not already have?

Let us return to Frans in Mexico City. As soon as the malaria abated and he felt a little better, he went to pay a visit to Manuel Gamio (1883–1960), then director of the Dirección de Antropología at the Mexican National Museum. In 1922 Gamio was the leading Mexican archaeologist, famous and respected for his comprehensive excavations and investigations of Teotihuacan, the ruined metropolis northeast of Mexico City. Furthermore, Gamio was a close friend of the elderly and influential American archaeologist Zelia Nuttall (1857–1933) who lived in Mexico City, and who seems to have been instrumental in securing Gamio the position of chief curator at the museum, thus keeping out her old archrival Leopoldo Batres. Today, Batres (1852–1926) is mostly known for allegedly having used dynamite during his excavations of the Pyramid of the Sun in Teotihuacan, and Nuttall accused him publicly of everything from corruption to grave robbing.<sup>101</sup> We assume that it was Mrs. Nuttall,

with whom Frans already had a good relationship, who introduced him to Gamio. On his visit to the museum Frans had brought along his notes and drawings from his travels in Tabasco and Chiapas, and Gamio was surprised by Frans's detailed observations and drawings and was so impressed that he soon offered Frans an office job in his department. Even though the salary was lower than what Frans could earn in the oil business, he accepted the job without much hesitation. Suddenly, it looked as though his old dream of working with archaeology instead of oil was about to come true. On his birthday, August 9, 1922, he wrote to his parents: "So it seems that I am finally about to enter the profession that has my greatest interest. It will certainly not make me a millionaire, but I will earn enough to live a tranquil life."<sup>102</sup>

Over the next couple of weeks, Frans wrote a brief article about his findings in Tortuguero and had it published in the journal *Revista de Ethnos*, edited by Gamio.<sup>103</sup> With his academic debut under his belt, and no doubt following the advice and encouragement of his new employer, Frans soon after wrote a letter to one of the leading Maya scholars, Sylvanus G. Morley, another of Gamio's close friends. In a direct and sincere manner, Blom explained to Morley: "my heart is with the archaeology, and every moment I can spare I have been nosing after ruins, etc. [...] I went to this town [Mexico City] to get fixed up, and have now left the famous oil game to be able to give all my time to the study of the secrets of southern Mexico and its Indians."<sup>104</sup>

In the letter he sent to Morley, Blom included his drawings and descriptions from Tortuguero. But who was this man whom Blom so wishfully approached? Sylvanus Griswold Morley (1883–1948) had graduated under Alfred Tozzer at Harvard in 1908, and at the time he was the acknowledged main expert on Maya hieroglyphs. He was also known as a very friendly and spontaneous person, "the Little Friend of all the World" as he was often called by other Maya archaeologists. Morley was a very short man and is said to have had a high-pitched voice – especially when talking about the Maya. With his round glasses and, when on expeditions, his large round sun helmet, he was quite a character and easy to recognize. In 1922, the 39-year old Morley served as head of the archaeological department at the Carnegie Institution, a position which he had held for eight years. Andrew Carnegie (1835–1919), the extremely wealthy industrial magnate, had founded the Carnegie Institution in 1902 with the intention that it was partly to function as a scientific research organization. "Uncle Andrew," as he was called, had thrown 35 million dollars on the table as a start. The research program was to have a wide scope, but emphasis would be placed on archaeology and historical studies, at least during the first period of the organization's existence. Morley had been employed in 1914 as head of investigations for a number of Maya sites in Yucatan and Guatemala, and he had been given the green light to launch an extensive project with the aim of tracing the development, rise, and decline of Maya civilization through excavations and investigations of three ancient Maya cities. These three sites were Uaxactun and Tayasal in the Peten jungle of Guatemala, and Chichen Itza in northern Yucatan in Mexico. Through this combination of sites, it was hoped that answers would be found to questions about what was at the time considered the three main periods of Maya history, namely the so-called "Old Kingdom," the "New Kingdom," and the period when the Spaniards arrived in the Maya area. The plan was that Morley would be in charge of the excavations

in Chichen Itza, while the excavations in Uaxactun and Tayasal would be carried out by other archaeologists attached to the Carnegie project. However, it would take a decade before relations between the U.S. and Mexico, as well as relations between the U.S. and Guatemala, improved sufficiently to allow the excavation work to go ahead, not least because of the revolution and civil war in Mexico.

In the meantime, the ever-industrious Morley made a large number of trips into the jungle areas of Guatemala and Honduras to find and draw as many hieroglyphic inscriptions as possible. Morley was particularly preoccupied with the parts of the Maya inscriptions relating to the calendar, and in 1922 he had traveled for nearly eight years through the jungles of Guatemala and Honduras in his search for new monuments. His colleague J. Eric S. Thompson, soon to become the leading Mayanist for decades, provided a vivid description of Morley at work: "I can still see him squatting before a new-found stela to draw the glyphs, often with handkerchiefs around each wrist to keep the sweat from running down his arms on the paper and, at hand, a ruler to scale the glyphs and to drive off the mosquitoes."<sup>105</sup> But there was more to Morley than just dates. Brunhouse writes: "He did not disparage the powers of the mind, for he had deciphered far too many hieroglyphic dates to go that far. But when he had the choice, he preferred the visual creations that moved the emotions."<sup>106</sup> In this particular respect Morley was very similar to Blom, and the two seem to have had a kind of spiritual bond, sharing a deep love for the compelling beauty and complexity of ancient Maya iconography and hieroglyphs. Morley also had a side to him not unlike the classic stereotype of the absent-minded and impractical professor. A Danish travel writer remembered him as brimming over with excitement as soon as he was talking about the Maya, and gave the following description of his meeting with Morley in Chichen Itza in the 1930s:

During dinner, which the professor eats with his staff, he is so engaged in the discussion that he would not get anything to eat had it not been for his young wife who literally feeds him with motherly care. "Eat your chicken! Sylvanus!" – "Eat your beans!" she says in a gentle but firm voice, calling back the professor from Maya Land. He obediently pushes down his beans, but only for a moment, then he throws himself back into the discussion and forgets everything else.<sup>107</sup>

Frans could hardly have contacted a person who would better understand his newfound fascination with the Maya. Morley was surprised by the letter from the young amateur who evidently had a certain talent for drawing glyphs and who seemed to have an overwhelming curiosity about indigenous cultures. On the basis of Frans's drawings, Morley was able to date the inscription from Tortuguero, and he passed on the drawings and a note about the young Dane to the great professor Tozzer. Morley himself was keen to meet Blom, but for various reasons the meeting did not take place for another eight months, and before that Frans would have the opportunity to further deepen his knowledge of the Maya.

As a consequence of his growing interest in antiquities and archaeology, or perhaps because of his new acquaintance with the museum world, it is at this point that Frans made his first contact with Thomas Thomsen, the director of the Ethnographic Collection of the Danish National Museum



back home in Copenhagen. Thomsen (1870–1941) was an archaeologist and ethnographer and had worked in Greenland. His greatest academic achievement, however, was the excavation in 1921 of a Bronze Age mound at Egtved in western Denmark and the ensuing conservation and examination of the well-preserved oak coffin and the remains of a young female contained therein – the famous Egtved Girl now on display at the National Museum in Copenhagen. Thomsen became the director of the newly formed Ethnographic Collection later that same year. His successor Kaj Birket-Smith, who was to become a good friend of Blom, describes Thomsen in the following way: “[He] had his own pleasant way of talking with visitors and this helped increase public interest for the museum. Though it can hardly be directly proven, Thomsen’s friendly manner no doubt contributed to the great development that started at this point in time.”<sup>108</sup> And development there certainly was. It was during Thomsen’s tenure that large ethnographic and archaeological expeditions were planned and enormous collections brought back to Denmark – among them artifacts from Knud Rasmussen’s Fifth Thule Expedition to northern Greenland, Canada, and Alaska; artifacts from Gudmund Hatt’s excavations in the U.S. Virgin Islands (a former Danish colony), and a huge amount of artifacts brought home from Henning Haslund-Christensen’s famous expeditions to Manchuria and Mongolia. As we shall see later, it was also partly under Thomsen’s aegis that Blom’s last scientific expedition came about. Under Thomsen, the department attained a great international reputation, and after an extension in 1936, it became one of the largest and most spectacular ethnographical museums in the world.

In two letters from Mexico City, Frans explains his interests to Thomsen. He is particularly anxious to collect objects for the museum, but: “As my travels most often have to be done on quite a tight transport budget, I have not yet been able to get together any large collection. But the things that I have, I will, as I have already said, donate to Danish museums and collections.”<sup>109</sup> Later, he mentions that he will send a small gift once a year, but from then on he would almost invariably be very apologetic in his letters about the modest objects he was sending, regretting that he was unable to donate any spectacular showpieces to Thomsen’s department. Frans furthermore tried to make contact with other Danes living in Mexico in order to get them to send ancient artifacts to Copenhagen, and he also took the initiative of creating an exchange between Gamio’s department in Mexico City and the National Museum in Denmark. Thus, a number of objects (among them artifacts from Teotihuacan) ended up in Copenhagen, while a small collection of Danish Stone and Iron Age objects were sent across the Atlantic to Mexico.

It is worth recalling that in those days it was not illegal to remove archaeological finds from their countries of origin, as it is today. Between approximately 1880 and 1940 American and British archaeologists in particular removed large quantities of archaeological treasures from the ancient cities of Mesoamerica. Today, completely different rules apply for archaeologists, whereas since the 1960s organized looting, not least in the Maya area, has reached alarming proportions. Each year thousands of priceless archaeological artifacts are smuggled out and end up in auction houses in Europe, the United States, and Japan.

Gamio had gradually become so convinced of Blom’s talent and abilities that in the late summer of 1922 he offered him a job as a kind of archaeological

attendant in the famous ruins of Palenque in Chiapas. Frans was to spend three months there on his own, from December 1922 to March 1923, in order to ascertain what could be done to preserve the ruins. For Frans, who had already been captivated by the enticing spirit of that beautiful place, this job was a dream come true.

On December 14, Frans reached Palenque, which he well remembered from his visit there in April. In his own words, the place was “a fairy tale palace beyond description.”<sup>110</sup> Covered by jungle and swept in a mist, Palenque had attracted romantically disposed travelers and scholars since the early nineteenth century, but strangely enough few archaeologists had worked here since the 1890s when Maudslay mapped out and investigated the central part of the ruins. Frans soon launched himself into his job with great enthusiasm, only somewhat postponed by his great love for the profusion of wonderful flowers:

And what a terrible job I had been assigned. Truly, I walked around for days, and couldn’t do a thing. Right and left were the old temples, settled in the world’s most beautiful forest. Lianas and orchids and other tropical verdure were covering one and all of the buildings. AND, – damn it, – It was my orders and my job to tear down all that floral beauty. [...] Alas, the day came for destruction. There were the temples, and the palaces, and every one of their roofs was covered in a solid carpet of wild pink begonias. The butchery started, and with every machete slash my heart was bleeding.<sup>111</sup>

After the flower massacre, work proceeded at a calm and steady pace. In the meticulous and well-grounded report which Frans later wrote for Gamio, he not only managed to comment on the condition of the ruins but to make suggestions as to how and in what sequence the buildings should be excavated and restored, which was what Gamio had asked him to do. Frans also provided exact descriptions of the ruins, and he was the first to describe and map a large part of the site – a map that has only recently been replaced by a new and better one.<sup>112</sup> In the western part of Palenque, Frans discovered a stela (blank and without hieroglyphs) as well as several burial chambers. He also made repairs to some of the buildings; for example, he covered holes in the roofs with a layer of cement to prevent rainwater from getting in and further damaging the insides of the buildings. Furthermore, he made detailed lists of materials and crew needed for a proper excavation and restoration, and likewise suggested an improvement of the road from the nearby village to the ruins. On top of all this, Frans found the time to copy several of the hieroglyphic inscriptions – and generally the results were somewhat better than his first attempt at drawing these strange and beautiful signs. One of the temple ruins which Blom investigated with particular care was one of Palenque’s largest, known as the Temple of the Inscriptions. In his report to Gamio he wrote: “On its walls are three big tablets containing rows of hieroglyphs. During the visit of a former Mexican Government Inspector of monuments, these tablets were washed with an acid to clean them, with the fatal result that the inscriptions are now peeling off. I did not touch these tablets for fear of furthering their destruction.”<sup>113</sup> Frans continued his investigation examining the stone floor of the inner temple chamber and made the following comments about a row of holes in one of

the large stone slabs in the floor: "I cannot imagine what these holes were intended for."<sup>114</sup> Had Frans only possessed greater imaginative powers, he would have become a considerably more famous Maya archaeologist. The holes had been used to lift into place the cover stone of a hidden stairway which later turned out to lead to one of the richest Maya tombs ever found. Only a few weeks before Frans Blom arrived in Palenque in December 1922, the famous tomb of Tutankhamen had been found near Luxor in Egypt by the British archaeologist Howard Carter. If Frans had had the imagination to envisage what might be hidden under the strange stone slab in the Temple of the Inscriptions – and had he only been able to rein in his restlessness long enough to examine things more profoundly – then he in turn could have taken his place in history as the man who discovered the most famous Maya tomb of all. But the secret of the stone slab was not investigated until 1949. Mexican archaeologist Alberto Ruz Lhuillier had less doubts about the purpose of the stone slab and its holes: rope was passed through the holes, the slab was lifted, and after three years of careful excavation of the 80-foot-deep stairway and antechamber, he became the first to once again behold the spectacular funerary crypt of K'inich Janaab Pakal, Palenque's great ruler from AD 615 to 683, who had been put to rest in a beautifully decorated stone sarcophagus with a wealth of jade jewelry and an exquisite jade mosaic mask.

In Frans's defense it must be said that in the 1920s no ruler's grave had yet been found in any of the Maya temple pyramids, which scholars did not consider burial monuments. So Frans could not lean on any previous discoveries, and furthermore it was not really his task to initiate comprehensive excavation work, merely to describe the condition of the ruins. In his notes he wrote: "I would love to excavate Palenque, but how can I do a good and honest job of it? It's going to cost plenty of money. It's not just excavation that counts. One must not destroy; but all should be planned so that the excavation will mean preservation. Thus future generations can learn and benefit from the work. Frankly, – I would rather leave Palenque as a jungle-covered pile of broken masonry – than rape it."<sup>115</sup> Unfortunately we do not know how Frans reacted when he first heard about Ruz Lhuillier's 1952 discovery, which ranks among the very greatest in the history of Maya archaeology. About his own work in Palenque he told the Danish writer and painter Per Ulrich: "I traded my oil salary for a miserable salary as an archaeologist. I have never regretted that decision. I was sent to Palenque to measure up the ruins. [...] I made a report of my investigations but it was never printed, for those were the days of the revolution and lead was used for bullets, not for printing."<sup>116</sup> Not long after his return to Mexico City, Frans handed over his manuscript to Gamio. It was an excellent and thorough work, and whatever lingering doubts Gamio might have had as to Frans Blom's qualities and potential, they were now dispelled. Frans had passed his first test as a self-taught archaeologist, and as David and George Stuart formulate it in their wonderful book on Palenque: "If one had to choose a date for the beginning of the modern scientific investigation of Palenque, it might well be 14 December, when a 29-year-old Dane, Frans Blom, arrived at the site."<sup>117</sup> It was not until 1982, however, that the report, which also included descriptions of a number of small ruins near Palenque, was finally published by the National Institute of Anthropology and History.<sup>118</sup> A delay of 59 years which was perhaps more due to Mexican inefficiency and other circumstances than shortage of lead.

Frans was back in Mexico City in April 1923 and finally got the chance to meet Sylvanus Morley. The two had lunch together and afterwards went to the large Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology where Frans showed Morley around the exhibits. In the following days they met several times, although Frans suffered a couple of minor attacks of malaria, and Morley became deeply impressed by Frans's notes and sketches from Palenque and minor sites in the vicinity. They also met with Thomas Gann, a well-respected amateur archaeologist from what was then British Honduras (now Belize), and together they visited the famous antique shop of William Niven, a Scottish mineralogist and amateur archaeologist, who at that time held Mexico's largest private collection of Precolumbian artifacts. Niven had carried out several excavations himself, mainly in the Valley of Mexico and in the nearly unexplored state of Guerrero.<sup>119</sup> On the basis of studies of the small clay heads he had found, Niven was convinced that as early as 50,000 years ago America had been populated by a number of different races, including people from the now-sunken Atlantis! In 1921 he had found a number of small painted clay tablets which he claimed to be of the same age, and it was these tablets, with their peculiar engraved characters, that the three Maya specialists now wanted to inspect personally. Frans was able to blow the color off one of the tablets and Morley thought the paint to have been applied recently. They agreed that the tablets were fakes, but thought it unlikely that Niven was behind the fraud. Yet, even though Niven may not directly have overseen the production of the objects, his offers of payment to anyone who could provide them would no doubt have encouraged their manufacture by the local workmen. Later on, when Blom was director at M.A.R.I., Niven donated one of these pieces to the small collection, and Blom, despite dismissing its authenticity, accepted it. Niven's more than 2500 clay tablets are still controversial, not least because he later adopted the ideas of the fantasist James Churchward that they had come from a sunken megac-continent in the Pacific Ocean by the name of Mu.<sup>120</sup> Such wild guesses never appealed to Blom, and as we shall see later, he was often quite caustic in his dismissal of them.

These exciting days in Morley's company became decisive for Frans Blom's future. Morley's overwhelming enthusiasm was infectious, and Frans was now ready to put all his stakes on archaeology. Morley on his part saw huge potential in Blom; his talents should not be wasted in an office in Mexico. He was needed in Morley's and the Carnegie Institution's comprehensive investigations of ancient Maya culture, but first he had to acquire some of the most basic knowledge and skills within archaeology.

Morley quickly managed to convince professor Tozzer, who had already seen Blom's notes and sketches from Tortuguero, to offer Frans a five-month course at Harvard University, the oldest and most prestigious university in the United States. In this way he would be able to take a master's degree in archaeology in just two semesters. It was a question of striking while the iron was hot, and there was no need to waste more time on academia than absolutely necessary. Blom's admission to Harvard seems to have been already confirmed around April or early May 1923. In a letter to Thomas Thomsen, dated May 17, Blom is already talking with great pride about his future as a student at Harvard. The news must also have caused much joy back home



Dora Blom, c. 1920.

in the Blom residence in Copenhagen; it seemed that the unruly Frans was finally about to enter some kind of career. Frans's financial situation, however, was quite strained and he would never have been able to pay for his studies at Harvard out of his own pocket. Fortunately, Zelia Nuttall had not forgotten him, and she was still pulling the strings from her home in Coyoacan on the outskirts of Mexico City. Thanks to her warm recommendations, Frans succeeded in obtaining a scholarship from Harvard that would cover a considerable part of his expenses. Additional financial support came from his family in Copenhagen, a sign of Alfred Blom's newfound confidence in his son. To earn money for the trip to Cambridge, Frans worked for Gamio throughout most of the summer of 1923. It was mostly tedious office work, but Frans also had time to study Maudslay's drawings and photographs of stelae and altars covered by Maya glyphic inscriptions. In a letter to Morley, Frans describes very vividly a sensation that probably strikes most people

working with ancient, incomprehensible scripts: "Have you ever had the feeling that the whole thing is so very near our reach, just like a dog that looks at you and wants to tell you something, but can only speak with its eyes? That's how I have often felt these days, when staring, my eyes tired, on Maudslay's drawings and photographs."<sup>121</sup> At the time, epigraphers on the whole were only able to decipher and understand those parts of the long inscriptions which related to the calendar dates and a number of astronomical observations. The leading Maya epigraphers, not least Morley himself and some years later Thompson, assumed – perhaps because they themselves had such trouble deciphering the many other glyphs – that the remaining parts of the texts also related to the calendar and that, as they were written in an archaic language, they could not be deciphered. According to Morley and Thompson, the texts contained no historical content, no names of rulers, nor any accounts of their lives.<sup>122</sup> This point of view prevailed to the extent that Morley and others sometimes omitted to draw the parts of the inscriptions which did not relate to the calendar, and which could not be read. This view of Maya writing and the content of the inscriptions did not change until the late 1950s and in the course of the 1960s, and it was only definitively rejected in the early 1970s. Today we know that the texts contain a wealth of references to historical persons and events.<sup>123</sup> In this light it is interesting to note that Frans seemed quite skeptical about Morley's hypothesis and intuitively felt that the texts must contain more than just dates.

In the summer of 1923 work was also being done, on both sides of the Atlantic, on the manuscript of Frans's first book, *I de store Skove: Breve fra Meksiko* [In the Great Forests: Letters from Mexico]. In Copenhagen Frans's mother Dora was busy editing the letters the family had received; meanwhile Frans edited his diary entries from the two expeditions in the spring of 1922.

The manuscripts were typed and the most personal passages that were deemed of interest only to the immediate family were removed, just as some critical remarks about the Mexican government and lawlessness in much of the country were deleted. For Frans it was not the right time to have a falling out with the authorities in Mexico, and he even went so far as to let parts of the manuscript be translated into Spanish, for Gamio to read and approve. The book was published in November 1923 and recounts Frans's first years in the foreign country on the basis of his letters and diaries. Alfred Blom financed the project and thus secured his son's debut as an author, and according to the standard of the day the book was richly illustrated with Frans's own photographs and drawings. We know that it was Dora who had taken the first initiative for the book, and that she had been responsible for the major part of the editing. Frans wrote to her after the release: "Dearest Mamie, [...] heartfelt congratulations that your book is published, for it really is yours. You collected and organized, and the letters were written to you. I have not yet received it; it will be exciting to hold it in my hands."<sup>124</sup> Columnist Carl Bratli wrote in his preface to the book that it "is full of youthful freshness and good spirits," and he ends the preface as follows: "It is a young man's unaffected 'document humain,' as such this book has a message for all young people who long for adventure, and as such it will obtain an important place in our travel literature."<sup>125</sup>

In a review in one of the leading newspapers Andreas Winding called it "a fresh and vibrant book," original because it was not written by an author

as such, but was a young man's personal letters. Winding also highlighted Frans's critical attitude towards the devastating incursion of so-called civilization, and ended the review by acknowledging the former lounge lizard's newfound status as a promising archaeologist: "Thus ends, so far, the saga of a young man from Copenhagen who had learned to speak English and be a scout, and who went off on an adventure that made him a man. His own account of it has – almost despite himself – become entertaining like a good novel."<sup>126</sup> Soon after the release Dora Blom tried to get an English, German, and Dutch version of the book launched, but without success. In fact, the Blom family ended up losing money on the book and this is probably why the planned sequel, *Atter i de store Skove* [Return to the Great Forests], which would have included Blom's letters from his time in Palenque, never materialized.

In early August 1923 Frans Blom returned to Denmark, partly on the occasion of the forthcoming book publication, but first and foremost to reunite with his family, for the first time since leaving in 1919. He had repeatedly entertained the idea of coming home on a short visit, but after having squandered so much of his family's finances earlier on, and after his father had paid for the trip to Mexico in 1919, Frans was determined that he would only return once he was able cover the travel costs himself. That, however, did not happen. He had not made a lot of money on his oil adventure, and as a future student he could not afford the trip home. Once again the father had to pay for his almost 30-year-old son – and in the letters to his parents, Frans is almost too subserviently grateful. It obviously hurt his pride to rely on his father's helping hand (and purse) once again. Regardless of this, it was a great experience for the family to see the prodigal son again after all these years – and for Frans to be together with his parents, sisters, and family in his country of birth. During his short visit in Copenhagen Frans organized, with the benevolent assistance of Thomas Thomsen, a small exhibition of Precolumbian objects at the National Museum. The exhibited objects were probably partly those that Frans had secured for the museum as a result of the exchange with Gamio, partly a number of ceramic figurines, pots, and sherds that Frans himself had collected during his expeditions in Veracruz, Tabasco, and Chiapas in the years 1921–22. When the exhibition ended he donated the artifacts to the museum, where they are still kept. Among the objects were elaborately designed obsidian arrowheads, blades, and small figurines from Teotihuacan, as well as effigy clay flutes from the Maya site of Jonuta in Tabasco. This was also Blom's first meeting with the kind Thomsen, and from what we know, the two immediately gained great sympathy for each other, and developed a friendship that lasted until Thomsen's death in 1941. During his stay in Denmark Frans also screened a movie, courtesy of Gamio's archaeological department in Mexico City, with new footage from a number of sites. Thus, with Blom, Mesoamerica's Precolumbian past had come to Denmark.

In early September, after less than a month in Denmark, Frans left again. The journey back to the United States was once again paid for by his family, and Frans had even persuaded his parents to accept the additional cost of a short stop-over in England. But Alfred Blom apparently had his limits: The return trip was in second class. Frans's purpose in England was to visit the now 73-year-old Maudslay, Frans's great role model. Maudslay has been



The cover of *I de store Skove* (1923).

described as a kind soul who gladly talked with younger archaeologists and poured out his encyclopedic knowledge of the Maya area, and Frans fully enjoyed the hours spent with the aged archaeologist. In the British Museum in London Frans also found time to inspect the impressive cultural treasures that the British had brought home from around the world. Here he saw with his own eyes Maudslay's greatest finds from the Maya area: the beautiful carved stone lintels from Yaxchilan. At the museum Frans also studied several of Maudslay's plaster casts of altars and stelae from Copan. Under extremely difficult circumstances, Maudslay had transported hundreds of pounds of plaster into the Honduran jungle and made casts of the monuments. Overcoming perhaps even greater challenges, he had the heavy plaster casts transported on muleback to the coast and from there finally to England. Frans later adopted the plaster cast technique, and in 1930 he would be in charge of the most ambitious casting project in the history of Maya archaeology, namely the casting of a building from Uxmal more than 160 feet long.

Upon his arrival in the United States Frans spent a few days in New York, where he showed the film from the Mexican ruins in museums and at other venues. Among the interested and impressed spectators were several Maya scholars and museum professionals. Frans had the opportunity to meet T. A. Joyce (author of *Mexican Archaeology*), archaeologist Marshall H. Saville, and Maya linguist William Gates. During his busy fall semester Frans also found time to show the movie at important academic gatherings such as the Maya Society and the American Anthropological Society. Frans Blom was becoming a well-known name among American archaeologists, and the contacts Frans made on his short tour would later turn out to be extremely valuable for his career. During the fall, he also became a member of two highly respected scientific societies, the Sociedad Científica Antonio Alzate and the Maya Society. Things were indeed going his way. In September 1923, shortly after the start of the semester at Harvard, Frans wrote a series of letters to his parents, describing his new life: "Boston is a great city, and Cambridge almost looks like a residential neighborhood – everything is more English than American, and the cultured people I have met during the last 8 days have shown me the Americans from an unknown and very appealing side. Strictly in parentheses I can note that the idea of the U.S. being dry must be a newspaper rumor running around Europe. It is true that you cannot buy wine or liquor in public places, but people bring it with them and pour out cognac, whiskey and champagne."<sup>127</sup> In a letter to Thomas Thomsen, Frans describes his new surroundings at Harvard. Blom praises the lectures and study materials, although at the same time he seems to have been rather unimpressed and in several contexts harshly criticized his mentors, including Tozzer and Morley. It is as if Frans lacked the awe and uncritical attitude with which many of his fellow students undoubtedly met the highly respected professors. This was probably partly because he was essentially an outsider to the entire milieu, but it probably also had to do with the fact that he was about ten years older than most of his fellow students, had overcome countless hardships in Mexico, been an expedition leader, and had big groups of workers under his command. On top of this he had even aroused the interest of the very same professors despite his entirely self-taught background. Frans knew what he was worth and was sure that he could handle Harvard. And Frans could not have ended up in a better place: Cambridge was the absolute stronghold

of Maya archaeology, and virtually all the leading Maya archaeologists of this golden era of Maya research taught their daily course, if not at Harvard University itself or the associated Peabody Museum, then at the Carnegie Institution, whose historical department was next door to the Peabody. The two dominant figures at Harvard were Tozzer and Kidder. The two famous archaeologists became father figures for Frans, and by an incredible coincidence they both shared, as did Blom's third role model Maudslay, his father's first name: Alfred.

In 1907 Alfred M. Tozzer (1877–1954) had written his Ph.D. dissertation at Harvard on the Lacandon Maya of the lowland jungles of Chiapas, the first real study of this small surviving group of Maya Indians who in many ways still lived as before the Spanish conquest. Tozzer had specialized in Maya culture, and since 1905 he had been responsible for "the famous Maya seminar which he was to give more or less steadily throughout his career and in which virtually all of the Mayanists of the next generations were to participate."<sup>128</sup> Tozzer is described partly as an excellent teacher who showed such an intense enthusiasm for his subject that all were affected by it, partly as a firm gentleman who sometimes demanded unreasonably much of his students. It was hard work following his course, and as archaeologist Gordon Willey, later to become a leading figure in American archaeology, recalled, "the learning process was sometimes painful."<sup>129</sup> We must assume that Frans also experienced Tozzer's high demands. Harvard's second Alfred was Alfred V. Kidder (1885–1963). Along with Morley, Kidder was one of the first Maya specialists that Tozzer hatched at Harvard. In his first years as an archaeologist Kidder worked in the pueblos of the arid U.S. Southwest, where Tozzer had the habit of sending his students for archaeological practice. Kidder's career culminated, however, with a number of excavations in the Maya area, including those at the major site of Kaminaljuyu in highland Guatemala, where he directed some of the most thorough and detailed excavations of the time. He was commonly referred to as America's leading archaeologist.<sup>130</sup> In 1927 Kidder replaced Sylvanus Morley as head of the Carnegie Institution's Department of Archaeology, and in 1929 he was promoted to Director of the entire History Department. Perhaps Kidder's greatest contribution to American archaeology was the broad, interdisciplinary approach he developed over the years. Kidder's aim with the investigations conducted in the Maya area was indeed to collect information on just about everything from archaeology, physical anthropology, medicine, ethnology, and linguistics to geology, zoology, botany, and so forth. The reason for this new approach, which was actually ahead of its time and characterizes much of the Maya research being carried out today, was the realization that a deeper insight into the life of the ancient Maya could only be achieved if the scholar had some knowledge of their environment and living conditions. Such an approach naturally requires many researchers and just as many financial resources, and Kidder never managed to complete the optimal interdisciplinary study of a Maya site, let alone an entire Maya region. It is clear, though, that Frans was a great supporter of the basic principle of Kidder's ideas, and later he repeatedly tried applying them to his own research projects and expeditions.

After several years of practical work and adventures, Harvard was a return to a school system with authorities, discipline, and expectations, a situation which hardly pleased Frans, who was not, and never became, a deskbound

scholar. The countless hours confronted with the pages of the books made him restless. It was no better when he was tested in the sizeable curriculum: "I feel like one of halach uinic's [the Maya ruler's] hardest working slaves, and about examination time I will be ready to be sacrificed."<sup>131</sup> The classes and the curriculum were too often about archaeological theories and topics that seemed far removed from the practical and not least the adventurous side of an archaeologist's work, which was the most appealing to Frans. In his small study chamber in Boston's cold winter, with a shipment of his mother's homemade Christmas cookies and marzipan as his only consolation, Frans longed to be back in the forests and wished himself away from Tozzer's requirements and reading materials. To make life even more miserable, he had to tighten his belt during his time at Harvard. He had nowhere near the money needed for any sort of escapade in the lively student environment; it was a stark contrast to his carefree, youthful days at Hotel d'Angleterre in Copenhagen. However, in a letter home, he commented that the girls in the city "look horrible and excel at softheadedness,"<sup>132</sup> so Frans evidently was not missing out on much. Although studying was hard and monotonous at times, he was also extremely pleased with his time at Harvard. To his mother he admitted that: "It was a long detour, however, I finally landed on the right track."<sup>133</sup> Thus, Frans spent most of his time reading and studying, as well as writing the thesis that he, at the behest of Tozzer, wrote together with another archaeology student Oliver G. Ricketson – who happened to be Andrew Carnegie's great-nephew. The thesis was to consist of an index and map of all known Maya sites, a job that required hours of studies of old travel accounts and archaeological reports. Although it probably bored Frans at times, the intensive work gave him a thorough knowledge of the Maya area and the literature of the entire field, something that would form the basis for his future work. Frans, who had already developed a passion for drawing maps, took great pleasure in placing all the sites on a map, and the many blank spots must have aroused his curiosity and longing for the field. What kept Frans busy with books was the prospect of going on an expedition to the ruins of Uaxactun in the middle of Guatemala's Peten jungle. When the exams were over at the end of January 1924, Morley's plan was that Blom, along with Ricketson, would go there to prepare the Carnegie excavations of the ruined city. Uaxactun was, as already explained, one of the three sites that were to be explored in order to provide a broad overview of the development of Maya culture.

Planning the expedition would prove to be extremely difficult, and the whole thing almost failed because of Dr. William Gates, President of the Maya Society and Director of the Guatemalan Archaeological Investigations – and in many ways a strange personality. Morley and the Carnegie Institution had trouble getting the permits to begin excavations at Uaxactun, mainly due to the fact that the scheming and moody Gates was an avowed "enemy" of Morley, whom he had accused of all sorts of mischief, while apparently harboring a deep envy of him.<sup>134</sup> There was nothing Gates would like more than to put a spoke in the wheel of Morley's career which ran both faster and better than his own. The intricacies in Guatemala worried Frans and he wrote to Morley and asked for news – bad news would be better than no news. When would he be allowed to return to the great forests? "My plans for equipment were laid and I was longing to see the things come in, and

smell the leather and other nice smells that foretold a new expedition would start. Studying is all right, but, man, the sweetest music I know is the sound of the bell-mule at the head of the pack train and the singing of the insects in the tropical night."<sup>135</sup> In the end, Morley would draw on his connections in Guatemala and obtain a permit, thereby circumventing Gates. Shortly thereafter Gates resigned from his post in fury and later tried, as we shall see, to take revenge for the humiliation he felt he had suffered. Gates would also, less than a year later, play an unforeseen and crucial role in Frans's further career. The expedition now had a green light to go, and in early February 1924, Frans and Ricketson accompanied by Morley and another archaeology student, Monroe Amsden, set off on a ship towards the port of Belize City in British Honduras, back then the easiest entryway to the heart of the Peten rainforest and Uaxactun.

The ruins of Uaxactun are located in the northern part of Peten, fourteen miles due north of the famous ruins of Tikal. The site had been rediscovered in 1916 by Morley on a trip that nearly cost him his life, when his small expedition was mistakenly attacked by Guatemalan soldiers. It was also Morley who had named the overgrown ruins Uaxactun (Mayan for "Eight Stones" or "Eight Years"), after the stelae where he had found inscriptions that could be dated to the eighth cycle in the Maya Long Count. Blom would later recount an anecdote of two chicleros discussing the name of the ruins. One, in his own view more knowledgeable than the other, explained with great pride that the site had been named after the American President Washington.<sup>136</sup> In the 1920s the route to Uaxactun began by boat or barge from Belize City up the Belize River to the small Klondike-like town of El Cayo (today San Ignacio), one of the main stations of Peten's chicle industry. From El Cayo the river was no longer navigable, and on the last leg of the journey the expedition had to rely on mules. The animals, ten to twenty in all, were bought in El Cayo, and Blom and Ricketson also hired a crew of eighteen workmen there, mostly Maya and blacks, to carry out the hard work at the site. Much of Belize's population is descended from African slaves that the British brought with them to the country during the colonial period, but Blom preferred the Indians, with whom he was accustomed to work. While Morley traveled via Flores to Guatemala City to sort out the final paperwork and permits, Blom and Ricketson were left in charge of buying additional supplies and tools. A few days later, the team of twenty men embarked on the four-to-six-day trip from El Cayo to Uaxactun. Although it was possible to follow a chicle track, that is, one of the narrow paths used by the chicleros, it was not exactly a picnic to reach Uaxactun. On a daily basis it was ten to twelve hours of hard work for men and animals to struggle along the muddy paths in the dense undergrowth, crowds of insects swarming around their heads, and with the constant and nagging fear of close encounters with the long needle-like spines of the escoba palm tree. But Frans was familiar with life in the forest, and it seems that he truly enjoyed being back. "The cook caught six scorpions in his stack of firewood, and the workers killed a snake this morning. The waterhole is drying out and the grass is full of ticks. I have grown a beard. The sun is shining and life is glorious," he reassured his mother.<sup>137</sup>



Clearing platforms at Uaxactun Group D (Stela 17 is to the right), 1924.

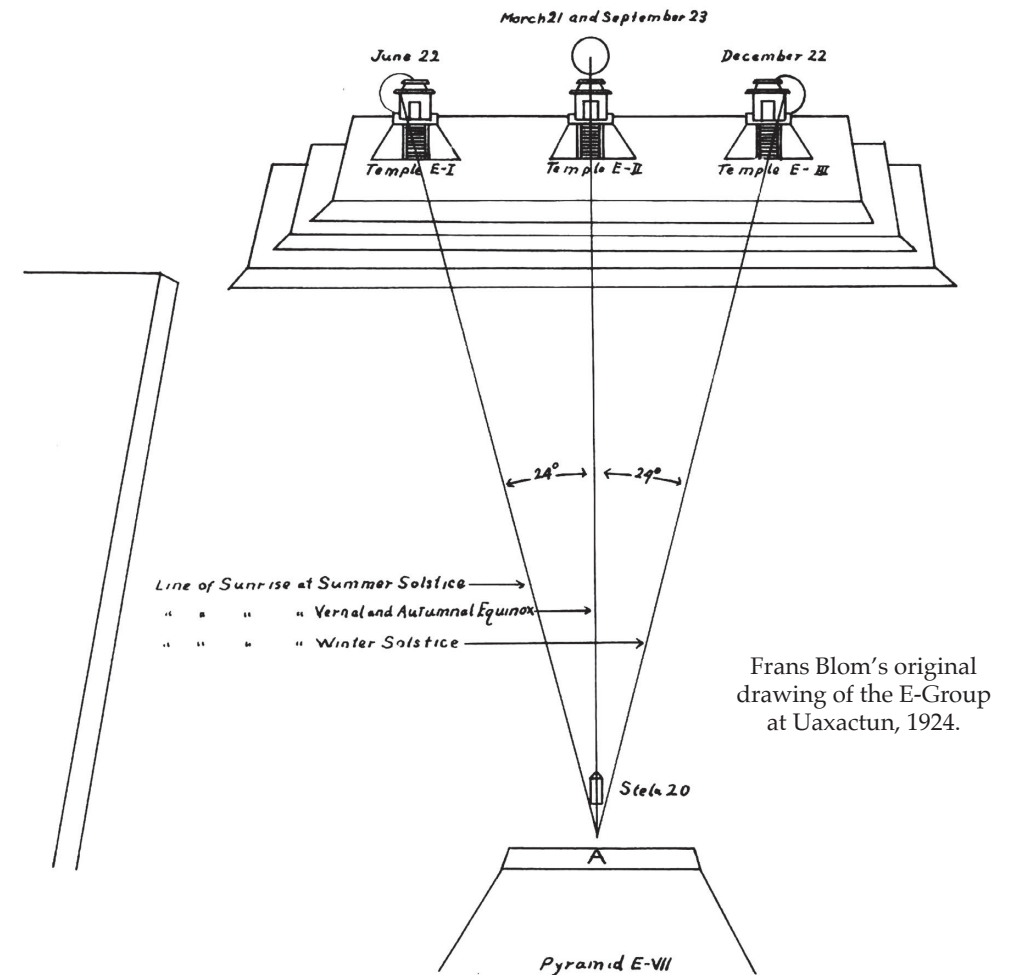
On February 29, 1924 they arrived at the site. As mentioned earlier, the main purpose of the approximately two months of fieldwork was to prepare the Carnegie excavations, scheduled to begin in the next dry season (that is, the first months of 1925). Blom, Ricketson, and Amsden were to draw up a preliminary map of the site core, which meant that they had to measure the collapsed and overgrown mounds which were almost indistinguishable from the small surrounding hills. This is where the workers from El Cayo came in. They would earn their wages from cutting down the ceiba, chicozapote, and amate trees and from clearing the ancient structures of undergrowth.

In addition, they were assigned to put up a small camp of thatched-roofed houses for the coming seasons. In a small status report Blom wrote satirically: "We have plenty of everything here except water and excavations."<sup>138</sup> The plenty of everything included, in addition to ruins and stelae, heat, ticks, lazy workers, and runaway mules. And there were problems. Ricketson and Amsden left the camp after just a short period of time. Why Ricketson left in order to participate in excavations elsewhere in Belize is unclear, but we know that Amsden became seriously ill and in mid-March had to be transported back to Belize City as quickly as possible – and from there to Chichen Itza in order to recover. Suddenly Frans had sole responsibility for work at the site.

He continued undaunted, and it was his accurate and thorough surveying work that formed the backbone of the later official map of Uaxactun. During his work Frans noticed how a group of buildings and stelae in the so-called E-Group was arranged in what appeared to be a significant and meaningful alignment. He estimated that this particular layout of an architectural group could have been based upon the ancient Maya's observations of the sun's movement across the sky, and later included the discovery in the report he wrote on the preliminary work at Uaxactun.<sup>139</sup> Several years later he summarized his interpretation of the E-Group as follows:

It was my good fortune to notice the fascinating secret of the ancient use of this temple group. Sitting one afternoon on the side of the western pyramid, directly behind and slightly above the monument [Stela 20], I took compass bearings. A line of sight ran over the top of the single monument on the east side, cutting through the center of the central temple on the east terrace and pointing due east. Then bearings were taken over the center of the temples on either side. The angle was  $24^\circ$ , and as previously there had been ascertained by the Department of Terrestrial Magnetism of the Carnegie Institution of Washington the exact longitude and latitude of Uaxactun, it was now only a matter of calculation to reach the astounding result that the two exterior lines indicated the amplitudes of the sun.

Which means that, while standing behind the monuments on the west side of this square, the astronomer-priest would see the sun rise, as if coming out of the roof of the central temple, twice a year, on the equinoxes, when day and night were of equal length; once a year, on the longest day, it would rise out of the northern temple; and once a year out of the southern temple.<sup>140</sup>



It is now commonly acknowledged that the Precolumbian Maya placed some of their temple structures according to astronomical alignments, and although it is rarely mentioned in the literature today, it was Blom who was the first to realize the astronomical significance of the E-Group, and this was certainly a high point in his career.<sup>141</sup> Moreover, it was an idea that came to be of importance for the subsequent excavations. As a direct result of Blom's discovery it was decided that the E-Group buildings should be investigated further in the coming seasons.<sup>142</sup> Blom also engaged in other kinds of work, including drawing and painting sections of the glyphic inscriptions on some of the stelae. Despite some inaccuracies, these drawings are extremely important today since the monuments have since suffered from further erosion and damage. The process of drawing, however, was extremely difficult, as anyone who has been face to face with a partially eroded and overgrown glyphic text will know. Frans summarized some of his first experiences at Uaxactun to Thomsen at the National Museum in Copenhagen:

65 km [40 miles] from the nearest city – i.e. a 5-day trip with pack-mules by a water hole, with dense jungle on all sides you will now find some palm huts, newly built and inhabited by the expedition, six Negroes, 10 Indians, two mixed, one Spaniard, and three Whites. We map the ruins, draw the monuments, take photographs, and do all the necessary preparatory work for next year's excavations. [...] The oldest monuments in the Maya area are found here, from approximately AD 68–97 [these dates follow a previous correlation between the Maya calendar and the Gregorian calendar, and are 260 years earlier than the correlation in use today]. Weathered and faded – what difficulties I have drawing the bastards.

We are supposed to work here for the next five years, and we expect a lot from the excavations. I cannot deny that I am a little proud that it has fallen to my lot to have to direct this work, it is a pleasure to work with what has one's fullest interest. Often I think with horror that I could have ended up in an office in Copenhagen.<sup>143</sup>

Blom wrote to Thomsen several times while in Uaxactun, and from reading the letters, now kept in the archives of the National Museum, one senses that he felt somewhat lonely among the black workers and the Maya whose language he still barely understood. But one also gets a clear impression that he is developing his own approach to the rich archaeological material he has in his hands every day – as when explaining to Thomsen that he finds Morley a little too single-minded in his work, namely in that he only cares for the glyphic inscriptions: “Here is Morley's weak side. He is only interested in the inscriptions, and even just the first part of the inscriptions. He has raced around Peten for the last eight years, collected inscriptions (he is brilliant at interpreting them) but has not surveyed as much as a building, not bent down after a single potsherd.”<sup>144</sup>

This brief statement is quite interesting, as Maya epigraphy at the time was focused almost exclusively on the calendrical dates in the beginning of the often very long inscriptions. Frans found this strange and apparently had a different perception of the Maya script and the content of the texts than Morley and Thompson did. At the same time the quote reveals another side of Frans. Sometimes he could be unreasonably harsh in his criticism of others,



Blom leaning on Uaxactun Stela 2, 1924.

and often he took it out on some of the people he owed the most, as in this case Morley, and later Oliver La Farge. Blom obviously had a temper and a sharp tongue that were particularly conspicuous when he was pressed and when he became overconfident. Brunhouse mentions that Ricketson and Amsden “found him unpleasant during the hours after work,”<sup>145</sup> unfortunately, without going into detail on how this manifested itself. Still, the tension



between Ricketson and Frans was not significant enough to put an end to their collaboration and completion of their thesis at Harvard.

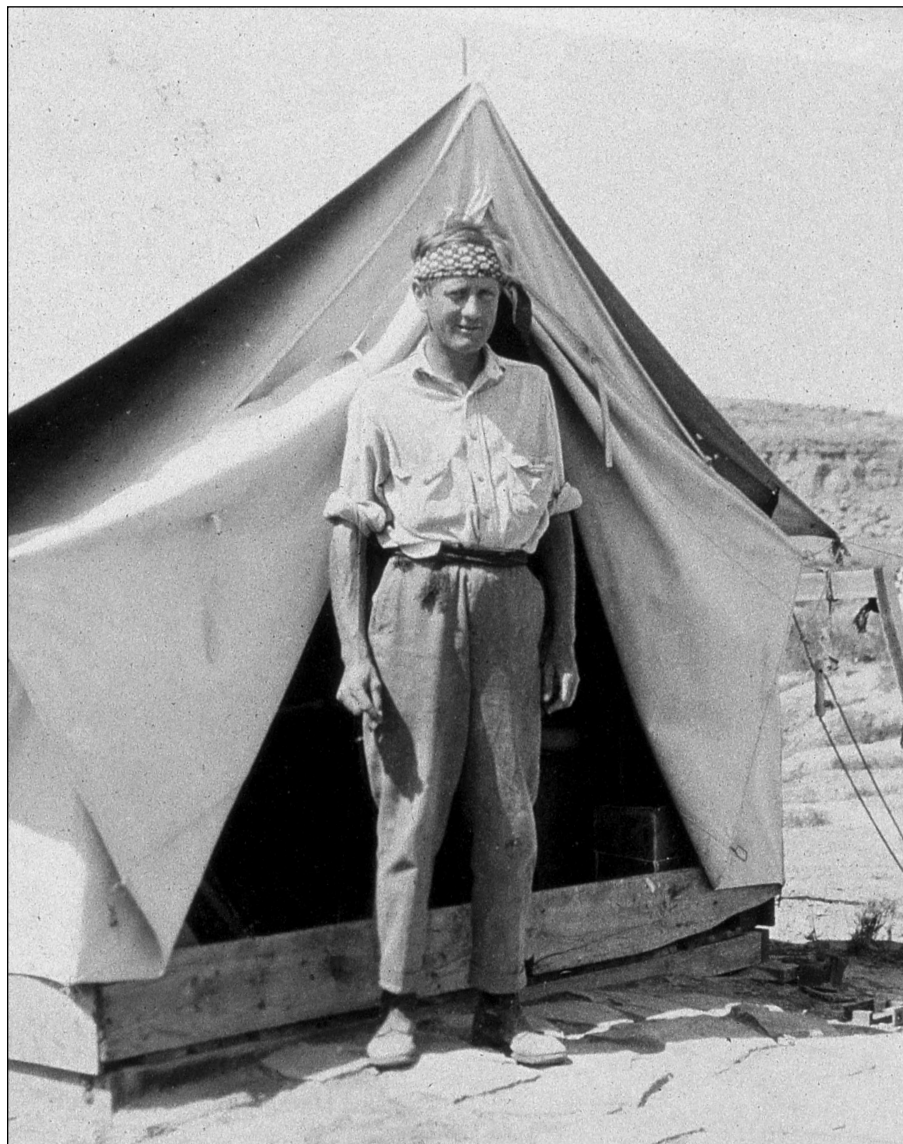
The numerous tasks that Frans had to deal with during the two months in Uaxactun required several practical skills, and as a matter of fact, several of the Carnegie archaeologists, including Blom, did not have a proper formation as an archaeologist, nor did they have much or any archaeological field experience prior to their enrollment with the Carnegie. Many of them can be described as practical “D.I.Y.-men” who had to learn much of the trade along the way, and gradually develop a working method suited to the conditions that they encountered in the forests and ruins. One of them, Edwin Shook, began as a draftsman and ended up as a renowned archaeologist. The last survivor of the old group of Carnegie archaeologists, Shook said in an interview in 1990: “It’s fair to say that a lot of Mayanists, including Frans Blom, Gus Stromsvik, and myself, came out of ships or oil fields, without formal training in archaeological techniques.”<sup>146</sup> The Norwegian Gustav Strømsvik’s (1901–1983) way into Maya archaeology is one of the most unusual, and perhaps even more remarkable than Blom’s. Originally a sailor, Strømsvik got tired of the monotonous work at sea, and jumped overboard one night in 1925 when his ship was anchored off Progreso on the northern coast of Yucatan. Strømsvik swam to the shore, and afterwards got a job on a sugar plantation. Here he heard about a group of Americans who were excavating at one of the many ruins in the area. The site was Chichen Itza, the Americans were from the Carnegie, and in charge of it all was, of course, Sylvanus Morley. Gus, as he was known, quit his plantation job and walked to Chichen Itza where he found work, first as a mechanic and later a handyman. The always festive Gus fell right in among the archaeologists, and when the Carnegie team finished their season that year, Morley offered Gus the job of looking after the ruins until they returned the next season. The ever-curious Norwegian accepted, but eventually he got so bored by doing next to nothing at the deserted site, that he began studying Morley’s field library. “God, by the second season he knew more about the Maya than most of the staff!” Shook reminisced.<sup>147</sup> From that day on Strømsvik exclusively worked as an archaeologist, and in time he came to lead one of the Carnegie’s largest excavation projects in Copan, Honduras. Eventually he would return to his place of birth, a small village in Norway, where he passed away in 1983.

Of the more classically trained Carnegie people, that is, those who actually had a degree from Harvard, the most important, besides Tozzer, Kidder, and Morley, were Oliver G. Ricketson and his wife Edith Ricketson, George Vaillant, and Robert Wauchope. Michael D. Coe, who as a student in the 1950s had his daily course among them, describes them as “Olympian Gods,”<sup>148</sup> and it was among these gods that Blom slowly tried to enter, although there is nothing to suggest that he had nearly as high an opinion of them as did the young Coe. And Frans succeeded with bravura. The work he had done in Uaxactun was excellent and surprising considering his lack of experience. He not only managed to complete the project singlehandedly, but he also formulated a novel and important hypothesis about the significance of the E-Group. There was no longer any reason, as there had been two years earlier, to consider himself “a very mediocre amateur.”<sup>149</sup> Blom had passed the test in the jungle with flying colors.

The makeshift camp in Uaxactun was closed down towards the end of April 1924, but Frans had not had enough of the forests and ruins yet. With two men and eleven mules he went on a long journey through the Peten to British Honduras. On his way, he managed to visit no less than fourteen sites, including Tikal, but also several almost undescribed ones, including the ruins of Chichantun near San Clemente.<sup>150</sup> Back in Belize City, he sold the mules and obtained passage to the port of Progreso – on the north coast of Yucatan where Strømsvik would set foot the following year. From there he planned to travel onwards to meet with Morley at Chichen Itza. What Blom did not know was that the boat he boarded belonged to a smuggler and was loaded to the brim with Caribbean rum and weapons. In Frans’s eyes this may have been tolerable, exciting even, but upon arrival in Progreso the smugglers were apprehended by the Mexican customs officials, and Frans was arrested along with the entire crew. Finally, after six hours in jail “the error was discovered and Progreso’s United Generals gave a dinner in my honor.”<sup>151</sup> Despite the dinner it was an exhausted Blom who reached his boss and good friend Morley in Chichen Itza in early June 1924. After returning to Harvard later the same month Frans began writing a long and detailed report, the first ever on Uaxactun, but like so much of what Frans wrote during his long career, it was unfortunately never published in full.<sup>152</sup>

In 1926 the Carnegie began proper excavations at the site. They were not, however, led by Blom, who would never again work in Uaxactun. It was Oliver Ricketson who became the leading archaeologist in the excavations that continued for the following eleven years. The excavations would be the most important of their kind for decades and in many ways laid the foundation for modern Maya archaeology. A major discovery was that the history of Uaxactun went all the way back to before the common era, and that the rise and initial development of Maya culture was much older than previously assumed. At the same time new standards for excavations were set and new methods and techniques for interpreting and analyzing ceramics, architecture, and sculpture were developed. Today, more than 90 years after Frans worked his way to the overgrown temple mounds, several of the buildings in Uaxactun have been restored, well-maintained lawns have been established around the temples, and the stelae are protected from the heavy rains under palm-thatched roofs. For the contemporary traveler the bus ride from Tikal or Flores, the capital of the department of Peten, through a vast jungle sanctuary to Uaxactun is nothing but an exciting excursion, and a sharp contrast to the hardships that met the first archaeologists in the area.

Frans only spent a few days with his writings in Cambridge, then he was off again. Around July 1, 1924, he arrived at the ruins of Pueblo Bonito in the Chaco Canyon in the dry and desert-like northwestern part of New Mexico. The reason that Frans found himself here, so far from the great forests, was Professor Tozzer’s preference for sending his students off on archaeological field work in exactly this area. It was obviously much less costly than transporting people to Middle America, and at the same time the students would contribute to investigating the prehistory of the United States. The two month stay at Pueblo Bonito became an important part of Frans’s archaeological training. From around AD 900–1200 Pueblo Bonito was one of the largest urban-like communities of the Pueblo culture, and to judge from the many living quarters and ritual buildings of the city, it had been



Blom during excavation at Pueblo Bonito, Chaco Canyon, summer 1924.

home to a significant population. The high walls that encircled the city were built of finely cut stone and showed highly developed architectural skills.

Frans undoubtedly learned a lot at Pueblo Bonito, not least the very basic archaeological techniques, especially during his excavation of Room 330 where he uncovered 24 skeletons, as well as vases, pots, and turquoise jewelry. Yet, sun-baked Pueblo Bonito was a mixed experience for Frans, who was never really captivated by the place. This may seem a little odd, since the great, desolate Pueblo city and the surrounding magnificent landscapes of the Chaco Canyon ought to have impressed the sensitive aesthete, but Blom preferred the lush, shady jungle rather than the dry, warm desert. What did,

however, catch Frans's attention was the local Zuni – real “redskins” as he knew them from the novels of his childhood. A letter to Thomsen, written towards the close of the season, provides a glimpse of Frans's enthusiasm and his sheer joy of writing. In it he describes all the new impressions, just as he repeats his continued interests in collaborating with the National Museum in Copenhagen:

Dear Th. Th.

The embers of the bonfire glow, the stars sparkle more clearly after the flames have died out. The Great Spirit has left for the eternal hunting grounds. A few moments ago he circled in the smoke of the fire. The Indians danced, the redskins are still alive, they live and preserve their customs, their dances. Something modern has crept into their costumes, but eagle feathers still crown their heads, in their hands they hold bows with feather-decorated strings. It is astonishing, incredible that intimate co-existence with Whites, and thousands of insistent attacks by all the many gods of the Christian religion [...] have not succeeded in shaking their thousand-year-old beliefs, or putting an end to their ancient ceremonies. It is an experience, an unforgettable sight to see our Indian workers dancing. They love their dance and every Sunday evening they have danced for us. Tonight was the last time before we break up camp.

The dance – soon in a long row, soon in a circle, now two are dancing in front of the row. All sing, a remarkable unison singing and the rhythm is set by the beat of the drums and the rhythmic stamping of their feet. In their hands they hold wild sunflowers or green branches, many hold calabash rattles. Their faces are painted, red, black, and white. The flames of the bonfire cast a golden glow over their brown skin. At the edge of the clearing, we sit, a few Whites and a crowd of Navajo Indians, with squaws and infants in cradle boards (papooses).

Now the song was quiet as a song that rose and fell, undulating rhythms, now it was wild melodic screams. One understood why the settlers trembled when they heard the Indian war songs and the screams across the plains. In and out, back and forth the dancers moved. And finally they disappeared out of the circle of light, away towards their camp. The song became fainter and fainter – then a wild shrill, and silence. The Great Spirit went on to the eternal hunting grounds. An American said “that's grand” – and I sat down to write to you.

On my table is a clay vessel, white with small figures painted on the interior. Two Indians who worked for me the past two months gave it to me “so that I should not forget them.” No, I shall not forget these pleasant and bright workers. They had brought the vessel here, and used it for their sacrifices to the Rain God. When I return to Boston I will send it to the museum, though not as a gift, Sir, but as a loan. It is my vessel as long as I live and I can demand it back. When someday I follow “the Great Spirit,” the museum shall have it. Dixit [...]

I yearn back to my forests. I have eaten enough sand for the past two months. No one shall lure me to a desert again. The work has been interesting and I have had a rich benefit from my stay here, both learned a lot and found a lot. But – the Maya and the forests have captured me. On September 9 I will go back to Boston to resume my Maya studies, and in January I hope to have my M.A. degree [...]

Well, that is all for tonight. What did the Americanists say? They probably had much fun out of Morley, Spinden and Gann. A wonderful crazy gang with some really good heads.

Well then, good night (suppose you will receive the letter with the morning post – good morning)

Yours

Frans Blom<sup>153</sup>

At the end of the letter Blom refers to some of the participants in the large International Americanist Congress, which had just taken place in Gothenburg, Sweden. On his way, Morley had stopped over in Copenhagen, where he visited the Blom family. Brunhouse noted: “The elder Mr. Blom gave him [Morley] a royal welcome, breezed him through five museums and entertained him at dinner at his country residence. Vay [Morley’s nickname] was duly impressed by all of the attention from this locally prominent man, while Blom was gratified that his son was working for the highly respected Carnegie Institution.”<sup>154</sup> From Frans’s letters to his family, we know that he had prepared his parents thoroughly and had described in laudatory terms the great Mayanist who might appear as “a funny little fellow to look at,” but “something of a genius in his field.”<sup>155</sup> Alfred Blom’s efforts to treat Morley in style also show how wholeheartedly the Blom family had by now accepted and truly valued Frans’s choice of career. Morley, however, was primarily in Copenhagen to greet Thomsen and to see the collections of the famous National Museum. As Frans wrote to Thomsen: “Greet my friends, and tell them that I should like to be there. Show them, the visitors, how beautiful our small country is. [...] (Let Morley see your ‘Princess on the cow hide,’ *that* is a piece of excavation that the good people here in the U.S. won’t be able to imitate).”<sup>156</sup>

“The Princess on the cow hide” which Frans alludes to with great humor and a reference to Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tale “The Princess and the Pea” is of course the Egtved Girl, whose excavation and preservation had brought the international archaeological spotlight on Denmark and Thomas Thomsen.

In the same letter from the sweltering and dusty Chaco Canyon Frans adds the following: “I have been allowed to choose a collection of objects from here, a small, typical collection from this kind of ruins. Complete vessels I can hardly get hold of, but a collection of sherds that provide the most typical forms, some samples of the woven straw mats and baskets etc. etc. you can probably also use. If it were possible you would receive better things. Well, that will come.”<sup>157</sup> Later in the 1920s an agreement was reached with the National Museum, which provided Frans with funds to purchase items when something particularly interesting appeared on the art market. This agreement, however, never led to any significant acquisitions for the museum, and all of Frans’s donations and acquisitions are currently put away in its storerooms. There can be no doubt, however, that Frans Blom cared a lot for the national museum of his homeland, and he sincerely wished to help expand not only the collection of objects, but also the library of the Ethnographic Collection. He thus convinced Tozzer that all the main publications from the Carnegie Institution as well as the Peabody Museum should be sent to Thomsen’s thriving department. Free of charge, that is. These wonderful volumes, bound

in brown leather, are still accessible in the library, many of them looking new and crisp, as if they have never been opened since the day they arrived.

By the end of August 1924 Frans finally got out of scalding Chaco Canyon and Pueblo Bonito, and in September he was back at the more temperate Harvard. He immediately started to write up the Uaxactun report and continued work on his M.A. thesis with Ricketson.<sup>158</sup> The two had combed through the existing literature for references to and descriptions of Maya ruins, and had collected all the information in an extensive manuscript and traced all the ruins onto a map. Although it was an unprecedented piece of work of extreme scholarly value, it was somehow also an “easy” way to get around a thesis, in the sense that when it came to writing as such, the process was reduced to compiling lists of names and references. Frans continued to work on the map for many years to come, and it was printed in 1940 in a limited set of copies. The urge for mapping and exploring the “white spots” on the map seems to have been a powerful drive in Frans, and this persistent curiosity and restlessness constantly led him towards the lesser known or completely unknown parts of the Maya area. Only rarely did his “restless blood” allow him to concentrate on a single location for a longer duration of time.

The fall of 1924 was a time of shortage of money, a time of stress and hard work. Equally worrisome was the fact that there was no immediate prospect of a permanent position after the completion of the thesis. Once more, Morley and Carnegie had problems with the excavation permits for Uaxactun, and Morley began to vaguely suggest that Frans might have to go to work at Chichen Itza instead. With everything up in the air, Morley could not, no matter how much he wanted to, guarantee Frans a job on any of the excavations. Would Frans’s lucky star suddenly abandon him, just as he graduated? The answer is no. An unexpected offer appeared from the newly founded Department of Middle American Research at Tulane University in New Orleans. The invitation came from none other than William Gates, the man who had almost managed to block Blom’s biggest adventure thus far, the Carnegie expedition to Uaxactun. In November Frans relates the news to Thomsen:

Of other things that have come up, the most important must be an invitation from Tulane University in New Orleans to take the position as head of their expeditions in Middle America, as well as Associate Professor in Maya archaeology. That offer gave me something to think about. The university has just received a large donation with work in Middle America in mind. And they sent a man here in order to get hold of me. I must say that this is a great honor. Well, I had a fairly good position at Carnegie, so I had some pretty demanding conditions which, to my great surprise, were accepted. So, I am stuck with it.<sup>159</sup>

The history of Tulane and the University’s new Department of Middle American Research began in New Orleans about 30 years earlier with bananas and an enterprising man named Samuel Zemurray. With his own hands Zemurray had built one of America’s largest “banana empires,” the Cuyamel Fruit Company, and he had risen from a poor banana street vendor to a tremendously rich businessman with great political influence in the countries from which he imported the popular fruit. Cuyamel had its own

fleet of cargo ships which docked at the busy port of New Orleans, at that time one of the prime commercial gateways to Central and South America. In addition, the company owned vast plantations (including railways) in the banana-producing countries, especially Honduras. In 1918, Sam "the Banana Man" Zemurray thus owned, together with two other companies, including the famous and infamous United Fruit Company, 75% of Honduras's banana plantations. The wealthy American banana kings practiced a more or less direct economic and political control of several Central American states, and hence laid the foundation for the concept of "banana republics." But Zemurray also wanted to develop more scientific ties between his hometown and Mexico and Central America; as a result, he decided to donate \$300,000 to Tulane University for the creation of a completely new department dedicated to Middle American studies. At the same time he presented the university with a large collection of books on Mexico and Central America which had just been offered for sale for \$60,000. President of Tulane University Albert Dinwiddie accepted Zemurray's generous offers without hesitation. The man who had just sold a major part of his private library was William Gates, and as Dinwiddie had problems finding a suitable head of the new department, he chose to let the man follow the books. Gates was hired as the first director of the Department of Middle American Research.<sup>160</sup>

The 61-year-old Gates had previously been tied closely to the U.S. theosophist movement, the Theosophical Society, which drew heavily on thoughts from Hinduism, including the idea of reincarnation. Gates was particularly interested in religious ideas from ancient India, Egypt, and China and searched for a common spiritual origin, a sort of spiritual community. The goal was to recover an ancient, mystical knowledge of the path to God that modern, fragmented man had long since lost.<sup>161</sup> However, Gates left theosophy behind, and it was only then that he got involved in Maya studies and began a long struggle to be accepted in the narrow circles of the community of Mayanists. He was the driving force behind the establishment of the Maya Society in 1920, which he governed with an iron fist. If the reports about him are to be trusted, Gates seems to have been a rather unpleasant character. A student described him in Tulane's student magazine *Hullabaloo* in 1926 as: "the most colossal egoist of any man we have ever observed. [...] Added to his boundless ego was, we believe, a deep seated defect in his mental make-up, a neurosis of some sort, which kept him constantly suspicious of others. [...] No man with self-respect could, we think, work harmoniously with such a man."<sup>162</sup> It was as if Gates had a built-in, nagging fear that someone was plotting against him. He is often described as a poor scholar and, mildly put, having a deficient knowledge of the Maya and their geographical setting, and his publications were marked by sloppiness and hasty conclusions. Yet, as an inveterate bibliophile Gates always had his works published in exceptionally beautiful volumes printed on exquisite paper. The books were only published in limited editions and were tremendously expensive. Despite the paranoid traits in his personality and his low academic status, Gates succeeded in getting important positions in Guatemala, as director of the country's archaeological investigations as well as the national museum. Whether people liked him or not, for a period Gates had great power and influence in the heart of the Maya area.

After the troublesome affair with the Carnegie Institution concerning

the excavation permits, and his subsequent resignation from his posts in Guatemala, Gates was so furious with Morley that he tried to get him expelled from the Maya Society. This led to the total dissolution of the society as virtually all members supported Morley, and the incident clearly showed that Gates stood isolated. The rather incidental recruitment as director of the new department at Tulane gave the controversial Gates a second chance, and he soon announced a series of wild and unrealistic plans: "I want [...] to make the Department not merely a scientific research center in linguistics, archaeology, history and the rest, but a developing center of specific information useful to the Port of New Orleans, and the business that lies behind it."<sup>163</sup> Gates's high aspirations never went further than words, and after a short time there were already problems with exceeding budgets. He never created an index of the many books he had sold to Tulane, and he probably still considered them his own property.<sup>164</sup> Gates wanted to hire an archaeologist as part of the department's permanent staff, and since Alfred Kidder and T. A. Joyce immediately refused the offer, it went to the young Danish comet. Gates knew that Frans was looking for a more secure and permanent position. The situation must be seen from Frans's perspective; he was, rather suddenly, offered a permanent position with the prospect of going on several expeditions in the near future, and for a newly graduated archaeologist this was a unique opportunity. But Frans also knew of Gates's personality and had heard all the stories about him. If he accepted the offer, he had to expect to stand graciously in the shadow of the erratic, older man.

Frans had to make a choice, and this he found so hard that he turned to Morley and Tozzer for advice. Morley preferred to let Frans decide for himself and stressed that no matter what decision he made, it would not affect their friendship. Tozzer, on the other hand, perceived William Gates as the worst boss imaginable, but indicated to Blom that perhaps Tulane would soon become so tired of Gates that they would fire him, which would mean that all doors would suddenly be open to Blom. Perhaps it was this perspective that made Frans say yes to Tulane, and things did eventually develop exactly as Tozzer had prophesied. Frans even got to play, according to some sources, a very active role in the expulsion of Gates. We will return to that part of the story in the following chapter. Brunhouse writes about Gates's "luck" attracting Frans to New Orleans: "He had managed to take that promising young man away from Morley and the Carnegie Institution, whom he had hated since the Guatemala days. If this attempt to even out old scores with the enemies prompted Gates to employ this particular archaeologist, he made a serious mistake."<sup>165</sup>

Frans signed a three-year contract, officially beginning on January 1, 1925, with an annual salary of \$3,000, considerably more than he had been accustomed to in the past few years. We know that he was concerned about having to work under Gates and that to others he would emphasize that he was hired by President Dinwiddie and was not directly subject to Gates's whims. Gates himself was utterly delighted to have enticed the bright talent into his own camp. He boasted loudly of his catch, stating that Blom was "ten times Morley's superior. Morley never sees anything but 'dates'; Blom sees everything, topographic and cultural." To Dinwiddie, Gates reported: "He is a gentleman born. Old Danish family; five languages; King's messenger in the war; was slated for high position in Denmark," and to the local

New Orleans newspapers, Gates boasted: “Frans Blom possesses the most remarkable abilities I have ever seen in a man of his age.”<sup>166</sup> While Gates was busy with his own little propaganda campaign, Frans and Ricketson handed in their thesis, and almost immediately thereafter Frans bid his many friends in Cambridge farewell and left for New Orleans, arriving on February 9, 1925. Frans knew very well that the academic environment was more developed at Harvard than in New Orleans, and the main reason for his decision was probably the possibility of setting out on new expeditions in the Maya area. The first, with Frans in charge, was departing from New Orleans, just ten days after his arrival there.

A new, challenging time lay ahead of Blom, who, partly by hard work, partly by chance and a good portion of luck, in just a few years had managed to turn his life upside down. In six years he had changed his life’s trajectory from being a money-spending womanizer to an oil scout, then to becoming a student at Harvard, and finally an author with an M.A. degree, and a tenured associate professor at an American university specializing in Maya archaeology. It was a remarkably fast career, and Frans was, when he arrived in Louisiana and the lively port by the mighty Mississippi and the warm Gulf of Mexico – the waterway to the Maya area – ambitious, energetic, and confident, and with good reason to be. The restless Frans finally seemed to have found a place in life.



## Chapter 5

# The Great Expeditions

(1925–1931)

*“We wandered across a piece of land that on most maps is marked as uninhabited and unknown. [...] A wonderfully beautiful piece of land. And here and there the old gods smiled at us and showed us their faces on stones or their houses.”*

(Frans Blom, 1925).<sup>167</sup>

On February 19, 1925, Frans Blom left the busy harbor of New Orleans on board the cargo ship “Copan” – aptly named after the famous Maya ruins in Honduras – as the leader of the first Tulane expedition. The following six months were to bring him and his assistant Oliver La Farge on an eventful journey of more than 1200 miles through the mountains and unexplored rainforests of southern Mexico and Guatemala. It must have been like a dream for Frans. He could combine his restlessness with his interest in Mexico’s past – and call it work. The expedition was to unfold as one of Frans Blom’s greatest triumphs as an explorer and Maya researcher.

Frans made the first part of the journey on his own, and the first stop was the oil port of Tampico in the Mexican state of Veracruz, where he had

a brief reunion with the Scottish-born amateur archaeologist William Niven. After seeing Niven’s latest archaeological finds Frans went further south to the state capital of Veracruz. It was here that Frans had first set foot on Mexican soil six years earlier, and once again the trip followed the route of Hernán Cortés to Mexico City. Here Frans met up with the other member of the expedition, Oliver La Farge, a student of ethnography, whom he knew from his time at Harvard. Together they secured the necessary permits and letters of introduction which, due to Frans’s contact with Manuel Gamio, went faster and more smoothly than usual, and Frans found time to pay the elderly Zelia Nuttall a visit. Soon Frans and La Farge returned to the port of Veracruz, north of the northwestern limits of the Maya area. From here the trip into the great forests would begin.

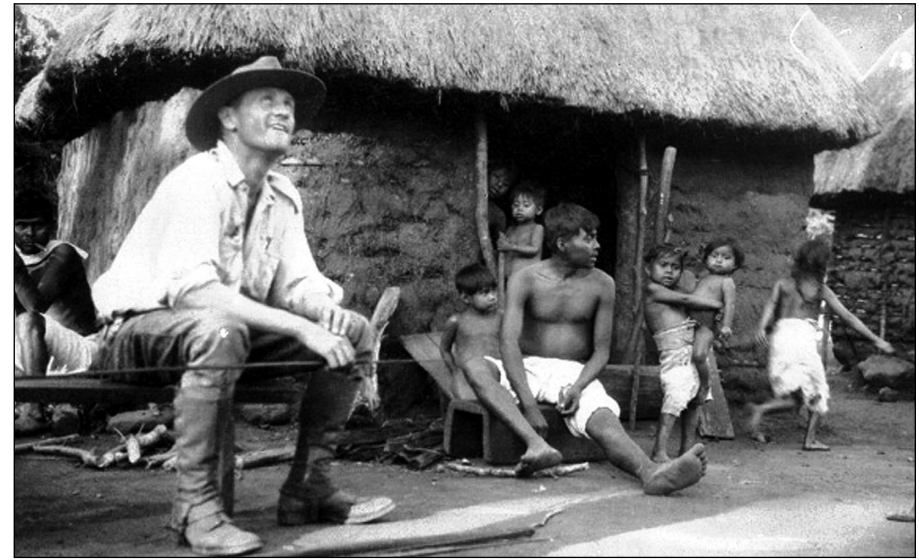
This is the brief prelude to the expedition, which eighteen months later resulted in what is arguably Frans Blom’s most famous book, the two-volume *Tribes and Temples*. A book which on nearly every page exudes Frans’s attentive curiosity, and is a wonderfully exciting – and rare – form of scholarly literature. The Mexican archaeologist Isabel Fernández Tejedó puts it as follows: “The style of Frans Blom, a native of Denmark, relates him to the travelers of the previous century [...] His methods and works link him with the subsequent scientific researchers. Spanning the two traditions, he is the last of the illustrious pioneering travelers and the first of the scientific archaeologists in the state of Tabasco.”<sup>168</sup> Frans undeniably had a characteristic, vivid style of narrative that enabled him to bring the material to life, a style that seems to belong to a bygone romantic era. As the archaeologist Robert Wauchope noted about the first generations of Maya scholars in his book *They Found the Buried Cities*: “I like the old nineteenth century accounts by Stephens, Morelet, Squier, and Maler – scientific reports that were widely read and enjoyed by the public, books that recounted adventures, were not afraid of expressing emotion, and frequently philosophized on matters entirely marginal to their technical theme.”<sup>169</sup> In many ways *Tribes and Temples* is exactly such a book, and it is clearly inspired by the famous books of John Lloyd Stephens from the mid-1800s which merge travel anecdotes and descriptions of nature and humans with archaeological observations. In Frans’s own words to Thomsen: “I have written the text as a travel book, with descriptions of the ruins we found. Here and there I interweave Maya history, so that the reader, upon finishing the book, almost without knowing it, has obtained an overview of the history and life of the Maya.”<sup>170</sup> *Tribes and Temples* was also a significant contribution to Maya research, and it is still frequently cited. Frans must have been particularly proud when his old mentor Alfred Kidder wrote to him in 1928: “*Tribes and Temples* is the best since Stephens.”<sup>171</sup> The main part of the book is written by Frans, while a few, longer ethnographic sections are by La Farge. The account is strongly characterized by Frans’s sometimes bone-dry and dark humor and his highly romantic descriptions of nature. In terms of format *Tribes and Temples* is a truly remarkable book: it is more than 500 pages, thoroughly illustrated with Blom and La Farge’s photographs and drawings. The high cost of the impression of 4000 copies was paid by the department’s patron Samuel Zemurray. Frans chose not to dedicate the work to Zemurray, however, but to his great role model Alfred P. Maudslay, “who was the first to explore the Maya ruins in a modern scientific way.”<sup>172</sup>

Quite unusually, the first chapter contains a thorough description of the

expedition's equipment. We thus acquire an accurate picture of Blom and La Farge's luggage as they move southwards from Veracruz and into the Maya area. Among the most important things were the aluminum cooking set, hammocks, a folding table, a snake-bite remedy plus a selection of other medications, army emergency rations, compass and a Brunton pocket transit, a 25-meter steel tape, a Graphix camera and a No. 1-A Autographic Kodak Jr. camera with tripod, folding shovels, a jack (to lift and turn fallen stelae and altars), stiff brushes, drawing boards, watercolors, colored crayons, protractors, and canned goods – a small selection since Frans preferred to buy food in the villages on the way. As becomes a true explorer, a "stock of glass beads, bandanna handkerchiefs, and a collection of chromo prints of saints were carried for bartering with the Indians." Everything was carefully packed into special boxes, each of which could accommodate about 110 pounds. A mule was loaded with two such boxes, whereas an Indian carrier could carry only one. The full equipment was shown to the press and public prior to departure, an effective way of getting attention that Frans would also employ several times in the years to come. He wrote, with his characteristic dark humor: "Before leaving for the field we were given a medical examination, and this same was repeated upon our return. The first investigation was to ascertain that we were in fit condition for a long, strenuous journey, and the second to find out if we had succeeded in collecting some interesting germs in our blood which might be of importance to medical students."<sup>173</sup> The reason for the examinations was certainly serious enough since the tropical climate with its exotic diseases, especially malaria, wore out several oil people and archaeologists.

On March 12, 1925, Blom and La Farge left the city of Veracruz and set off for the Tuxtla Mountains in the southernmost part of the state. The journey was by train which sometimes went so slowly that La Farge could comfortably lean out of the window and pick flowers. From San Andrés Tuxtla they continued in a small truck to the small village of Catemaco on the banks of the volcano-fringed lake by the same name. There was time to explore the area, including a small island in Lake Catemaco where they came across a group of previously unknown ruins, and on the mainland, they discovered several Precolumbian stone sculptures. On March 16, they were back on the track, this time on horseback, and set out from Catemaco in a southeasterly direction. They passed farms and coffee plantations that had been destroyed and looted during the civil war and remained in sad condition. Along the way, they heard rumors that the Indians in the village of Tatahuicapa were hostile and would not hesitate to shoot down strangers passing through. It turned out, however, that the village simply had an effective defense against bandits and stray rebels; the small expedition received a friendly reception and was accommodated in their own hut. In the evening they were told the story of how the villagers had shot a group of rebels, some ten days earlier, who had sought shelter in the village. To Blom and La Farge this was a reminder that the danger of assault in this part of Mexico was still imminent.

It is from the stay in Tatahuicapa that we first get one of Frans's enthusiastic descriptions of the scantily dressed young Indian women, barely disguised as an anthropological observation: "The women dress in gaudy coloured striped skirts held up by finely woven white belts. Shoulders and breasts are naked, and as they are well built they certainly gave a pleasant



In the village of Tatahuicapa, Veracruz, March 1925.

impression, especially the young women when they passed by our hut on their way to the river [...]"<sup>174</sup> But, as he adds with disappointment in his field diary, they could not stay in the village to admire nature's creative power; they had to move on to study what man has created in stone.<sup>175</sup>

With Tatahuicapa as a base, on March 19 the expedition took off on a three-day detour to the Gulf Coast to visit the site of Piedra Labrada, where a stela-like sculpture had been found – perhaps a hitherto undescribed Maya stela with a new calendar date? After a nine hour ride they finally arrived, and there the stela was – but without any recognizable calendrical inscription. Frans had difficulty determining to which culture the well-preserved, two-meter-tall monument belonged. Scholars still discuss this, although certain features indicate a close connection to Teotihuacan in Central Mexico. Frans, however, rightly concluded that the stela was not Maya. In Piedra Labrada he and La Farge also became intimately acquainted with the bountiful and diverse species of insects which have caused Maya archaeologists irritation and pain at all times when working in the lowlands. They had to endure hordes of leeches, ticks, sand flies, and mosquitoes during work, and in the evening they rubbed each other with alcohol trying to get rid of the pests. Among the more severe nuisances were the botflies which lay eggs under the skin, where they then hatch and emerge. Worst of all, however, was the almost inevitable malaria – which Frans already had in his blood.

Escaping the hot and humid coastal climate, Frans and La Farge returned to Tatahuicapa via the San Martín Pajapan volcano. At the top of the 3973 foot volcano they rediscovered an old stone sculpture of a strange kneeling figure, probably once placed there as part of rituals for gods and ancestors. Frans photographed and carefully sketched the enigmatic sculpture. Soon after the return to Tatahuicapa the journey continued towards Puerto México, a city and a region which Frans already knew very well from his time in the oil business, but which – because of the unhealthy climate and malaria – remained one of the least studied in Mexico in terms of archaeology,

ethnography, and linguistics. In Puerto México, an unattractive town Blom refers to as a “dump,” he and La Farge had to wait ten days for a boat to travel further up the Gulf Coast. On March 30 they made a small expedition up the nearby Tonalá River in a rented sailboat in order to kill time. In Puerto México people were talking about the remains of some large ruins, known as La Venta, which should be close to a tributary of the Tonalá. The expedition arrived several hours later, and Frans immediately hired a group of locals to clear the dense undergrowth covering the mounds. And the sight that met them came to rank among the expedition’s greatest discoveries.

Scattered throughout the jungle stood and lay several beautifully carved stelae and altar-like monuments. For the first time in centuries the rays of the sun reached the sculptures: here a glimpse of a figure with a strange, elongated headdress, and there, partially covered by leaves and grass, a figure crouched below what appeared to be a deadly snake’s head. As in Piedra Labrada, Frans had difficulty determining which culture the monuments belonged to. There were, however, certain features of the motifs and the depicted figures on the stelae that reminded him of the Maya. The culmination of the hours-long stay in La Venta occurred when Frans discovered a giant stone head half-buried in the loose soil. The 2.5-meter-tall monument, obviously weighing tons, was executed with a perfection that astonished Blom. While he and La Farge filled their notebooks and photographed the sculptures, they wondered how the transport of the huge stone blocks had been possible. La Venta was situated several miles from the nearest source of volcanic stone. In Blom’s own words: “La Venta is certainly a place of many puzzles, and further work should be done in order to ascertain more definitely where this ancient city should be placed in our sequence of cultures.”<sup>176</sup> But: “The Maya features in Stela 2, the standing figure with diagonal ceremonial bar and huge headdress, and in Altars 3 and 4, are so strong that we are inclined to ascribe these ruins to the Maya culture.”<sup>177</sup>

Frans’s description and the pictures of the many stone monuments in *Tribes and Temples* would soon attract other archaeologists. In the 1940s Matthew Stirling excavated at several places in the area, including at La Venta. Gradually it became clear that it was not the Maya who had inhabited La Venta and created the great stone heads, which we today know come from quarries in the Tuxtla Mountains some 100 miles to the north, and which were probably transported down the rivers to their destination on large wooden rafts. The culture, now known as the Olmec, turned out to be older than the Maya and any other civilization in Mesoamerica. Thus, La Venta had flourished as early as between 900 and 600 BC. In the previous centuries, another Olmec center, San Lorenzo, had been the largest city in the Gulf Coast region, and had evidently played an important role in the emergence of civilizations in Mesoamerica. For these reasons, the Olmec are often referred to as a “mother culture.” Today the colossal head that Frans found (Monument 1) has been transported from La Venta to an archaeological park in Tabasco’s capital Villahermosa. The head probably portrays one of the rulers of the ancient Olmec city. Frans Blom never returned to work with the Olmecs, but the Danish architect Steffen Fisker remarked how Frans later proudly told him that the head he had found was called “Blom’s stone head.”<sup>178</sup>

When, on April 10, the expedition arrived at Frontera, a major town at the estuary of the Grijalva River, which Frans had previously visited in 1922,

they had finally reached the Maya area. Blom and La Farge immediately began to seek out the city’s American oil workers, German and British hacienda owners, Mexicans, and indigenous peasants to get information about whatever ruins could be found in the vicinity. Drawing on such local intelligence was by far the best and easiest way to identify “unknown” ruins, and the method was used during the entire trip. Frontera did not, however, yield any archaeological discoveries, and a few days later they continued on up the broad Grijalva River in a flat-bottomed motorboat. The goal was Villahermosa, the capital of Tabasco state. Blom did not conceal that he found the name of the city inappropriate:

Villahermosa is Spanish for “Beautiful City,” but alas, the name is the only thing beautiful about that place. To quote La Farge, verbatim, “There is little to say about it except that it is misnamed and smells worse than any town we have yet been in.” [...] Dirt and flies were so plentiful that we decided to leave the following day.<sup>179</sup>

In the foul-smelling city they were joined by Gates and “The Tulane Botanical Expedition,” consisting of the two agronomists Hartenbrower and Haskell. Middle American botany was yet another of Gates’s numerous research areas, but he cut off his own expedition for a few days to follow Blom and La Farge’s ride to the Maya ruins of Comalcalco. It is doubtful whether Frans appreciated Gates’s visit, and his presence is largely ignored in the published report. Comalcalco had previously been visited by the Frenchman Désiré Charnay in the 1880s but had never been adequately studied and mapped. The impressive temples and palaces of the site are unique in being built of flat clay bricks, instead of the ordinary limestone with which almost all other Maya cities were built. The expedition spent several days cutting down trees, clearing undergrowth, and making the necessary measurements and sketches. On the ninth and last day in Comalcalco only one building remained to be cleared and surveyed:



Detail of the stuccoes Frans discovered at Comalcalco, 1925.

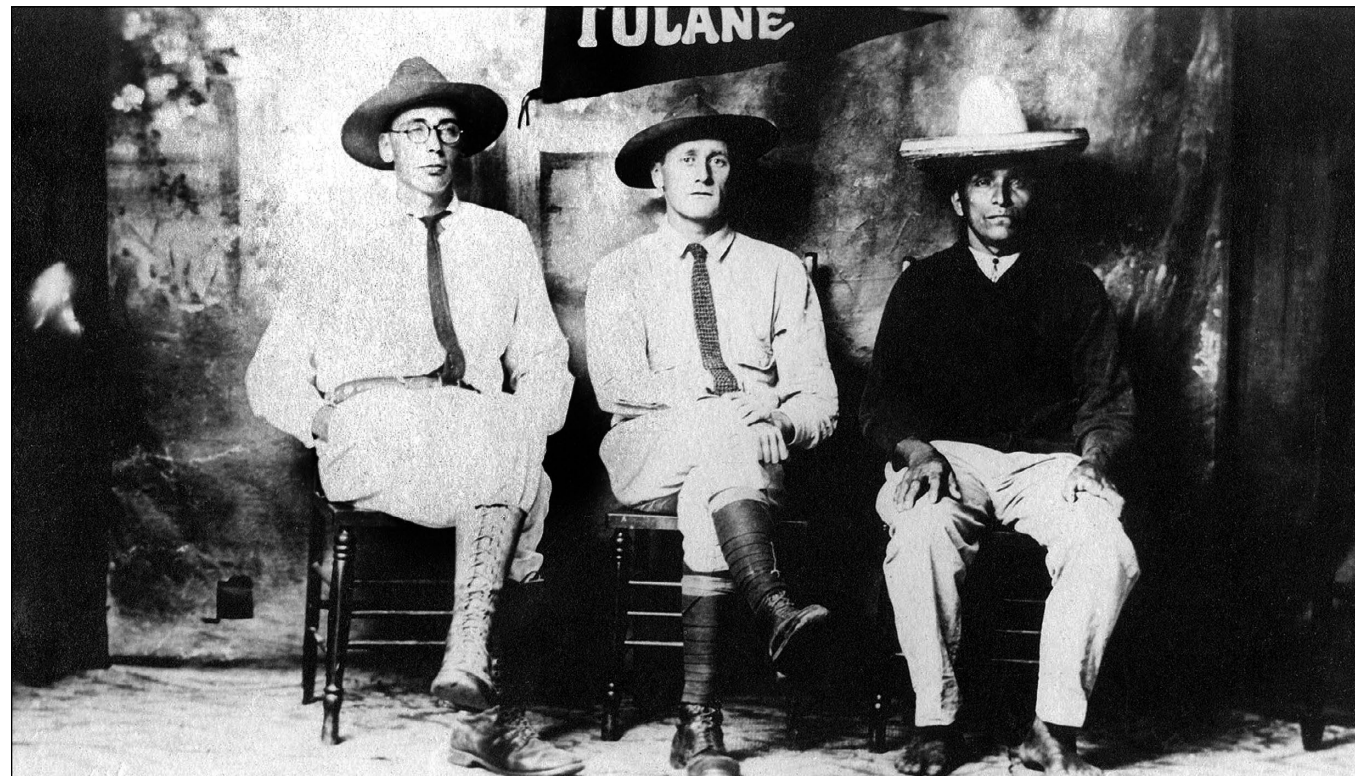
All our work had been finished. [...] It was late in the afternoon and we were ready to leave Comalcalco the next day. Only a small ruined room remained to be placed on the general map. [...] The sun was standing low, and its rays fell on the east wall of the room. "What was that on the walls – some stucco ornaments?" Eagerly we scraped away a great mass of fallen leaves and dirt. The feather ornaments of a helmet appeared, then a face, all modeled in stucco low relief. More feathers, and part of another face. After all we had not finished our work at the ruins.<sup>180</sup>

The great discovery meant that the stay in Comalcalco was extended by a few extra days, and Frans excavated what appeared to be the remains of a burial chamber with a total of nine stucco figures on the walls, probably portraits of priests and relatives of the Comalcalco ruler who had been buried there. The chamber itself was almost empty and had obviously been looted. Finding such well-preserved stucco figures was a real sensation in the 1920s, and according to Blom this discovery alone would fully justify the entire expedition. Other tombs embellished with stucco figures have since been found, not least K'inich Janaab Pakal's burial crypt at Palenque where nine dynastic predecessors guard the magnificent sarcophagus of the Palenque ruler.

Frans traced the glyphs accompanying the portraits, but unfortunately he did it so hastily that the drawings' inaccuracies render them difficult to decipher today; sadly, the quality of his photographs is also too poor to enable us to read the inscriptions. To make matters worse the original stuccoes in Comalcalco have since weathered to a degree where the glyphs are now almost completely illegible. At a later point in time, Blom had a coarse reconstruction of the tomb reliefs made for the museum of the Tulane Department. Again, the details of the glyphs did not receive much attention.

After the eventful days in Comalcalco the expedition returned to Villahermosa on April 25, and here Blom and La Farge parted from Gates and the two agronomists, who went on to explore the flora of Tabasco. Blom and La Farge continued after a few days of practical tasks towards the town of Macuspana and the nearby ruins known as Tortuguero. The expedition was still in the hot lowlands of Tabasco, but gradually the landscape began to rise, and the climate became a bit cooler and more bearable. Frans had already visited Tortuguero briefly in 1922, but on this occasion there was time for a more thorough exploration of the site. There were no standing buildings preserved in Tortuguero, but Frans knew of several monuments with well-preserved glyphic inscriptions.<sup>181</sup> He attempted to trace the glyphs, but without much success. The partially eroded and overgrown signs, poor lighting conditions, an awkward work posture, and swarms of insects must have made the work difficult. Frans had enlisted workers from Macuspana to clear the ruins, and he also hired an interpreter, guide, and cook in one, namely Lázaro Hernández Guillermo, better known as "Tata," who was to accompany him and La Farge faithfully for the remainder of the trip:

Enter Tata. He came walking slowly down the village street, a broad-shouldered man with excellent Indian features, dressed in sandals, blue cotton trousers, a white cotton shirt, and a broad-brimmed Mexican straw sombrero. He was then told of our projected journey, which might take him through the United States back to his home and might last 3



Oliver La Farge, Frans Blom and "Tata" (Lázaro Hernández Guillermo) with Tulane's pennant, 1925.

or 5 months; that we would take him on for trial as far as Palenque; and that we would pay him \$50.00 a month. He answered that he liked to travel. He had a wife and two children, and would go out to his little house and say goodbye to them. Then he asked when we were leaving, and on my saying "tomorrow," he answered, "Está bueno," "that's all right." The contract was closed. Next morning Lázaro arrived with his traveling equipment packed in a small straw mat, ready, as far as he was concerned, to travel around the world."<sup>182</sup>

Not only did Tata prove to be an invaluable help on the rest of the journey. He also became one of the Maya who helped change Frans's view and understanding of the indigenous population forever. The epithet "Tata," which means "father," was commonly used among the Indians as a special, reverential reference to older and wise people. The fact that Lázaro got this name strongly suggests how important Frans perceived Tata's role to be in the expedition.

On May 6 the journey continued into the state of Chiapas towards the oil-drilling station Salto de Agua. Frans had visited all these exciting places, Tortuguero, Salto de Agua, Palenque, El Encanto, and Tonina in 1922 as an oil scout and curious amateur. Now, he returned as a Harvard-trained archaeologist and leader of an official expedition. With expectant



self-confidence he revisited the old, familiar places. In Salto de Agua, they were accommodated by a team of American oil engineers, and after several weeks in the field, they could finally look forward to some much-needed convenience: "A bath in a bathroom was a luxury after swimming in dirty rivers. Then a splendid meal, and afterwards while the sun was setting, we sat on the porch of one of the bungalows and swapped yarns with our American friends. Down on our left lay the Tabasco lowlands and to our right and in front of us lay range after range of mountains: Chiapas, the promised land of Ruins and Indians."<sup>183</sup>

That same night they slept in real beds for the first time in weeks. Thus scrubbed and rested, they rode on towards El Retiro, a small, previously undescribed Maya city. At the site they investigated a well-preserved temple, built in the same elegant style as the buildings in Palenque. Frans was particularly interested in this specific temple, as it was said to house a stone tablet with glyphs. The disappointment was great, therefore, when they arrived to see that a mighty cedar had fallen on the temple a few months earlier and had shattered the upper structure and buried the inscription under several tons of stone and lime dust. Leaving the city of the destroyed temple behind, a tough 28-hour ride to Palenque lay in front of them. Frans decided to make part of the ride at night to avoid the midday heat on the savannah that had to be crossed. During the night ride they lost their way and unwillingly extended their stay in the saddle. But, as Frans notes, after finding out that other travelers had been assaulted and robbed the same night on the exact stretch from which La Farge, Tata, and he had come: "As the old saying goes, nothing is so bad that it is not good for something."<sup>184</sup> At 9 o'clock next morning, May 12, they could finally catch a glimpse of the church tower in the village of Palenque.

The ruins of Palenque already held a special place in Frans's heart, and there was no other Maya city he knew as well, with its beautiful temples and palaces, so beautifully situated right where the highlands and lowlands of Chiapas meet. In 1922 he had gone into raptures over the many begonias that covered the ruins, but the joy of returning was marred by the fact that many of the improvements and repairs he had made were already in a state of neglect and decay. Moreover, there had been unwelcome intruders, including a Catholic priest who had lived out his ambitions as an amateur archaeologist and brought a small orchestra for the occasion. Not only had the priest dug holes at random in the temples and stolen a number of objects, his mistress, Doña Carmen, had forgotten a piece of "intimate lacework" on the floor in one of the temple rooms. Frans was both disappointed and disgusted, and aired, as he often would, his strong antipathy towards religious hypocrisy: "This for the Padre, most holy and learned man, supposed to be of the educated class, wandering around the country with a band and a mistress, 'studying' ancient monuments."<sup>185</sup> Not all, however, was bad news. Apart from the vandalism that had occurred, the guard whom Frans had employed reported that he had discovered three new monuments with inscriptions near the temples of the Sun and the Foliated Cross. Frans read the calendrical signs and he managed to produce some of his best drawings during the stay in Palenque.

There are few places like Palenque where one can imagine how a Classic Maya city must have looked in its heyday, and in a passage of *Tribes and Temples* Frans populated the site with rulers, priests, workmen, and slaves, taking

the reader back to a moment in the thriving city's history. The city center is bustling with activity: "But look! – there at the entrance to the aqueduct many slaves are hauling a huge stone block and trying to put it in place; [...] a foreman directs them with loud cries; all the slaves lay their strength to the ropes, and the block moves a few feet. [...] Long lines of workmen carry stones and baskets of lime and dirt to build the pyramid of the Sun Temple. From the hills we hear the song of the workmen in the quarries, cutting tablets by the slow process of chipping stone against stone."<sup>186</sup>

From Palenque the expedition moved into lesser-known regions of the jungle of Chiapas: "Then into 'the great forest,' a glorious toil along overgrown Indian trails up and down the infernal mountains," Frans wrote home to Thomas Thomsen.<sup>187</sup> Along the way Frans once again shows himself to be a great nature lover, and life in the uninhabited jungle is described as a romantic adventure – in contrast to Morley, who believed that "Only liars and damn fools say they like the jungle."<sup>188</sup> Blom is almost ecstatic:

At nightfall we sat around the campfire, eating our birds, and listening to the Indians chatting. It was our first camp in the real, big jungle. Soon we climbed into our hammocks, and for a time lay listening to the thousand sounds of the tropical night, the monotonous singing of insects, small noises of nocturnal animals, and the murmur of the stream close by our camp.

Evening in the jungle is beautiful; dawn is magnificent. We sat wrapped in our blankets drinking coffee when light began to appear high up in the tops of the trees, at first very sparsely and a pale gray. Little by little the light sifted down, and as it reached the bottom of the forest the sun threw a glimmer of gold on the tree-tops. The night insects became quiet, and the birds began to fly around and sing. He who has watched the daily awakening of life in the jungle will never forget it.<sup>189</sup>

It is very rare to come across a type of text like this in the scholarly literature, and it is in his picturesque descriptions of nature that Frans Blom resembles the travel writers of the nineteenth century. In the more common, concise archaeological reports all available space is spent on description and analysis of objects and other data. Frans's colleagues must have regarded him as a romantic character who considered the adventure and nature at least as exciting as archaeology itself. Blom's assistant Oliver La Farge, a sensitive author in the making, must have been an ideal companion. Let us for a moment leave the Tulane Expedition in the jungle, and take a closer look at the young, long-limbed La Farge.

Oliver La Farge was born in 1901 in New York and came from a wealthy family with long and proud artistic traditions. When young Oliver began studying ethnography at Harvard University, he had difficulties adapting, and his studies were constantly interrupted by his daydreaming. Of all things in the world, he most deeply wanted to write fiction. At the same time he had a strong interest in Native American cultures, and in 1921 when he was assigned to do fieldwork among the Navajo in the American Southwest, he was struck by a lifelong and deep fascination with this culture. Among the Navajo La Farge learned to ride, acquiring a great knowledge of horses and of surviving in the wilderness. These skills had prompted Frans to ask Oliver to join him in Uaxactun in the winter of 1924. When the trip to Guatemala was

postponed, Oliver decided to give up Uaxactun in order to concentrate on his Navajo studies. He was confident, however, because “the signs and omens are that this may be going to produce something even better and, all else besides, Blom is one who habitually lands on his feet.”<sup>190</sup> This “something even better” that Blom had apparently mentioned to La Farge, was a future position at Tulane University. Soon after, La Farge became a member of Tulane’s first expedition, and the following year he was employed at Tulane as a research assistant in ethnography specializing in the Maya – not the Navajo. As La Farge moved to New Orleans, he was introduced to the city’s thriving literary scene, including William Faulkner. Living in New Orleans inspired La Farge to resume his literary writings, and several of his short stories were published in local newspapers and magazines. In 1927, after his second expedition to the Maya area, he started writing a novel about his beloved Navajo. It became *Laughing Boy* which was released in 1929, earning him the following year the prestigious Pulitzer Prize, defeating Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*. Frans wrote to Oliver that the book was one of the most beautiful things he had ever read. His success as a writer did not lead La Farge to abandon Maya ethnography, and he later conducted fieldwork in Guatemala twice. In 1932 he became president of the U.S. American Association on Indian Affairs, and became known for his struggle for the territorial rights of the North American Indians.<sup>191</sup> He thus succeeded in achieving a remarkable dual career as a writer and an ethnographer until his death on August 2, 1963, a mere six weeks after his old traveling companion Frans Blom had passed away.

Frans had great confidence in La Farge’s abilities, but nevertheless sometimes had to reprimand him for being so absent-minded. It was as if Oliver’s daydreams followed him all the way out into the jungle, and Frans complained in his diary that he was “somewhat of a weak sister and seems to hate hard work. Either he complains because he has eaten too much or because he is hungry.”<sup>192</sup> La Farge’s ethnographic studies during the Tulane expedition testify to the work of a talented scholar, and Frans indeed made a great effort to get him permanently employed at his department. Still, he continued to have a somewhat ambivalent relationship with La Farge and his artistic temperament; perhaps Frans recognized something of himself and his own shattered literary dreams in him? Frans was indeed aware that he too had his weaknesses, and thus apologized a few years later to Oliver that he had probably often behaved like a pocket version of Mussolini, and thought that it was a wonder that Oliver could stand him at all.

As the expedition journeyed further into the jungle Frans had the opportunity to demonstrate his skills as a marksman several times. When they encountered game Frans tried to provide dinner, usually in the form of great curassow, a big, meaty, and very tasty turkey-like bird. The hunt was usually crowned with success. In one case, however, the menu was fresh howler monkey meat, and Frans had great difficulty bringing the monkey to the ground because, although mortally wounded, it clung to the branches and twigs with arms, legs, and tail. When it finally fell, it was, according to La Farge, only the weight of all the lead bullets that made the animal flop down to the ground. The skepticism with which Frans a few years earlier had regarded eating the “too human” monkeys was forgotten. On this part of the trip they encountered some of the steepest and muddiest paths, and mules and men repeatedly slipped and fell. It would take several hours to advance

just a single mile, but according to Frans it was all part of the great experience and there was no reason to complain.<sup>193</sup>

When they finally came out of the inferno, however, it was into a paradise in the middle of the mud: Finca Encanto – “Enchantment Farm.” It was the German Timler, whom Frans knew from his 1922 expedition, who ran the finca in the upper part of the Tulija River Valley. Here, on the edge of civilization, Herr Timler had his workers chop and burn a little deeper into the tropical forest every year to expand the production of coffee, cattle, and timber. “We were now in a region where maps show either a blank or are drawn from the mapmaker’s imagination,” Frans memorably begins his chapter on the discoveries at Encanto, which they reached on May 20.<sup>194</sup> Timler made the stay a luxurious experience, and Frans, La Farge, and Tata went on a few minor reconnaissance trips in the area, which was said to abound in newly discovered ruins. One of the Indians working at the farm drowned in the Tulija River in a major Sunday drinking bout, and Blom and La Farge administered artificial respiration to the man – but in vain. The day after, Frans had more success in saving an Indian who had been bitten by a poisonous snake and was brought to him swollen, blue in the face, and spitting blood. Blom acted as a doctor and got to use the antidote he had brought with him, and a few days later the man was back on his feet. There was also time to write letters and organize the full notebooks, copies of which were sent back to New Orleans in the event that the originals should be lost. A small, but important detail, which demonstrates Blom’s professionalism and diligence as an expedition leader.

A couple of days later they are told by one of the finca’s timber scouts that there are supposed to be some unexplored ruins, known as Yoxiha, east of the farm. Frans, Oliver, and Tata set off at once, and sure enough, right down by the Tulija River, by a natural bridge, were a small group of overgrown buildings and temples. It was an almost magical place, close to a beautiful blue-green lake, small springs, and several caves surrounded by the lush jungle: “No wonder the Maya selected this spot for their temples,” Frans noted.<sup>195</sup> The beauty of the location had not, however, been the main reason that the Maya had placed their city here. Lakes and caves were perceived as natural intersections between the human and the supernatural world, and here the Maya could interact with deities and ancestral spirits. Frans and La Farge discovered a total of ten odd looking stelae (probably shaped from stalagmites or stalactites), all without inscriptions or images, the tallest of which was thirteen feet. In a collapsed tomb in one of the temples they found a few well-preserved and beautifully painted vessels and censers. It was late before Frans and Oliver finished their measurements and sketches, and they decided to camp in the woods – a decision that nearly cost them their lives when a nocturnal rainstorm toppled a huge tree just ten feet from the small palm hut where the expedition members spent the night. By the end of the expedition a newspaper journalist recounted the episode, and how they “heroically” escaped death from under the tree. However, there was nothing valiant or heroic about it, Frans later thought: “May it be my privilege to state that never were there ‘HEROES’ more scared than we. We were just downright scared.”<sup>196</sup> After having explored a few more small ruins nearby, the expedition returned to Finca Encanto and Timler, only to witness yet another violent incident. An Indian worker had been killed in a

showdown by two shots in the stomach, and when the severely injured killer was apprehended, Frans once again had to act as a doctor. He cleaned the deep machete wounds, but then had to leave the culprit to the men from the farm, who tied him up until the local authorities could collect him. The man's punishment would probably be death by hanging. In *Tribes and Temples*, Frans relates the unfortunate incident with a surprising lack of empathy and sensitivity for what happened: "La Farge had collected much data on the Indians, but one thing that he had not seen was an Indian burial ceremony. We could not very well kill an Indian for that purpose, but as it happened the Indians themselves furnished us with the missing data."<sup>197</sup> Having seen the body of the murdered, he further notes: "Two or three Indian women sat around wailing and screaming. One of them was quite a pretty girl."<sup>198</sup> A few days later, after La Farge had had the opportunity to poke his nose into the native burial customs, they left the enchanted farm and set off to the southwest, towards the mountains and the Maya Highlands. It was June 7, 1925.

Moving southwards also meant moving upwards, and the tropical growth was gradually replaced by oak and pine trees. By way of the Tzeltal Maya village of Bachajon, which had the reputation of being one of the most hostile throughout Chiapas (but where the expedition was once again welcomed with open arms), they reached the beautiful Ocosingo valley and the town of the same name on June 11. In the 1920s Ocosingo was a small town with a mere 500 inhabitants. Today, there are 42,000 people in the city, which is still surrounded by lush maize fields, where fog lingers far into the morning in the pine trees on the slopes of the valley. The ruins of Tonina, the main reason for the expedition's visit to Ocosingo, lie some 8.5 miles from the town; but, even in town, they found excellent traces of the ancient Maya: there were glyphs on the sidewalk! Stone tablets and stelae had been dragged to Ocosingo and reused in the construction of the town. They found a total of nine monuments in and around the town: "Our stay in Ocosingo was very delightful. The children of the village eagerly hunted monuments for us, and our arrival made a boom in the local market," Frans remarked.<sup>199</sup> During their reconnaissance of the area he and La Farge discovered several large temple constructions, all once part of Tonina's religious and political core. At the top of one of the overgrown temple mounds Frans found clear evidence of the continuation of offerings. The local Maya had placed candles, incense, and maize on small altars, and Blom was struck by an overwhelming sense of the survival and continuity of Maya culture centuries after the Spanish invasion:

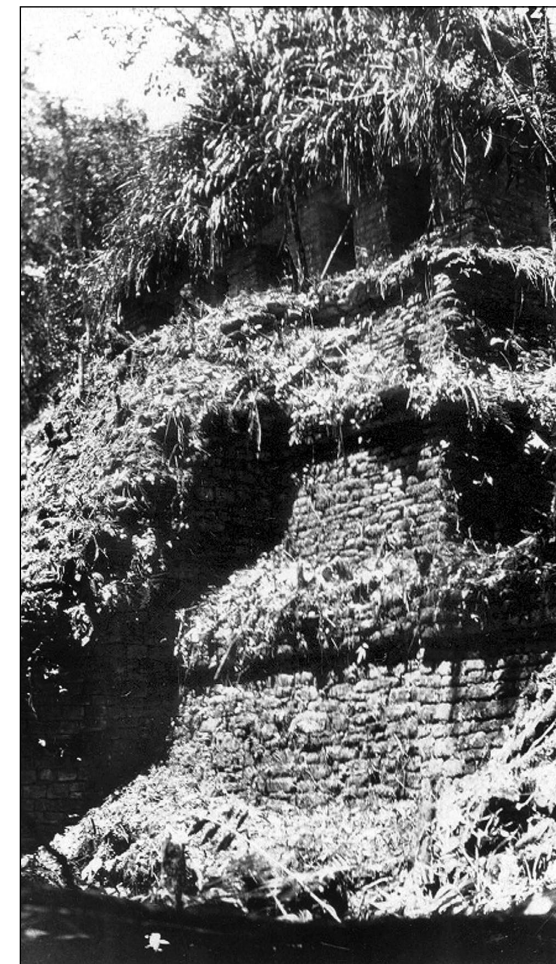
Four hundred years of Spanish rule, four hundred of Catholic missionizing, had not been able to stamp out the worship of the ancient gods in the ancient way. Here I stood, the first white man to behold this altar, a white man with a deep interest in the ancient history of this country. I could not help feeling that the ancient gods were still living, and that I was nearer to the ancient times at that moment than I had ever been before.<sup>200</sup>

Frans had first visited Tonina in 1922, and the unique ruin complex had lured him back, this time to work for almost a whole week at the site which was hardly known at the time. He and La Farge secured a series of good photos of the buildings and the many stelae and sculptures of the city's rulers, and provided the first detailed description of the site in *Tribes and Temples*. To-

day the central part of the city has undergone excavation by Mexican and French archaeologists, and it is a truly stunning place with some of the best-preserved stucco façades from the entire Maya area, and the most impressive Maya ruins in Chiapas after Palenque and Yaxchilan. In other words, it is one of the places where, had Frans been able to focus some of his immense energy as well as the patience and discipline to excavate Tonina, he would have made magnificent discoveries for the rest of his life. Apparently, though, it was not really "archaeological" curiosity that motivated him; instead he seems to have been driven forward by a deep restlessness and an overwhelming urge to explore unknown areas – one ruin would be too small and constrained, almost claustrophobic, to Frans's liking.

As work at Tonina was completed, the expedition detoured from Ocosingo to the ruins at Agua Escondida. Along the way, they stopped at Finca El Real, where La Farge photographed Frans in the company of two Maya women. Frans is wearing a white shirt, Indian belt, long khaki trousers, and high laced boots. He is a handsome, slender man, and given the circumstances, he is well groomed and clean in appearance. Maybe it was in honor of the lovely young women since we see him muddy, filthy, and with a "fox red" beard, as he himself called it, in many other pictures from the expedition. When they arrived at Agua Escondida they were met by an almost miraculously well-preserved Maya temple which Frans thought could barely be called a ruin.<sup>201</sup>

The masonry of the temple terraces, the wide staircase, and the upper temple building was in such good condition that Frans could study the Maya building techniques in detail, and La Farge, who "spent a great part of the day dangling from a rope on the side of the temple roof," succeeded in finding remnants of stucco decoration on the roof crest.<sup>202</sup> Tata installed his field kitchen at one end of the temple room while the hammocks were hung



The ruins of Agua Escondida, 1925.

up in the other; they camped for two nights in the 1300-year-old building. Another great discovery had been added to the already long list of successes of the first Tulane expedition.

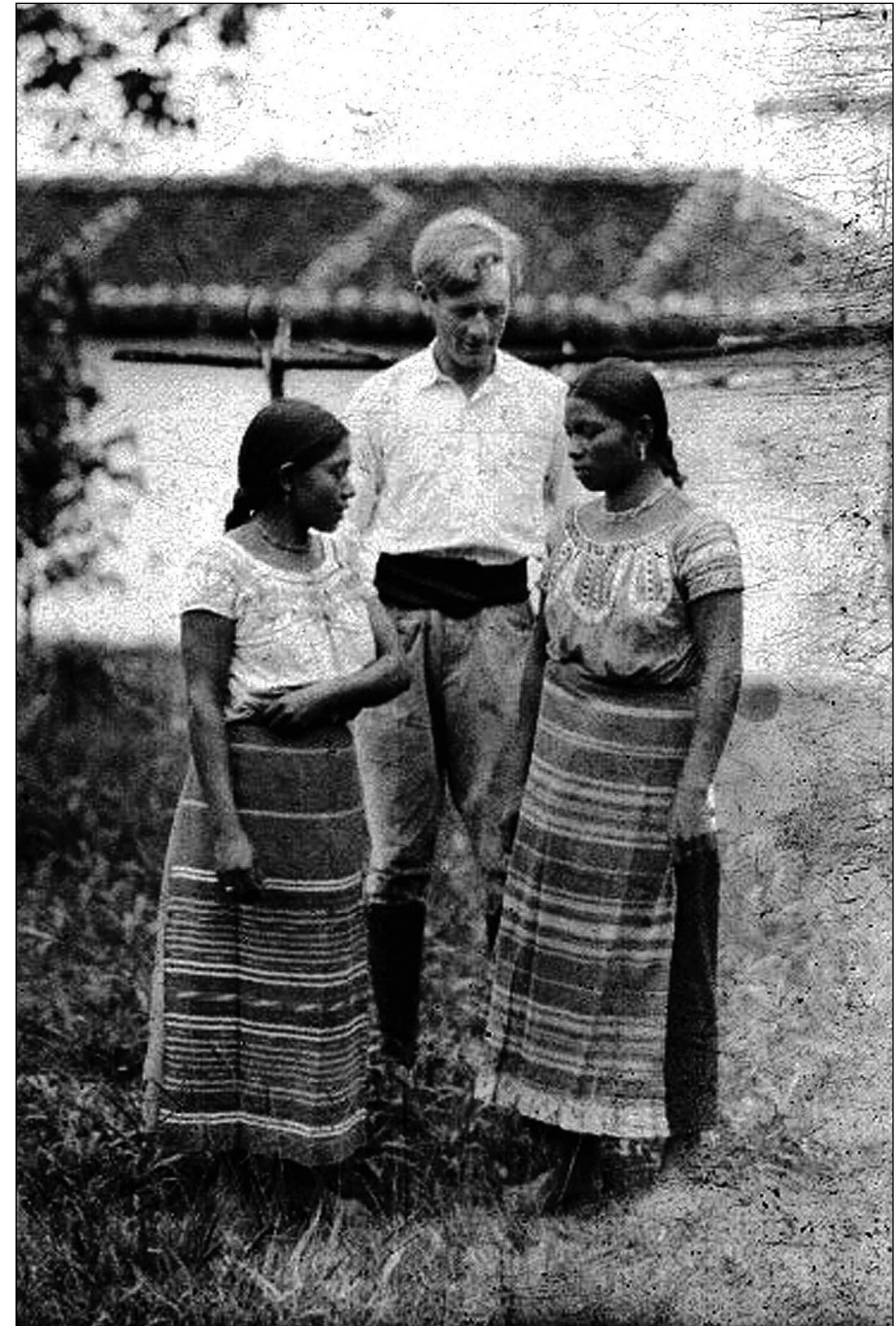
Back in Ocosingo on July 1 the last part of the journey was prepared, and on July 4, Frans and La Farge rode towards San Cristóbal de las Casas. The trip took them through several Tzeltal Maya villages and La Farge made important ethnographic descriptions of life in several of them. On July 8 they finally arrived in San Cristóbal on the winding road from Tenejapa. The road was made of the rust-red earth of the highlands, and along the way the grass between the resin-scented pine trees was grazed to the ground by the indispensable sheep of the Tzeltal and Tzotzil Maya:

The road turned abruptly, bringing us around the cliffs to a view of the valley and San Cristóbal at last. We looked down into a little bowl ringed with green mountains. Around the edge was a band of meadows cut by streams with scattered white farm-houses, a grouping of white walls, red roofs, green trees, and the domes of twenty-two churches. On a hill as steep as any pyramid, just behind the town, the little temple of San Cristóbal himself looked down over the town.<sup>203</sup>

Already in this first description of San Cristóbal de las Casas we can sense Frans's fascination and incipient love for "the heart of the highland," which was then a lively market-town with approximately 12,000 inhabitants. Maya people from a vast hinterland came here to trade, and the big town market was a colorful jumble of different fruits, vegetables, flowers, traditional dresses, and all sorts of other goods and necessities – like it still is today. All the small mountain trails in the highlands of Chiapas seem to lead to the market and the city's many churches.

San Cristóbal de las Casas was founded in 1528 by the Spanish conquistador Diego de Mazariegos, the conqueror of Chiapas. The city is named partly after Saint Christopher, partly after the humanitarian-minded Dominican friar Bartolomé de las Casas (1474–1566), the second bishop of Chiapas, and known as "Protector of the Indians." "For us, after our long ride, our twelve days in San Cristóbal were a heavenly holiday. We worked up our notes, had pictures developed, and saw the sights."<sup>204</sup> Letters were written, and Frans gave a brief summary of the progress and highlights of the trip to Thomsen at the Danish National Museum. The letter is light in tone, and the dangers which the expedition members had endured are downplayed: "Of small experiences we had a tree that fell 10 feet from our leaf roof one night, an Indian who was bitten by a snake, and a murder. We had no particular use of the tree, the snake bite we cured together with a medicine man and thereby got a magnificent ancient incantation, with a pair of Classic Maya gods; and the murder helped us to obtain information about some specific details in the funeral ceremonies of the Bachajones."<sup>205</sup> The Blom family in Copenhagen also followed their son's travels with great interest. Alfred Blom thanked Thomsen, in a letter from July, for the loan of a map of the Maya area. Frans was not forgotten by his family.

On July 20 the expedition members were back in the saddle and continued on a southeastern course towards Guatemala. The first stop was Comitán,



Blom at Finca El Real, 1925.

some 50 miles from San Cristóbal, where they met a diligent and skilful amateur archaeologist who proudly showed off his collection of pots, vessels, and bone fragments to the two visiting Maya specialists. Blom and La Farge made several new friends in the town, and Frans was invited to give a talk on the prehistory of the region at the local cinema. All in all, they had a pleasant time in the town which was so quiet “that only two things were heard, the bells of the church and the tongues of the women.”<sup>206</sup> This idyll can no longer be found in Comitán, which today is on the Pan American Highway and is one of Chiapas’s largest and fastest-growing cities. Further along their way towards Guatemala, Frans and Oliver examined the ruin and the two stelae in Tenam Puente, but they were, understandably, getting weary of travel life: “Why not be frank and admit that we were getting somewhat worn down? It was now July 29 and we had been on the trail since March 14.”<sup>207</sup>

After a brief visit to the ruins at Chinkultik they journeyed onwards, crossing the border and entering Guatemala, where they were received with an unexpected and overwhelming kindness. The Governor of the Department of Huehuetenango, the westernmost part of the Guatemalan highlands, had arranged that all villages and authorities on the remaining part of the route assist them in any way desirable. When they later reached Guatemala City this “triumph” culminated in a reception by none other than the President of the country, General José María Orellana. It was probably William Gates’s close ties to the political and cultural elite of Guatemala that had made this magnificent treatment of the small expedition possible.

The western region of Guatemala that Blom, La Farge, and Tata now entered was, and remains, the country’s most rugged and isolated. The western highlands of Guatemala are dominated by the Cuchumatanes mountain range, a vast and sparsely populated massive with volcanic peaks up to 12,500 feet high, and with most of the small Maya villages tucked away in the valleys at an altitude of 6,500 to 8,200 feet. It is one of the most isolated regions in the entire Maya area, and therefore one of the places where several of the ancient beliefs and practices are still carried out. Blom and La Farge experienced this when they arrived in Jacaltenango, a small Mam Maya village where life in many ways continued according to Precolumbian traditions. They made a surprising discovery when they were informed that not only was the ancient ritual 260-day calendar still in use, but the idea of “yearbearers,” which was part of the ancient Mesoamerican calendar cycle, was also still alive. Briefly, a “yearbearer” is one out of four possible days of the 260-day calendar that was alternately used to name the consecutive solar years – the years essentially receiving their name from their “birthday” in the 260-day calendar. Before Blom and La Farge’s discovery, it was assumed that this tradition had ceased to exist centuries ago. Obviously, Jacaltenango was a goldmine of information on the ancient calendar and its meaning, and La Farge returned to the village two years later accompanied by ethnographer Douglas Byers on the second Tulane Expedition. Together they carried out a detailed ethnographic description of the religious life of Jacaltenango – published under the title *The Yearbearer’s People*.<sup>208</sup>

Leaving behind the people of the yearbearers, they ventured into the Cuchumatanes Mountains to Todos Santos, a small village nearly 7,500 feet above sea level, where the men still wear their beautiful red-and-white striped trousers and white shirts. The expedition was invited to spend the night in



Blom in Todos Santos de Cuchumatanes, 1925.

the simple parish house next to the equally simple church, and when large white fog clouds drifted in over the maize fields and pine forest on the sides of the valley in the late afternoon, it was so cold that “we went to bed with all our clothes on, plus heavy Indian sweaters and blankets.”<sup>209</sup> From Todos Santos Frans, La Farge, and Tata only had 31 miles to go before reaching the city of Huehuetenango, the official goal of the expedition: “We were now on the last day of our ride. Night would see us in Huehuetenango where civilization, with automobile roads, telegraph, and all its other difficulties, began.”<sup>210</sup> Such a remark reveals Frans’s love for being on the trail far from the crowds in the towns and cities. The romantic attitude towards life in the open is also a hint that Frans knew very well what awaited him, besides cars and telegraphs, when he returned to civilization – namely academic life with writing reports, further studies, and other commitments and responsibilities that would stand as a stark contrast to the life he had led for almost six months. Last but not least, William Gates was also to be counted among the vexations of civilization.

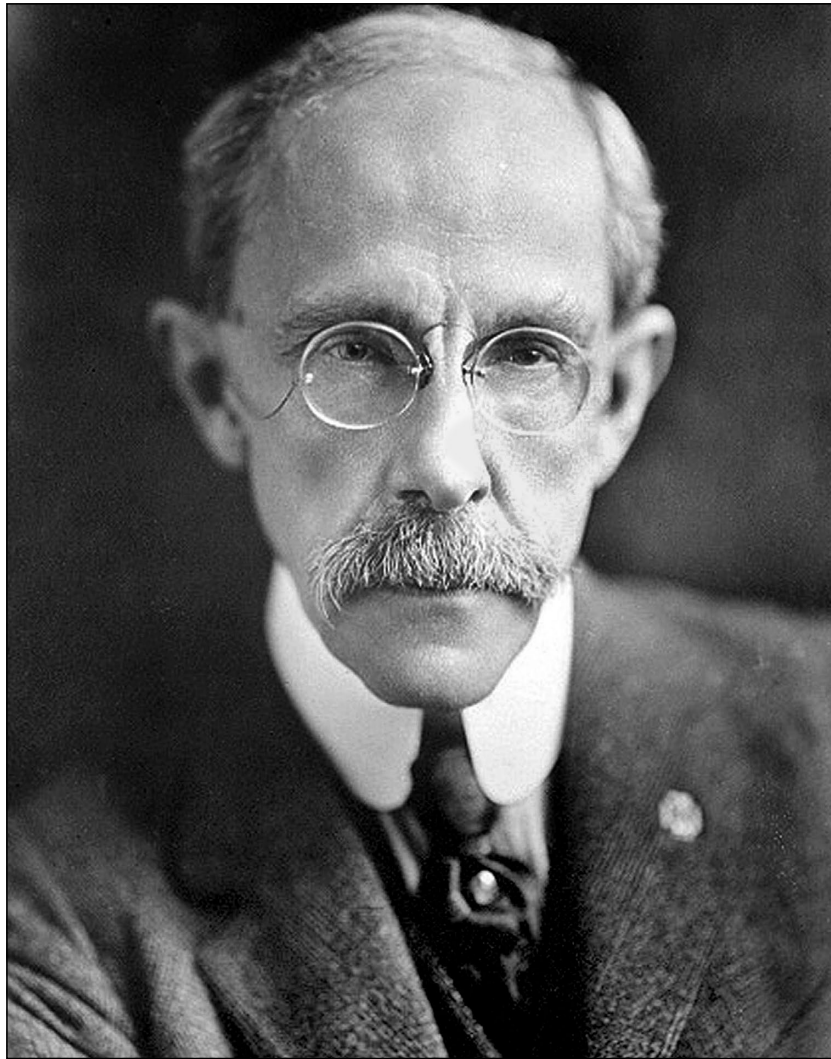
Via Guatemala’s second-largest city, Quetzaltenango, Frans and La Farge arrived in Guatemala City, where they had their meeting with the President.

In the capital, the first journalists began to show up to inquire about the expedition's discoveries. On August 9 Frans wrote to Thomsen: "Just arrived in Guatemala's capital after 2010 km's ride [1250 miles] and what a trip. Only in a thick book can it be described – and what results. Far exceeding expectations, with one stroke Tulane now stands in the first row – it was a long battle – and even exhausting now and then – but now it is forgotten. [...] New York Times sent a correspondent here to get our first report. The beast is plaguing me all day long, and is terribly drunk in the evening."<sup>211</sup> After the fuss in Guatemala City and after a short visit to the Maya site of Quirigua, the journey continued to the port of Puerto Barrios from where the members of the expedition, including Tata, boarded a ship that would bring them back to the starting point – New Orleans. Tata, the peasant from Macuspana, spent two weeks in the United States. The stay was not exactly unproblematic, partly because of problems with Tata's entry papers, partly because his table manners were not quite sophisticated enough for the hotel where he and Frans took lodgings at the beginning of his stay in the States. Thereafter, Tata returned home to his family and his small house in Mexico.

Returning from the first Tulane Expedition was a true triumph for Frans, and he and La Farge immediately got into the spotlight of the press. Everyone wanted an interview with the two explorers about

Routes of the first Tulane Expedition and The John Geddings Gray Memorial Expedition.





William Gates.

their exciting discoveries in the great forests. Frans Blom was suddenly one of the city's most well-known personalities. In the background stood Gates, whose envy of Frans's obvious success must have taken on new dimensions. He probably felt that his position as head of the department was threatened, and he would, despite Blom's and La Farge's success, under no circumstances let archaeological work become the main focus area of the newly formed department. He continued to create new, unrealistic, and vague goals for his department, and as he continued to exceed the budget with several thousand dollars, the relationship between him and the president of Tulane, Albert Dinwiddie, became full of tensions and mistrust. Soon Frans also began to bypass Gates and apply directly to Dinwiddie when there were things he wanted or needed. By now Gates really did have reason to be suspicious of his great catch. Was Blom planning to go against him? Would he try to get rid of the



Frans Blom, c. 1925.

very person who had secured him a position and paved his way for success and fame?

In between the writing of *Tribes and Temples* and the quarrels with Gates there was plenty of time to enjoy the sweet life in New Orleans's famous French Quarter, Vieux Carré, originally built by French architects and engineers in the 1700s. Large parts of the neighborhood had burned down in 1794 and were, since the city was then in Spanish hands, rebuilt in Spanish style. Hence in Frans's day the French Quarter appeared with a typical colonial touch dominated by small, low-rise buildings, many with balconies and beautiful cast-iron fences and railings. The French Quarter was known as a lively and colorful home to the city's artistic community, and located close to the bustling harbor, it was also a place where sailors did not need to go far in order to satisfy their various appetites.

The first year in New Orleans Frans shared an apartment with Oliver La Farge on Audubon Street, quite near the university. Eventually he moved to more magnificent surroundings at 511 St. Ann Street on Jackson Square in the French Quarter. In St. Ann Street lies one wing of the coveted Pontalba apartments flanking the beautiful square. Built in the 1840s by the wealthy Madame de Pontalba as some of the first (and still most elegant) non-detached townhouses in the United States, the two upper floors were intended for housing, while the ground floor was reserved for businesses and shops, just like today. Frans moved into a spacious apartment with several large, bright rooms with high ceilings, located on the first floor. From his balcony he overlooked the beautiful Jackson Square, to the left he could see the Mississippi and the port where the coffee and banana ships docked, and on the right were the town hall and the stately St. Louis Cathedral. Frans had decorated his apartment with Maya ceramics and textiles, photographs from his travels, and of course loads of books and manuscripts. Almost every day he invited colleagues and friends over for lunch and a drink.

Frans was now 32 years old, and an unusually handsome bachelor: on a portrait from a photo studio in the city, he can easily be mistaken for one of the movie stars of the period. He was known in the newspapers as a heroic explorer, and his kindness, open mind and great charm made an impression on the women as well as the men whom he met. Apparently he was also a bit of a social chameleon, easily adapting to very different environments, and was just as comfortable among the urban socialites as he was among Mexican and Guatemalan chicheros and Indians – although he seems to have preferred to be in the company of the latter. In New Orleans he easily entered into the intellectual circle of the French Quarter, which included famous authors such as William Faulkner and Sherwood Anderson and the artist William Spratling, and where La Farge would also have his place. Spratling, who taught architecture at Tulane in the 1920s – and who later became a silversmith in Taxco, Mexico – once reminisced about life in New Orleans in those years: “Writing and drawing for the architectural magazines, plus constant special design jobs for many of the architects in the city brought my slight income at the university up to a level which permitted me an apartment in the French Quarter, the services of a slatternly but glorious cook named Leonore, and abundant liquor for all comers, in spite of prohibition. Those were the days!”<sup>212</sup> Together with William Faulkner, who was awarded the 1949 Nobel Prize for Literature, Spratling published the book *Sherwood Anderson and Other Famous Creoles* in 1926, a series of small portraits and caricatures of the members of New Orleans’s literary and artistic scene. Spratling’s amusing caricature of Frans alludes to the rumors that must have flourished of his erotic escapades when traveling among scantily clad Indian women. In the caption he is ironically called “The Tulane Champollion” (after Jean-François Champollion who in the 1820s had deciphered the Egyptian hieroglyphs), perhaps because he claimed on festive occasions that one day he would be able to decipher Maya glyphs, or, as the drawing shows, because he was so busy studying and trying to understand the female anatomy? In any case the drawing strongly hints at the fact that Frans’s fascination with beautiful women did not go unnoticed. Presumably Frans was, with his well-developed sense of humor and self-irony, flattered by the caricature. Brunhouse writes about Frans’s humor that it had “a peculiar twist,” indicating that Brunhouse may not have



“The Tulane Champollion,” William Spratling’s caricature of Frans Blom, from William Faulkner’s *Sherwood Anderson and Other Famous Creoles* (1926).

fully understood Danish dark humor and irony.<sup>213</sup>

Good examples of Frans’s use of irony and sarcasm are when he names his diary from the first Tulane Expedition “Five Months in Hell, or with Blom in the Maya Area”<sup>214</sup> or when he calls the former slave residence at the ground floor “Bumbay” in reference to all the friends and guests he had staying overnight in the small, cramped space where there were always two camp beds with a pair of blankets. The “bums” were happy to have a place to sleep it off, when the party ended in the wee hours of the morning.

By the end of the year Frans went to New York, partly to pick up his mother who had crossed the Atlantic to visit him, partly to apply for funding for excavations, and probably also to seek out any possible job opportunities. At this point he considered becoming a Ph.D. student at Harvard, as Tozzer had already proposed in 1924, but which of course required an even greater scholarly perseverance than writing an ordinary master’s thesis – something that cannot have been overly attractive to Frans. Gates tried to prevent him from going on this trip, which he must have perceived as a real provocation and sign of disrespect. The conflict between the two had in fact now become so intense that Frans would only communicate with Gates through President Dinwiddie. The situation grew worse, and in early December Frans decided to resign as of October 1, 1926. Explaining the background for his decision, Frans mentioned the working conditions at the department, which he thought were poor in every way, just as he felt that Gates’s repeated accusations of disloyalty were intolerable. Frans undoubtedly knew that his resignation would cause



some consternation with Dinwiddie and the Board at Tulane. The result: On March 8, 1926, William Gates was fired, and Dinwiddie asked Frans to stay and become Gates's successor. The historian John P. Dyer wrote about the "choice" between the two contenders: "The contrast in the personalities of Blom and Gates was striking. Blom was personable and affable, an excellent conversationalist and a charming host at his beautifully furnished Pontalba apartment. He wore casual clothes extremely well and seemed to make an excellent impression on everyone; and, until he himself encountered rough sailing in the late thirties, he brought a measure of stability to the department, although he was more promoter than scholar."<sup>215</sup> The rejected Gates was infuriated. So much so that he wrote a 70-page pamphlet, and published it himself, confusedly and pedantically accusing Blom and Dinwiddie of having deceived him.<sup>216</sup> Frans summarized the whole affair with Gates to Thomsen as follows: "Quickly I found out that the director here was mad. I knew it beforehand, but I did not believe that he was that crazy. [...] I had not begun my work here, before he began to put obstacles in my way. While I was away in New York, he took my secretary from me, and when I made a fuss, and quit my position, he tried to censure my correspondence etc. That was the last straw. I promised the university to finish my report [*Tribes and Temples*], but then I would leave. The result, that Gates was ousted as director."<sup>217</sup>

In another letter to Thomsen, Frans gave the impression of being able to pick and choose freely among other positions in Washington, Cambridge, and New York, which may have been true, but may equally well have been nothing more than wishful thinking. Presumably he would have preferred to stay in New Orleans; at least Brunhouse believes that Blom even did his own fair bit to get Gates removed from the department in order to direct it himself.<sup>218</sup> A similar view is expressed by Edwin Shook, one of the old Carnegie archaeologists, who many years later said that: "Choosing Blom was a miscalculation on Gates's part because Blom went on to stab Gates in the back, really. That was a nasty operation. Blom was young and ambitious, and Gates was elderly and slowing down."<sup>219</sup> The fact that Shook recalled this ambush on Gates, planned by Frans and assisted by Dinwiddie, suggests that it was a matter that was discussed in the narrow circle of Maya archaeologists at the time. The accusations which Gates put forward in his dramatically entitled *The Development and Disruption of the Department of Middle American Research* suggest that Frans interfered too much, considering his position, and that he did not respect Gates's decisions, visions, and his position as head of department.<sup>220</sup> Their early correspondence concerning Frans's appointment in 1924 already shows that Gates had to fight fire with fire to handle the ambitious and now highly confident Frans, who, in his own words, was hoping to become Morley's natural successor.

The way was paved for Blom, who was now head of the Department of Middle American Research at Tulane University at the age of just thirty-two. Frans Blom had reached another goal in his rocket career, and nothing seemed to be able to stop him. "The victory surely increased his self-confidence and the conviction that he could solve any problem he chose to undertake," Brunhouse writes<sup>221</sup>, and implies between the lines that nemesis would later befall him. And there were certainly plenty of challenges awaiting the new head of department, taking over a veritable mess after Gates, who had exceeded the budget by no less than \$20,000. "I will hardly go on a long

trip this year. [...] There is so much to fix after the Gates chaos that without wasting time, I can work four to five months in our little museum," Frans complained to Thomsen in April 1926, and also let him know that his goal was to build a first-class library, publish research, and send out expeditions.<sup>222</sup> He hoped to spend three-quarters of his time in the field and the remainder at the university. The museum would not be expanded in the near future, just as the education of students was not part of Frans's immediate plans for the department. One of the reasons that Frans would not spend time in the classrooms was that he felt there was "a danger by admitting students in that there is a certain romantic appeal to our work – which means that students are inclined to see a study at our institution as a quick and easy matter,"<sup>223</sup> and suggests that he wants to have scientific enthusiasts, not adventure-hungry romantics, although he himself, at least in part, can be characterized as such. Another reason to shun teaching was simply that Frans – as we shall see later – did not feel comfortable speaking in front of an audience.

The two volumes of *Tribes and Temples* appeared respectively in the summer of 1926 and winter of 1927, but despite praise from colleagues and excellent reviews did not bring in any significant amount of money for the beleaguered department, as Frans had hoped. He went so far as to call the work an economic failure. And it was the department's finances that Frans had to work hard to rectify from the outset, sometimes to the point where he had to go down in salary and even postpone further purchases of books for the library. A fundamental task for the new director was therefore to establish ties to private patrons and sponsors. Apart from Samuel Zemurray, who had enabled the creation of the department in the first place, and who would become its economic lifeline countless times to come, Blom received financial support on several occasions from the millionairess Matilda Geddings Gray (1885–1971), another of New Orleans's wealthiest citizens.

Most of 1927 was taken up by administrative obligations, paperwork, and the time-consuming cataloging of Gates's book collection. However, there was also, more to Frans's taste, time to produce a few short articles based on the findings from the first expedition, some small revisions on the map and index of Maya ruins, and, finally, to have a closer look at the prehistory of the state of Louisiana. The latter was a subject Frans quickly gave up; there were too many small arrowheads and no real temples. The daily work routine was pleasantly interrupted when the old "aunt" Zelia Nuttall came to town. The previously well-off Nuttall had run into financial problems, and Frans had invited her to New Orleans to give a well-paid lecture (\$100), and made sure that she was accommodated, not in shabby "Bumbay," but in one of the city's finest hotels. Frans had not forgotten Nuttall's helping hand when he first arrived in Mexico, and was more than happy to be able to return some of the favors.

Finally, in early 1928, Frans could set off to the great forests again, after, as he wrote to Thomsen, having been trapped in New Orleans for two entire years without going on "one of my dear expeditions."<sup>224</sup> The expedition, which would traverse nearly 1490 miles across the Maya area and last approximately 200 days, was funded by Matilda Geddings Gray and her brothers and bore the name "The John Geddings Gray Memorial Expedition" in memory of their deceased father, who had had commercial interests in Middle America. Whereas the first Tulane expedition had moved from west to

east, this time the trip was going to move from south to north, from the Pacific coast towards the northern Yucatan peninsula. The aim of the expedition was, in addition to collecting archaeological, ethnographic, and linguistic data, to examine aspects of geology, geography, zoology, botany, and climatology. Kidder's ambition of the broad interdisciplinary approach once again resonates with Frans. In the brief report that was the only official description of the expedition, he notes that: "It is all very well to know that the Maya carved calendrical hieroglyphs in stone and wood, but that does not tell us how they lived."<sup>225</sup> This is no doubt a critical reference to what Frans regarded as the limited scope of Morley's numerous expeditions and fieldwork seasons in the Maya lowlands. As travel companions Frans chose two young students from Tulane, both in their early twenties. One was a medical student, Louis Bristow Jr., the other Webster McBryde, a student at the College of Arts and Sciences, who joined the expedition as a photographer and also had the responsibility for measuring heights and geological and climatic data. It is not entirely clear why Frans selected these two inexperienced men who had absolutely no prior knowledge about the area they would be traveling in. Perhaps he felt they would be easier to control, perhaps because they would never pose an academic threat to him in the way that La Farge had. We do not know. On the other hand, we do know that he felt deeply responsible for them, and that he considered them to be his peers, and we know that Bristow as well as McBryde felt the same.

As assistants, guides, and mule drivers, they brought Ciriaco Aguilar and Gustavo Kanter, both with Maya blood in their veins and old friends of Frans. Accompanying them on parts of the journey (at the request of the Mexican government) was ethnographer Don Carlos Basauri from the Mexican Ministry of Education.

The John Geddings Gray Expedition was to be the longest of Frans's "picnics," as he called his expeditions, and at the same time it would put his skills as an expedition leader to the most serious test. Although Eric Thompson later wrote about Blom that "With meticulous attention to detail, he oversaw provisions and essential equipment with a skill equaled by no other archaeologist,"<sup>226</sup> Frans was not entirely infallible. Our knowledge about the Gray Expedition is based partly on the aforementioned, brief published report,<sup>227</sup> partly, and more importantly, on Frans Blom's own private diary from the journey. For example, in the diary we get a direct and unedited impression of Frans's view of his fellow travelers; we can see that right from the beginning he has great respect for Bristow, while the clumsy McBryde gets disparaged several times: "I know I am hard on the poor boy, but he certainly is funny."<sup>228</sup> And later in a letter to La Farge, who knew Frans's opinion of clumsy people in the field all too well: "He was green, oh, so bitterly green, and he nearly gave me gray hairs, but now everything is going well."<sup>229</sup> The somewhat unfortunate Webster McBryde afterwards became a faithful friend of Frans, and many years later he was one of the few who helped him when things started to go downhill.

The expedition set out on January 22 from the small town of Tapachula on the Pacific coast of Chiapas, and first moved upwards into Chiapas's most mountainous regions where the route passed by several smaller archaeological sites. They then set course in a northwesterly direction, towards Comitan which they reached on February 2. Here Frans and his small crew made the



Webster McBryde, Don Carlos Basauri, Frans Blom, and Louis Bristow Jr. on the John Geddings Gray Memorial Expedition, 1928.

final preparations for the big jungle trip that lay ahead of them: "The largest outfit yet under the Tulane pennant was to go out on the most difficult trail tackled by a Tulane party."<sup>230</sup> Don Carlos Basauri – with whom Frans had very little patience, describing him as extraordinarily lazy and disinterested and actually suspecting him of being a spy – chose to stay for a while in Comitan to rest. He would catch up with the expedition again in Ocosingo – a decision Frans was very happy about, and that he himself had facilitated, constantly exaggerating the hardships and dangers that awaited them on this leg of the journey. A week later they made their first remarkable discovery. At a place called Cieneguilla, not far from the ruins of Chinkultik, they had the luck of finding several pieces of well-preserved Precolumbian Maya textiles in a small, dry cave – guarded by bees. It was a great and surprising discovery, as only a few small, woven remnants preserved in the sacrificial well in Chichen Itza had previously been found: "In our hands, we held 90% of all known Maya textiles"<sup>231</sup>, the expedition leader enthusiastically notes in his diary on the evening of February 11. On February 22 they reach the small settlement of Zapotal on the verge of the vast unexplored jungle area known as the Zendales, and four days later the team heads into largely uncharted regions without any map to follow. Now the excitement increases, and they are approaching everything Frans holds so dear: the jungle, the rich, unspoiled wildlife, and the possibility of encountering an undescribed Maya city covered by the forest.

The jungle bid the party welcome in a dramatic and unexpected way: The rain poured down, the amounts by far surpassing what one might expect for the time of year. The rain soon soaked the narrow trails in the hilly terrain,



Frans on the John Geddings Gray Memorial Expedition, 1928.

turning them into muddy and greasy slides. In one day the mules slipped down the slopes in the heavy rain fifteen times. And every single time the animal had to get up, the load had to be put back in order and securely fastened, and then all over again: "Day by day we advanced slowly, with our Indians opening our trail. After a week's work the Indians returned to their homes. Neither presents nor money could persuade them to go with us any longer. Thereafter our party of seven continued alone [...] On March 18 we reached a place we named Camp 12, where we met with a formidable mountain barrier, which the river we were following penetrated through a natural tunnel, one of the most magnificent spectacles I have seen in this part of the world."<sup>232</sup> However beautiful and fascinating nature was, it suddenly turned into a real obstacle, effectively bringing the journey to a halt: "For nearly two weeks we went out in small parties every day, searching for a way to cross the barrier. Food was running low, but this by no means broke the spirit of the party."<sup>233</sup> What they were looking for was a passage that would allow them to reach the Jatate River, and Frans's diaries reveal a somewhat different story than the one we read in the printed expedition report: "I admit that it looks serious to me. There is no more talk of hunting ruins, it is the question of finding the way out."<sup>234</sup> He never mentioned his concerns to the others, even when they ran out of cartridges and fish hooks and the old strategy of providing food for themselves failed. For many days the menu consisted of small fish and palm hearts. Most of the time in Camp 12 was spent searching for food, and once again Frans and his men must resort to monkey meat. This time it is a spider monkey, and Frans is disgusted by its too-human screams as it falls to the ground. Ciriaco prepares it as steak, but the atmosphere at dinner is uneasy: "The boys had asked for monkey meat, and it was obvious that they had a hard time keeping it in their stomachs."<sup>235</sup> To make everything even worse, the clumsy McBryde wounded himself in the leg with his machete, and the whole situation became potentially life-threatening. Frans was in doubt as to



Frans Blom (John Geddings Gray Memorial Expedition), 1928.

how he should solve the problem. Turning back would be like giving up, like being defeated by nature – but would he gamble with the lives of the young men for a victory over the jungle? In the end it is Frans's instinctive need to move ahead that wins, and a decision is made that Kanter and one of the mule drivers must try to reach Zapotal in order to get food and directions for the way through the pass. Blom, Bristow, McBryde, and Ciriaco wait five long, anxious days before they hear the sound of the hooves of the mules on the path again. The rescue operation was successful, and that evening they ate so many fresh tortillas, cheese, coffee, sugar cane, and wildfowl that they all ended up with a stomach ache. It was Saturday, March 24. A few days later they managed to find the pass through the mountain wall and on April 14 they reached another settlement; it had been about month and a half since they rode out of Zapotal. But problems are not yet over. A mule driver nearly drowns, hunger begins to set in again, and they have great difficulties crossing the rapid Jatate River. Then an unexpected solution appears. They are transported across the river by a small group of curious Lacandon Maya who, at a reasonable price, lend them their canoes made from hollowed tree trunks.

On April 23, they finally reach Ocosingo which must have seemed like paradise for the emaciated and weary explorers. Here they could get plenty of food, sleep in real beds, have a proper bath, and then there was their "fat

friend" Don Carlos Basauri, who had not, as Frans had probably hoped, returned to the capital. They end up spending almost a week recovering in Ocosingo, only interrupted by a visit to the ruins of Tonina and making film recordings of the repairs made on the local church roof,<sup>236</sup> and when the journey is resumed the goal is the ruins of Yaxchilan – a trip of more than 62 miles. Along the way, they have another encounter with the Lacandon at the tiny settlement of El Capulin. Frans's fascination with these Maya, who live and dress so differently than the Maya of the highlands, is rekindled, and while Bristow is busy measuring skulls and femurs of the astonished Maya, McBryde shoots the first film footage ever of the Lacandon. It was a "treat for our moving pictures," Frans writes to Thomsen.<sup>237</sup> In the footage from El Capulin, which was later included in the Tulane Department's movie *Men, Mules and Machetes*, we also get a glimpse of Frans – thin and hollow-cheeked; a bad case of dysentery had taken its toll. The encounter with the few remaining "wild" Lacandon Indians was also highlighted in the New Orleans newspapers that avidly followed Blom's latest adventure.

The Gray Expedition arrives at the enchanting site of Yaxchilan on the banks of the big, brownish Usumacinta River on May 17, 1928, and five days are spent among the beautiful temples and many stelae. While Frans immediately embarks on photographing and drawing the imagery and glyphs on the stelae and lintels in the temples, the others settle in the labyrinthine Temple 19 at the entrance to the main plazas. It is dark as the grave and the smell of bat droppings is overwhelming; but the ancient structure is dry, and a lamp and a little tobacco smoke does the rest. Frans is certainly satisfied: "From May 17 to May 21, I spent some happy days. I worked from about 5:10 in the morning, until 11 at night," he wrote in his diary.<sup>238</sup> On May 22 they cross the Usumacinta and enter Guatemala. The course is set towards Flores, the capital of the vast, desolate Department of Peten which back then consisted of almost entirely untouched jungles. On June 2 they reach Flores, and here, on a small island in the middle of Lake Peten Itza is a cozy, small town built on top of the ancient Itza Maya city of Tayasal. Frans and his fellow travelers can relax once again, and horses and mules can enjoy proper fodder. And the remains of ancient Maya culture are right below their feet.

Tayasal, the capital of the last independent Maya city-state, was conquered by the Spaniards as late as 1697, and Frans learns that the ruin of a large temple has recently been found under the foundation of the church. Here too, the Spaniards had wished to show the superiority of Christianity by erecting a church on the smoldering remains of the temples. One week later they are back in the saddle. Due to an unexpected drought in the regions farther north, Frans decided to change the route from going through a part of the Peten which is devoid of rivers and lakes, to a more northeasterly route via El Cayo in Belize towards northern Yucatan. In that way they should ideally be able to move along a string of small ponds and wells. The expedition has only reached the eastern bank of Lake Peten Itza, when the ever-unfortunate McBryde suffers a fierce attack of fever. One moment he is sweating, the next he is shivering with cold, his temperature reaching a threatening 104 degrees. McBryde's sudden illness means that it is only Frans and Kanter who carry out the planned trip to Tikal – by then the largest Maya site known – some 18 miles further north.

Apart from an attack by a column of army ants, the trip is without



The ruins of La Honradez (John Geddings Gray Memorial Expedition), 1928.

problems, and when they finally stand in the Great Plaza, surrounded by mighty temple pyramids covered by trees and rows of overturned stelae, Frans pulls his camera out of his saddle bag and shoots the first moving pictures of Tikal. He and Kanter settle in the upper chamber of Temple 5, high above the canopy, and after sunset Frans sits in the doorway enjoying the sight of swarms of fireflies piercing the darkness: "Well could I imagine the astronomers of the Maya sitting here at night 1500 years ago, and watching the movements of the heavenly bodies. Once I would like to bring an astronomer here, and spend one night at least with him in each of the great temples, for him to make naked eye observation on the stars. This would throw some light on the astronomy of the ancient Maya."<sup>239</sup> Once again Frans's intuition, and his experience from Uaxactun, puts him on the right track – in this case long before archaeoastronomers began to discover that some Maya temples and monuments were aligned with the positions of the planets and stars in the night sky. But as so often before and since, Frans's good ideas remain just that, and never reach further than the thin paper of the expedition report.

Back on the shore of Lake Peten Itza McBryde's state had not improved, and Frans decided to have him sent to New Orleans as soon as possible. In a hurry they have McBryde shipped to El Cayo and from there to Belize City in one of the country's few automobiles. It subsequently turned out that McBryde was infected with a particularly virulent malaria – his bad luck had not let him down. Webster McBryde is not the only one leaving the expedition here in late June 1928; after Frans's stories about the hardships to come and

McBryde's illness, Don Carlos Basauri has finally had enough. Thus reduced the expedition continues its journey towards the north, first passing through the ruins of La Honradez and later the little-known ruins of Tzotzkitam. Frans paints a nice watercolor of three well-preserved temples in his diary, and with small, careful letters he adds his measurements and observations: distances, lengths, widths, descriptions of architecture and monuments. Tzotzkitam was to be the last major ruins that the Gray Expedition would investigate before arriving at Chichen Itza, and the next important destination of the trip was the old colonial town of Bacalar on the shores of a large, blue freshwater lagoon not far from the Caribbean Sea. Bacalar had once been an important trading center and outpost of the Spanish colonial empire, but in 1928 it stood as a sad shadow of its former self, its old fortress in rubbles, and with only a few inhabitants left.

The town had been ransacked during the bloody battles of the Caste War (1847–1901) when a rebel Maya army had risen against the Mexican government in what was the biggest indigenous uprising since the Spanish invasion. The Maya succeeded in taking control of most of northern Yucatan, and in 1849 the vengeful Maya stood outside Mérida – the capital of Yucatan. Just as it seemed that the Maya were to reconquer the entire northern peninsula the majority of the peasant army went back to their villages. The rains would soon come, and the life-providing maize had to be planted. Without maize, no Maya resistance – and so the war came to an end. The Mexican mestizos soon regained control of the western part of the peninsula, but most of the eastern part, including Bacalar, remained under Maya control. The battles raged until 1901, and had at that point cost 200,000 lives, but even in the 1920s only a few white people had dared to travel through the “Maya Zone,” which encompassed most of the current state of Quintana Roo. The rebel army still stirred, and as late as 1934, Morley was contacted in Chichen Itza by a Maya general who asked for U.S. support in a renewed battle against Mexico. The aid was to consist of 1000 rifles. Morley had to politely decline, and actual fighting between the Maya and the Mexican government army never occurred again.

From the desolate Bacalar the journey went on 81 miles to the north, towards the main center of the rebellious Maya, Chan Santa Cruz (now Felipe Carrillo Puerto). Few had traveled through this region, and the land was arid and unwelcoming. Once they reached one of the few water holes or wells along the way, the water was almost undrinkable: “I have given up drinking water now, and subsist on coffee and tea. I.e. boiled water, with something in it to take the taste and smell away.”<sup>240</sup> On July 26 they rode into Chan Santa Cruz, the headquarters of the Maya rebellion leaders, and the home of the so-called Talking Cross. During the Caste War, God had supposedly spoken to the Maya through a cross, and had ordered them to go into battle against the foreign intruders.<sup>241</sup> On the town's dusty square, in the shadow of the stodgy, fortress-like church, Frans was greeted by his namesake, the once dreaded General Francisco “Pancho” May. General May was one of the last survivors of those who had led the fight against the Mexican government, and now, in 1928, he was the richest and most exploitative chicle boss in the whole of Mexico. In 1917 May had obtained the rights to the surrounding 20,000 hectares of forest from President Carranza as part of the government's expropriation policy.

May could now make a fortune leasing the desolate forest land to the chicle industry, and he forgot, as predicted by the government, all about rebellions and messages from God. For more than ten years General “Pancho” May had ruled the “Maya Zone” as an autocratic king, and he had taxed his people harshly. Frans made sure to get a portrait of the old freedom fighter – but only after politely asking for permission. Disobedient elements were still tied to the stake at the center of the square and assigned lashes as deserved. A few months after the Gray Expedition's stay in Chan Santa Cruz, the population of the area had had enough: May was deposed and deprived of what remained of his fortune, and he had to return to his own small maize field again. He was still working there, 30 years later – more than 100 years old. On their way further north the expedition ran into the most dangerous situation since they had been stuck in the jungle looking for the pass to the Jatate River. When they stopped for the night in the small village of Xcacal Guardia one of their mules dined on a bunch of ripe bananas, which, despite the offer of a generous compensation, immediately led to death threats from the armed Maya soldiers of the village. To Frans and his companions the threat is so real that they take turns keeping watch throughout the night – loaded weapons in hand. Frans knows the stories about the ruthless Maya army all too well, and at the break of dawn they quietly mount their horses and sneak out of town, hearts in their throats. After the frightening experience in Xcacal Guardia the tiny group of weary travelers hurries on. Because of water shortages they must ride as quickly as possible through an area rich in unexplored ruins, and on August 5 they see Chichen Itza's El Castillo temple hovering above the trees in the distance. After 200 days and more than 1240 miles on horseback, the members of the John Geddings Gray Memorial Expedition have reached their final destination, and Frans's old boss, Sylvanus Morley, is there to welcome them, eager to hear about their new discoveries.

That evening, after a magnificent dinner at the Carnegie Institution's hacienda close to the ruins, everybody headed over to Chichen Itza's enormous ball court, where the Maya once played their ritual ball game. The high walls of the court created a fantastic acoustic setting, and Morley placed, as was his habit on special occasions, a gramophone at one end of the ball court while the guests were seated at the other end; soon the wonderful sound of Sibelius and Beethoven would flow towards them, and above them the Milky Way shimmered in the tropical night sky. For Frans, it was nonetheless a melancholic evening with mixed emotions. It was the end of the expedition and a goodbye to the free life, and after unloading the faithful mules for the last time Frans wrote in his diary: “It was with some sadness that I looked at this, no more camps, no more trails for a while, the ‘vacation’ is over, now it is time to go to work.”<sup>242</sup> These are the very last words in Frans's field diary, and a few days later he and Bristow were on the way back to New Orleans – only after having sold the old worn mules at a higher price than he had paid in Tapachula more than six months earlier.

A month after returning to New Orleans in mid-August 1928 Frans attended a congress in New York, where he presented a preliminary status report of the Gray Expedition, emphasizing what he clearly saw as the two most important discoveries; the ancient textiles and the ball courts he had noted at several sites.<sup>243</sup> Frans was thus able to demonstrate with certainty that the

Maya of the southern lowlands had also built ball courts in the Classic period, and that the game did not, as was otherwise assumed, derive from Central Mexico in the Postclassic period. Frans further investigated the history of the ball game and its distribution across Mesoamerica, and a few years later he published one of his best papers on this very subject.<sup>244</sup> As for the results from the Gray Expedition, a proper full publication never appeared, which is strange considering what Frans, somewhat self-righteously, had written to Thomsen a few years earlier: "I have seen so many expeditions come home and throw their notes in a closet without processing them, that I will not do the same. My opinion is that the notes are written not only for oneself but also for those who come after. [...] This may seem obvious, but isn't so."<sup>245</sup> In the brief preliminary report from 1929 Frans mentions a forthcoming, major release at the end of the year. We know that Frans received quite a few offers from several publishers, but he refused them all, presumably in the hope that in the end Tulane would publish the expedition report. But there was no money; neither the banana king Zemurray nor Matilda Gray felt charitable this time, as Frans had already exceeded the budget of the Gray Expedition considerably. At the same time the actual writing process caused Frans a lot of frustration, and he admitted that he was not a great writer, something that does not characterize his vivid and well-written diary reports. This is the first clear example of the difficulties he had writing and completing longer and more time-consuming projects, and when he started working on a larger, comprehensive work on Maya history a few years later, he ran into new problems.

On The Gray Expedition the banner of the Explorers Club had waved alongside Tulane University's pennant, and Frans had been a member of this fabled, exclusive club in New York since 1924, but now he had had enough. In 1931 he irately left the club, and not only that, he warned the U.S. National Research Council in letters against supporting pseudo-scientists, named individually, whom Frans had now apparently realized formed the core of the Explorers Club.<sup>246</sup> Frans was deeply worried about all the amateurs who traveled around the Maya area "discovering" ruins, stealing antiquities and deceiving the local population, all of which made life difficult for genuine archaeologists. Frans was equally tired of hearing the "adventurers" bragging about how hard it is to travel in the jungle – the never-ending stories of blood-sucking leeches, mosquitoes, fights with snakes, and uncivilized Indians. Frans was not impressed by the drama so often described by the club members: "I do not happen to have any wild experiences when exploring in Central America, and if I should have had any, I considered them part of the game and nothing to brag about."<sup>247</sup> Frans remained a member of other clubs, including the Harvard Club, whose branch in New Orleans he served as chairman for a few years. Cigarettes and alcohol were a natural part of the social life of the clubs, and Frans enjoyed both immensely. Whether he was an alcoholic already at this stage is unclear, but we know that during the expedition in 1928 Frans "liked his several daily drinks."<sup>248</sup> This did not in any way affect his fitness or endurance, which in most cases surpassed that of the younger expedition members. But alcohol had no doubt already for a long time been one of Frans's daily habits; and he knew very well the forces he was up against. In the preface to an article written by an amateur archaeologist, he notes: "Life under the tropic sun is hard on the nerves of the northerner, and



The Department of Middle American Research: the exhibition area, 1928.

unless he has a hobby of some kind he may be driven to drink, or he may go native."<sup>249</sup> Frans, who had no hobby, would probably have preferred to "go native," but in the long run it was the bottle that won.

After his visit to New York Frans returned to his usual surroundings at Tulane University. The Department of Middle American Research (today the Middle American Research Institute or M.A.R.I.) is housed in a large, four-story building that was renamed Dinwiddie Hall in 1936 (after Blom's steady supporter, President Albert Dinwiddie) but was then called the Science Building. The obvious way to the university from Jackson Square is the busy but beautiful St. Charles Avenue, and most often Frans probably jumped on one of the old streetcars that to this day run along the wide avenue. But we can imagine him making the trip on foot in the pleasant, cool morning hours, enjoying the scent of the magnolia trees, the gardenias, and all the many other flowers blooming in the large gardens of the old well-to-do villas. The Department of Middle American Research was located on the fourth floor of the Science Building, all the way up under the sloping roof. In Frans's days the floor was divided into a number of small offices flanking an elongated, broad center area that served as a museum and library. Frans had his own office, bright and spacious, and here he had his filing cabinet with hundreds of small cards with information on all known Maya ruins. This humble cabinet, Frans Blom's famous "Maya Index," is still to be found at M.A.R.I., and when browsing through the small, yellowed cards with Frans's notes about

a location of a site, occasionally with a small photograph glued on the back, one understands what an enormous job it was to collect all this information. For the same reason, it soon became a habit for Maya archaeologists on the way to or from an excavation or expedition to pass through New Orleans to consult with Frans and his database.

Of the staff members Frans had attracted to his department, one stands out as the most active and probably also the most intelligent. In 1927, he had hired the 47-year-old German Mesoamericanist Hermann Beyer. Beyer was a heavysset man with a jovial moon-shaped face and an appetite and thirst equaling his interest in Maya glyphs.<sup>250</sup> It was hardly a coincidence that Frans chose Beyer to become the glyph expert of his department. Unlike Morley, Beyer believed that researchers should do much more work on the parts of the inscriptions that did not contain calendrical information. Thus Beyer searched for historical content in the texts – in line with Frans’s intuition. Although Frans did not agree with Beyer on all points regarding Maya writing, employing the German scholar placed the department in open opposition to Morley and Thompson. Today many of Hermann Beyer’s publications are considered groundbreaking; which was, sadly, not the case in his own day.<sup>251</sup> Other prominent scholars who worked on the top floor of the Science Building for a shorter or longer period of time were the eminent ethnohistorian Ralph L. Roys (1879–1965) and Zemurray’s daughter, ethnologist and archaeologist Doris Zemurray Stone (1909–1994). The old traveling companion from 1925, Oliver La Farge, Frans had to dismiss with chagrin in the fall of 1928, allegedly because he had had a conflict with the son and daughter of one of Tulane’s directors.<sup>252</sup> Frans and Oliver were still on good terms, which is apparent from the correspondence between them in the following years, and by the fact that Frans a few years later assisted him when a theater version of La Farge’s book *Laughing Boy* was performed in Le Petit Théâtre in New Orleans’s old town. Frans generously loaned several genuine Navajo dresses and props from the museum’s collection for use in the performance.

The staff also included Frans’s faithful secretary Dolores Morgadanes, photographer Dan Leyrer, sculptor Enrique Alférez, and librarian Arthur E. Gropp. In 1931, Maurice Ries, who had studied journalism and history at Tulane, got the position as editor of the department’s publications, and he became a permanent and important member of Frans’s team. Apparently there was a good and relaxed relationship between the members of the department, something that probably had to do with Frans’s informal style and his unwavering loyalty towards his employees. It was as if there was a special atmosphere and team spirit among the staff in those early years, Ries later recalled, and all were driven by a great desire to do their work as best as they could.<sup>253</sup> Frans had succeeded in establishing a well-functioning research unit; the troubled times of the short Gates era were long gone. But Frans had not settled for good; there was more to see and explore, and as the year 1929 came to an end, after nearly two years in his office in New Orleans, Frans was more than ready to go back to the Maya and the great forests again – and soon the opportunity arose.

Sheltered by the low, rolling Puuc Hills on the otherwise flat, northern Yucatan peninsula lies one of the most famous and best preserved Maya ruins – Uxmal. The city had, in contrast to other major sites like Tikal and Palenque, never quite been forgotten. In the populous Yucatan, where the Maya had



Frans Blom and his crew in front of the Nunnery at Uxmal, 1930. Blom is in the center. Front row, far left: photographer Dan Leyrer. Front row, fourth from the left: architect Gerhardt Kramer. Back row, far left: Ciriaco Aguilar. Back row, second from the left: sculptor Enrique Alférez.

continued their way of life and where the Spanish conquerors settled down in the 1540s, the great, mysterious ruins had been continuously known. The stunning stone mosaics and sculptures of feathered serpents, bound prisoners, and crooked-nosed rain gods that embellished the buildings had already attracted curious travelers in the centuries after the arrival of the Europeans. In the mid-1600s the Franciscan friar Diego López de Cogolludo had visited the place and named several of the buildings, including the “Nunnery.” With its numerous, small cell-like rooms and four structures enclosing a courtyard, the complex apparently reminded the friar of a convent.

Uxmal became known to a wider public after John Lloyd Stephens’s description of the ruins paired with Cathwerwood’s precise renderings, and both Charnay and Selser had since visited and described the remarkable old city. Uxmal, however, had never been adequately investigated, and not even a proper site map existed when another Tulane expedition led by Frans Blom arrived here in February 1930. The previous year Frans had been addressed by the planning committee for the World’s Fair “A Century of Progress” to be held in Chicago in 1933–34. They asked Frans to organize and execute a plaster cast of the entire Nunnery – arguably one of the most beautiful and harmonious buildings throughout Precolumbian America – which would then later be rebuilt in full size in Chicago. The expedition was to

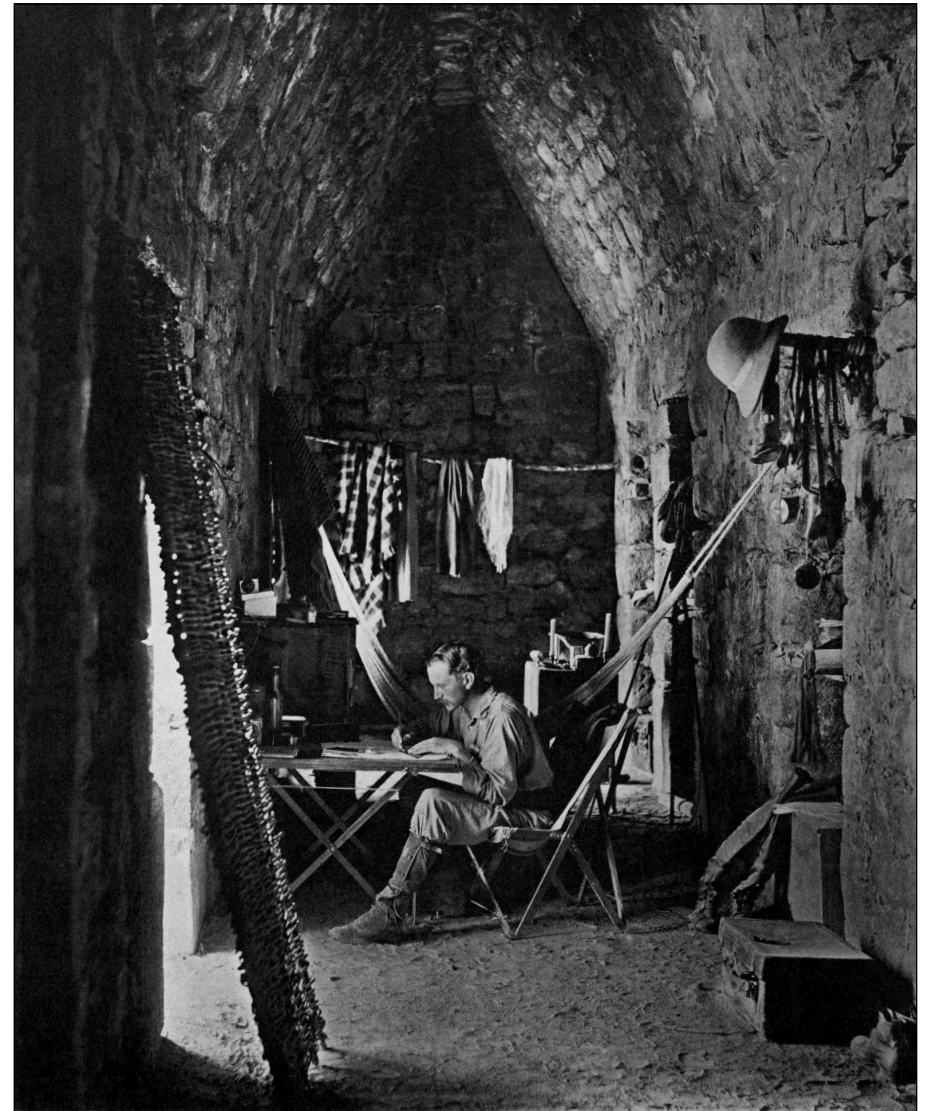


Frans in his thousand-year-old office at Uxmal, 1930.

be financed by the bulging assets of the World's Fair, and would therefore not be a burden to the department's strained economy.<sup>254</sup> It was an exciting task and a major challenge, and so of course Frans accepted the offer. More specifically the assignment consisted of measuring, drawing, photographing, and making casts of the façades of all of the four wings of the Nunnery – each between 164 and 229 feet long and up to 33 feet high. It was an unusual, some would say unrealistic, undertaking; never before had it been attempted to make so many, and such large plaster casts.<sup>255</sup> As could be expected, there was considerable attention from the press when the news of Blom's next adventure was announced.

It was possible to reach Uxmal by car from Mérida, the capital of Yucatan, and the camp that was established in Uxmal was luxury compared to what Frans was accustomed to from his previous expeditions. The Tulane team took lodgings in the east wing – situated in the shadow of the impressive "Pyramid of the Magician" – and Frans got his own two rooms; one of the most famous photos of him shows him in one of those rooms, sitting at his desk. The setup is hardly accidental, since it is an almost exact replica of an equally famous photo of Frans's big hero Alfred Maudslay sitting at his desk in a temple room at Chichen Itza.

The remaining rooms in the 1000-year old building were shared by the



Alfred Maudslay in Chichen Itza, Las Monjas (photo by Henry Sweet, 1889).

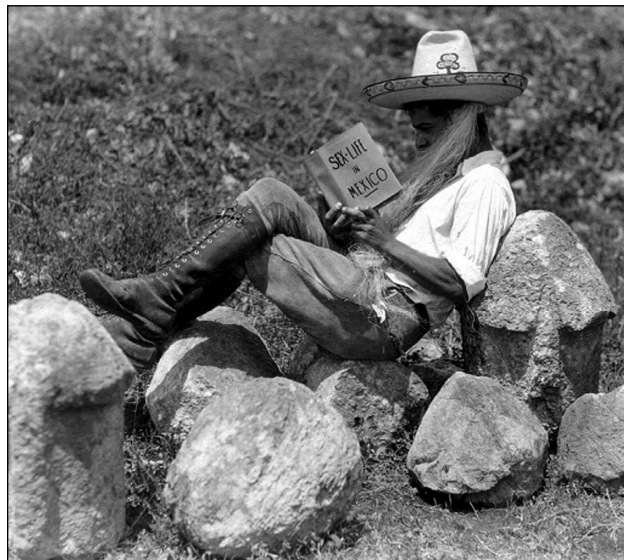
other members of the expedition: two architects, a surveyor, a sculptor, a photographer, and an engineer. Two larger rooms in the middle of the wing were turned into dining room, kitchen, and living room. Occasionally they slept on the roof of the building, and once a week the whole Tulane group drove off to the village of Muna ten miles away to get a shower, resupply, and maybe be lucky enough to track down an old newspaper. While his crew is engaged in the work at the Nunnery, Frans finds an opportunity for new discoveries and soothes his restlessness by exploring Uxmal's little-known periphery. He comes across several new buildings and a number of stelae, including Uxmal's most famous, the large Stela 14, portraying the ruler who built the Nunnery in the early tenth century.<sup>256</sup>

Some 124 miles northeast of Uxmal, Morley is still fully occupied



Frans and his assistants document carved monuments by night with the help of artificial light, Uxmal, 1930.

"Sex-Life in Mexico," Uxmal, 1930.



excavating and restoring the central part of Chichen Itza, and the two old friends have time to visit each other on a couple of occasions. The members of the Tulane Expedition are impressed by the conditions of the Carnegie people at the hacienda in Chichen Itza which makes the otherwise excellent conditions in Uxmal seem primitive, and where even the napkins bear the emblem of the Carnegie Institution. Apparently they also find all the comfort and Carnegie's name printed and stamped on everything a little comical; and when Morley later visits Uxmal, he is surprised to see that the toilet paper in the field toilet bears the handwritten initials T.U.X. – Tulane University Expedition. This is probably one of Frans's practical jokes.

However, he also channeled his creativity into more scientific purposes, and together with photographer Dan Leyrer he began documenting the stelae at night. In daylight many of the partly eroded images and glyphs were almost impossible to make out, but illuminated by a sharp spotlight at a low

angle, the old carvings would cast a clear shadow and therefore appear quite clearly in photographs – a simple but effective technique still in use today.

As we have already mentioned, Blom and Tulane were popular with the New Orleans press, and several reporters were sent to Yucatan to describe the unusual project. One of them, Helen Schertz, reports admiringly: "He loves these ruins better than they [the Mexicans] do, is giving his virile young life to their restoration [...] He's a Great Dane, is Frans Blom." The impressed Miss Schertz also quotes Frans for saying that he would rather stay in the tropics than on the North Pole since in the Arctic there is "too much ice for the amount of beer obtainable."<sup>257</sup> Uxmal offers more than night-time photography, playing tricks on Morley, and entertaining journalists. There are several problems with the casting process, and the job takes longer than first anticipated; but on May 12, 1930, it is done – after three months of hard and dusty work. 2½ tons of plaster of Paris have now been turned into a total



Preparing plaster replicas from the Nunnery, Uxmal, 1930.

of 200 casts, which are packed safely for the long trip to Chicago.

What nobody knew at the time was that much of their hard work and efforts would be in vain. The Wall Street Crash had hit the U.S. the year before, and the World's Fair came to suffer under the ensuing economic crisis. Every penny had to be reconsidered, the earlier, grandiose plans shrunk, and in the end only part of the north wing of the Nunnery was erected in Chicago.

Frans is also disappointed by the stark colors of the reproduction, and goes so far as to call it a "bastard." Nevertheless, the exhibition and especially the Maya building, which is awarded a special prize, becomes a great success among the visitors. More than four million people pass through the reproduction from Uxmal, ensuring invaluable publicity for Tulane and Frans Blom. But we have moved three years ahead, and much will happen in Frans's life before then.

In the summer of 1930 Blom receives a letter from his family; his mother, Dora, is seriously ill, and shortly after, he takes the long trip across the Atlantic to Denmark. In early August Frans is reunited, after seven long years, with the rest of his family in the peaceful surroundings at Sømandshvile. It was a tough time for the Blom family. The Nørlund manor had been sold and the economic world crisis had serious consequences for the illustrious family business. However, Frans is relieved to find his mother recovering from her illness, and so he barely spends a month in Denmark before he returns to the U.S. There is work to be done, and Frans must move on. First he travels to Hamburg where he participates in a major conference and presents some of the new finds from Uxmal. In the audience are his father Alfred, and sister Vera, who have accompanied him to Germany, to finally see him on the podium as a recognized and accomplished archaeologist and scholar. From Hamburg Frans heads back to New Orleans via Paris, where he had agreed to help in

mounting an exhibition on Middle American archaeology at the Trocadéro Museum. While in the French capital he visits the so-called "Colonial World Exhibition" and sees the giant reproduction of the famous temple ruins of Angkor Wat from the Cambodian jungle. Frans had to lean back to see the top of the tallest tower – it was a building that made his Nunnery resemble a small, four-winged farm.

With the coming of the fall Frans is back in his office on the fourth floor of the Science Building, and there is plenty of work. The setup of the Nunnery has to be improved, there is all the daily administration, and he begins working on a manuscript that will eventually turn into a book on Maya culture and history. The next year and a half are all about work, and Frans would have no reason to complain. One success seemed to follow the next – at least in the professional part of Frans's life. But what about the man Frans Blom? Was he not to settle down? Rumors of the handsome and attractive man's active love life and many affairs swirled with undiminished force in the French Quarter. Frans wrote to his friend, the painter Nat Burwash in August 1931, explaining how he had just escaped from a previous relationship: "Most of my library and museum gang is on vacation, and the city is feeling hot and sticky; with a desire for cool drinks and lightly dressed females waving fans. Both can be had."<sup>258</sup> Yes, Frans could easily charm his way to another passionate affair, but was there no need for a family and some emotional stability in Frans Blom's world? Or had he completely lost faith in enduring love?



## Chapter 6 A Temple in Tulane (1932–1943)

*"[W]e plan the erection of what will be one of the most spectacular public buildings in the world: a full-sized, exact, reproduction here (as a part of Tulane University) of the famed 'Castillo' which dominates the ruins of the ancient Maya city of Chichen Itzá in Yucatan."*  
(Frans Blom, 1938).<sup>259</sup>

On April 20, 1932, Alfred and Dora Blom receive a letter from their son in New Orleans. He has met a beautiful young heiress and is to be married on May 27.

Things had undeniably moved fast. Frans had barely met the young woman before he proposed and the wedding was set. In March, Frans had been a tour guide on a three-week trip to Mexico for a prominent company of wealthy New York and New Orleans people, including millionairess and financier of the 1928 expedition Matilda Gray and the famous newspaper



The park of Sefton Manor, 1932.

columnist Dorothy Dix, whom he knew from social circles in New Orleans. The elegant man of the world, traveler, and Mexico connoisseur Frans Blom seems to have especially charmed the female members of the group. Upon her return, 70-year-old Dorothy Dix said: "Going to Mexico with Frans Blom is like being shown over heaven by an archangel."<sup>260</sup>

This view was obviously shared by eighteen-year-old Mary Sefton Thomas from New York, who was among the travel party. Her father had passed away, so she and her mother held shared ownership of the large cosmetics company Harriet Hubbard Ayer, and the family fortune was so large that it outshone both merchant Blom's machine company in Copenhagen and Frans's old love Myra's title of nobility. Besides apartments in New York and Paris, Mary and her mother owned Sefton Manor on Long Island, an enormous country house in massive English manor style with 34 rooms and fifteen bathrooms, a huge garden with an old Venetian fountain and three small Greek-looking temples. Outside the imposing French bronze gates of the park lay meadows and forests, greenhouses, vegetable gardens, horse stables, and a tennis court.

Mary first met Frans during a visit to New Orleans. He talked enthusiastically about the upcoming trip to Yucatan, and asked if Mary and her cousin wanted to come along. After conferring with their parents, the girls were allowed to go. The trip, however, was no great success for Mary; she certainly did not think that Mexico was anything special.<sup>261</sup> But she fell in love with



Mary in the park of Sefton Manor, photographed by Frans, 1932.

Frans, and he with her. She was young, she was pretty, she was rich – and she was a perfect match for Frans's elegant lifestyle.

Mary Sefton Thomas was born on April 29, 1913. Her twin brother died in infancy, and she grew up as an only child. Her father died in 1918 when she was five, and in 1924 her mother remarried. Mary did not regularly attend school, but followed her mother on her many travels and was taught by private tutors in all conceivable disciplines – she learned to type as soon as she could write, and she loved to read books. She had played the piano from childhood and soon began to study singing. She loved opera, enjoyed

painting (at times Frans would call her his “pocket Picasso”), horseback riding, and astronomy.<sup>262</sup> Mary was a gifted, cultivated, and art-interested young society woman – and Frans was exciting, experienced, and exotic.

On the same day as the letter from Frans reaches his parents in Denmark, Alfred Blom writes an overwhelmingly happy letter to his future daughter-in-law: “My sincerest wish is that you two dear children – although Frans is of a certain age you will understand that to me [he] is still my boy – may have a long, happy life together in love and harmony.”<sup>263</sup> It does not quite turn out that way, but so far things are looking bright, and Dora Blom gives her future daughter-in-law a diamond ring that Dora’s father had originally given to her mother. It is a ring that Dora has worn for many years, but which she has always wanted to present to her daughter-in-law – if she was ever to get one. Finally the time has come, and the Bloms are relieved that Frans is settling down. Dora writes to Mary: “Well my dear child, I am glad Frans gets a wife; he is so interested in his work that he really wants to be looked after, generally his clothes want pressing, and his hair wants cutting. You will have to be strict with him from the beginning, but his many years in the field, the beautiful free life on his expeditions has made him a little careless of civilized life.”<sup>264</sup> To everyone’s regret Frans’s parents must decline attending the wedding because of Dora’s failing health and the difficult economic situation of the family business. Nor are the sisters able to come. In early May, the newspapers in New York and New Orleans announce the exciting news: “Romance amid the Ruins,” “Frans Blom to Wed N.Y. Society Girl,” and the rescheduled date of the wedding is now set.<sup>265</sup>

On June 15, 1932, the wedding is celebrated with an outdoor ceremony in the park at Sefton Manor. Frans’s loyal staff of the Middle American Department sends him a congratulatory telegram that shows the pleasant and humorous tone they enjoyed with each other. A jumble of Maya words leads to the warmest congratulations to “the

Mary on her wedding day, June 15, 1932.





Alfred Blom, c. 1930.



Dora Blom, c. 1930.

mule driver” as the employees jokingly call Frans.<sup>266</sup> Alfred Blom has not been able to come, but Dora’s health has improved, and she makes the trip across the Atlantic to see her son get married. It is a strong and touching sign of her will and affection, and it would be the last time that Frans saw his mother who loved and admired him so much.

Several of Frans’s upscale friends also attend the wedding – representatives from the Roosevelt family include the former First Lady Edith Roosevelt, a gracious old lady, and her son Archibald, who is a year younger than Frans and has for several years been a good friend of his. “Archie” is Frans’s best man at the wedding ceremony, while Mary’s cousin is maid of honor. At six o’clock Frans Blom and Mary Sefton Thomas are wed in the park by a former bishop, and the wedding ceremony is followed by a reception in the building’s main hall and dinner on the terrace. The papers describe Mary’s wedding dress in detail, a French model of thin, light velvet, simple and princess-like with long tight sleeves, with a belt of pearls as the only adornment. The train mingles with the dress, and the chiffon veil in the same light color as the dress is simply arranged, like a nun’s veil. The bridal bouquet of orchids has the same delicate hue.<sup>267</sup>

The honeymoon a month later, however, was not exactly to Mary’s liking – they were headed for Mexico! Frans was to give a series of lectures in Mexico City, but there was also



Frans and Mary visiting the Aztec ruins at Tenayuca on their honeymoon to Mexico in 1932. The photo was taken by Swedish archaeologist Sigvald Linné, and to judge from the expressions of the newly-wed couple, Frans enjoyed the excursion more than his wife.

time for sightseeing in the beautiful old colonial towns of Cuernavaca and Taxco. Upon returning Frans and Mary also take over the second floor of the beautiful Pontalba apartment in New Orleans, which is soon to be lavishly equipped according to Mary’s more formal taste, counterbalancing Frans’s stacks of books and his collection of ethnographica and ceramics. She installs her Steinway grand piano and her fine furniture, and from Denmark, the famous Flora Danica china and Georg Jensen silverware. She also decorates the house with new curtains and fitted wardrobes.

The housekeeping is handled by maids, a butler, and a handyman. The archaeologist Frans Blom now boasts a home and a life style that few, if any, of his colleagues can match. Mary’s expensive red sports car, an elegant apartment, and great sociability that includes university colleagues and the city’s upper class, as well as Frans’s friends from the artistic and more bohemian circles. Frans comes home for lunch every day, and their talented cook Rosa knows how to improvise and make a treat for the often unexpected guests Frans brings home. Mary later said: “Those brought home for lunch had brains – a requirement – and good conversation flowered.”<sup>268</sup> The Danish ethnographer Jens Yde remembered that “his dining room in New Orleans shone on festive occasions with Flora Danica, and Danish beer and schnapps were always to be found at his house.”<sup>269</sup> Perhaps there was even



The living room in Frans and Mary's apartment, 511 St. Ann Street.



View of Jackson Square from the balcony.



Mary and Xochitl ("Flower" in Nahuatl), the daughter of sculptor Enrique Alférez.

a little too much beer and schnapps, rum, tequila, champagne, and gin in Frans's well-equipped bar cabinet. But surely he was man enough for having a ball, enjoying the opportunities offered by life, and what was there to worry about?

Mary soon discovered that her sudden and overwhelming infatuation with the man of the world would be replaced by the everyday grind in an unfamiliar and almost tropical city, far from her friends and family in New York. Frans had his job to do; he was at the office every day, and meanwhile Mary was bored in the beautiful apartment. Frans's assistant Maurice Ries recalled: "She was charmed by the cathedral, the French Quarter, and so on, but she also didn't feel comfortable there. She was never comfortable there."<sup>270</sup> She found it hard to get used to the southern atmosphere and the more unrestrained, immediate temperament of the inhabitants. Mary remained the stylish New Yorker, and she was seen by many as "aloof and withdrawn."<sup>271</sup>

After the first difficult time it seems as if Mary settled a little better in her marriage, and she and Frans organized their lives so that Mary spent long periods of time on Long Island and in New York while Frans was working in New Orleans, traveled to Middle America, or was on tour in the States. In September 1933 Frans wrote to Mary: "I do not know when I love you most. Near you or away from you. All I know is that I love you."<sup>272</sup> And in another letter he writes to her: "It is lonesome here without you, little one – but it is better that you are home with mother because I have to do a lot of running around. I am behaving nicely. Early up and to bed about 11 P.M. Only on beer, and Rosa feeds me well. I love you my very dearest. Yours Frans."<sup>273</sup> His letters to Mary during the long separations are filled with the most loving, sweetest words, but she occasionally scolds him or cries on the phone. In fact they seem to have had quite a hard time communicating; they often seem to have misunderstood each other. Frans was a loner, and he had always found it difficult to bond with anyone, and he had also been a bachelor for so many



Frans Blom, 1932, dedicated to his mother-in-law for Christmas.

years that it was hard for him to get used to living so closely together with another human.

In October 1933 Frans is alone in New Orleans and writes to Mary at Sefton Manor: "You know – we are both funny people. We all the time want to make each other happy – and we are afraid of talking about things that we might disagree upon. My first thought is *always*: Will it make Snooky [one of Frans's pet names for Mary] happy? Will it make life more pleasant for her? I think that we are both very sensitive and shy."<sup>274</sup> Occasionally Frans and Mary still spend time together in New Orleans, but Mary is not pleased with the apartment, despite its central location and flower-decked balcony. She wants a private house with garden, and they begin to look for a house on St. Charles Avenue in the charming old villa neighborhood near the university. "You know darling, that there is nothing I would rather have than to make it nice for you here in New Orleans," Frans wrote to her. "My work is here and I can't leave all that which I have built up step by step just flat. I want my little darling with me, and to have her in a place she likes so she can be happy when she is with me here."<sup>275</sup> The house move never comes about, though. To fill her vacant time Mary opens a small art gallery with changing exhibitions on the ground floor, underneath their apartment, and she takes active part in the city's cultural life, although it is somewhat impoverished compared to New York. She attends all classical concerts with her girlfriends – Frans does not bother, he is busy at his desk and absorbed in his dear books. He does, however, join her a few times at the opera in New York, where Mary's mother has a permanent box. Mary later remembered how presentable Frans had looked in tails and a top hat.

Mary adored classic European culture and ancient Roman and Greek art,

but had only contempt for the cultures and peoples of Middle America. She later said that Frans was "a man of many talents and one can regret that he did not pursue a profession other than searching for Mayan ruins."<sup>276</sup> Among the many talents was Frans's interest in photography. He took photo after photo of Mary in the park at Sefton Manor, and never tired of photographing flowers and the patterns of leaves. He even installed a large professional darkroom in the basement of Sefton Manor. Frans also designed several pieces of furniture for Mary and himself, including an elegant desk with a leather table top, which he had made at one of Copenhagen's finest cabinetmakers. In addition, Mary recounted later, he designed a silver bed, dresser, and desk for his own bedroom.

She appreciated his interest in arts and crafts, and she loved being with him on Long Island and in New York City, where both of them had many friends, or to travel with him in Europe visiting the cultural capitals. In the famous museums they were united in their love of art, and in the evenings they would enjoy the social life at the most expensive hotels and at large elegant balls. In Paris, Mary had expensive dresses made and she bought old sheet music and manuscripts, while Frans bought Maya ceramics and stone figures in antique shops and rare books in the well-stocked antiquarians. In Brussels, in the summer of 1933, they visited the library where Frans twenty years earlier had studied medieval manuscripts, and they were warmly and sincerely welcomed by the director who opened display case after display case to show them the precious objects. On another occasion, they were in Stockholm and saw newly discovered archaeological findings from what Mary considered the hearth of culture – Europe: "A welcome sight to my eyes instead of the Mayan stuff."<sup>277</sup> Mary's mother spent much of her time in Paris, where Frans and Mary visited her numerous times. In contrast, Mary only rarely came to New Orleans; she was never there in the summer, because of the stifling heat, and so a lot of the time Frans and Mary lived separately. In the mid-1930s a female journalist visits the blond, charming Frans Blom in the sumptuous apartment, and describes him as surrounded by stacks of English and Spanish books, Turkish cigarettes, and bucketloads of coffee. Mary is not mentioned.<sup>278</sup>

In Mary's opinion, Frans wasted his life and talents in New Orleans, and it was certainly not what she had hoped for: "How different his life could have been if he had never gone to that awful Central America!"<sup>279</sup> She did not understand his interest in the Maya, and he in turn was disappointed that she did not take part, or at least show some interest, in his work. One of the few friends Mary made in New Orleans was the Mexican-born sculptor Enrique Alférez who worked for Frans at Tulane. Mary was also very fond of Enrique's little girl Xochitl – Mary and Frans never had children of their own: "As I look back over those fine years of being Mrs. Blom I know that what held me there, often unhappy, longing for the world beyond poor old New Orleans, was the company of Enrique most of all, and also the various artists who formed a coterie around me. We talked about everything, played poker, I played backgammon if I had a partner. Frans never moved from his desk."<sup>280</sup>

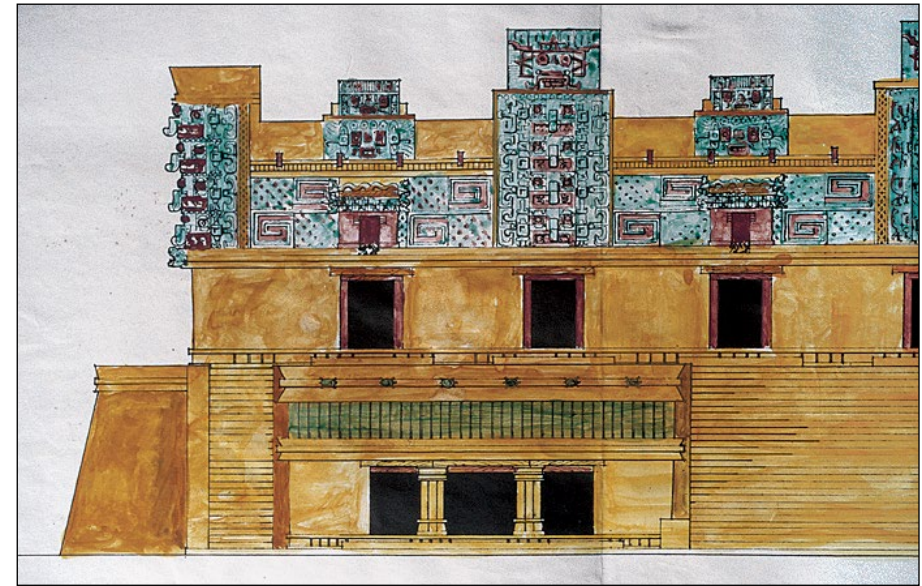
At about the same time as he was preparing the Uxmal casts for the upcoming World's Fair in Chicago in 1933, Frans began to look into ways to move his department to new, better, and bigger buildings. There was too little room under the roof of the Science Building, and the building was in

a miserable condition. The roof leaked during the tropical rains, and it was unbearably hot beneath the black slate roof when summer temperatures from June to mid-September reached a soaring 100 degrees or more. Maurice Ries once told an anecdote about an afternoon where the other staff members had gone home due to the sweltering August heat. Frans had stripped down, only keeping on his underpants, and was caught off his guard by a female employee and her friend. Frans was in the library, far from his office, and soon the two women jokingly chased him around between the shelves. Finally, the breathless Blom issued an order to his pursuers: "If you ladies will turn the other way, the director will go back to his office."<sup>281</sup> Although the furnace under the slate roof thus gave rise to witty performances, there was no doubt that there was a sincere need for new surroundings.

Frans's great dream, which in the eyes of most others was a hopeless and crazy idea, was that in the future he and his colleagues would be housed in a replica of the Nunnery from Uxmal. Frans knew the building better than any other, and apparently found it suitable as a model for a modern research center and museum. At the same time the building would mark Frans's department as something special in the U.S. and throughout the world. In addition, the great plan can be interpreted as a critical comment on the way the modern U.S. often disregarded the cultural legacy of the native civilizations of the American continents. Thus, it was Frans's vision to create a response to a nation which tended to consider itself as cultureless before the European invasion, and where academic, legal, and governmental buildings were usually built in a neo-Classical style inspired by Greek and Roman architecture. Instead Frans wanted to construct a building in the shape of one of the absolute architectural masterpieces of the New World as a tribute to the people whom he considered the most advanced from the Precolumbian period – the Maya.

Not everyone on the Tulane University Board shared the view of the man who was not exactly known for respecting the unwritten laws of the university, and the board would not allocate the \$400,000 that the new buildings were estimated to cost. When the Rockefeller Foundation also declined to give financial support, Frans decided to seek the necessary funds from private and commercial businesses. Going on an extensive tour which included lectures, film screenings, and performances on the radio, he hoped to be able to find a thousand people who would each donate \$500 to the project. Samuel Zemurray remained one of Frans's loyal supporters and had immediately donated no less than \$25,000 to kick off the campaign. However, the 1930s – the time of the Great Depression – was a time of economic downturn and severe crisis across the U.S., and Frans's futile battle for new, unconventional surroundings would prove to absorb the vast majority of his working hours during his last seven years at Tulane.

On June 1, 1933, the Chicago World's Fair opened, and thousands upon thousands of curious Americans flocked in to see and admire the Nunnery, or "the bastard" as a disappointed Frans had called the gaudy, amputated plaster version of the otherwise so beautiful building. Frans did not attend the opening, and had instead gone off on an extended journey with Mary to Europe at the end of May. The trip included a stop in Denmark where they visited Frans's beloved mother's grave in Copenhagen. Dora Blom had died on February 12 after years of illness. Moreover, Frans showed his home



Sketch by Gerhardt Kramer for the reproduction of the Nunnery, Chicago, 1933.

country to Mary, and she was introduced to Frans's sisters and his father, who received her with open arms. They went on to Paris where Frans had been invited to help with a reorganization of the objects in the Precolumbian collection at the Musée de l'Homme. Clearly, Blom had become one of the most popular and respected figures in Maya archaeology. In his native Denmark, he appeared under the name of Don Enrico in the children's book *Sporet i Junglen* [The Track in the Jungle] from 1931. The protagonist is an intrepid oil scout working for Aguila Oil, whose experiences in the jungles of southern Mexico are strikingly similar to Blom's. The author, R. J. Nielsen, is not trying to hide his source of inspiration; in the preface he writes: "Don Enrico has no living model – there are thousands like him, spread wherever the tropical sun glows; and yet there is one he resembles more than any other: the Dane who has accomplished most in these parts: Professor Frans Blom, a happy and carefree youngster who set forth to meet adventure. [...] Perhaps Frans Blom will recognize a few things in these accounts as memories from a time when he was searching for oil in the great forests."<sup>282</sup> Indeed, Frans must have recognized quite a lot, since parts of the text are almost a direct copy of his own book from 1923. However, he would hardly have recognized the characteristics of a "carefree youngster" or the Lacandon Maya who appear dressed as Plains Indians from the popular westerns.

Later the same year, Frans went off on yet another trip, this time accompanied by Matilda Gray, and the destination was Yucatan. He had planned excavation work in the ancient Maya capital of Mayapan, but he had no luck in raising the necessary funds. Once more, it is the Great Depression that complicates things for Frans. Far from depressing, though, the despised alcohol prohibition in the U.S. was repealed that year, which breweries in New Orleans celebrated by handing out half a million gallons of free beer. On the first night after prohibition the spirits were high and the clinking of glasses could be heard everywhere in the narrow alleys of the French Quarter,



and Frans most likely took part in the fun with La Farge, Spratling, and the rest of the party-loving, intellectual gang.

In 1934 Tulane's Department of Middle American Research began publishing a new journal, named *Maya Research*, with Frans as the driving force and editor. Although money was tight, they managed – perhaps with a helping hand from Mary's family and connections – to get aid from a rich fund in New York, the Alma Egan Hyatt Foundation. Frans's own name was highlighted to a rather unusual degree on the cover of each issue of the journal, and he chose to publish several articles in it himself, making it a ready outlet with no hindrances from peer-reviewers. It was Frans's journal, and it was not least his own personal friends and the people of the Tulane Department who contributed. The first issue, published in July 1934, contained contributions from Alfred Tozzer and Hermann Beyer, while the second issue contained articles by Doris Z. Stone, Oliver La Farge, and once again the industrious Beyer. The number of Frans's friends was somewhat too conspicuous and led to some criticism of *Maya Research*, but otherwise there was nothing but praise for the new journal. Yet, after three years and nine issues, it was over. Frans had to discontinue the publication due to dwindling financial support. Once more money put an obstacle in the way of Frans's hopes and ambitions. It would not be the last time.

In spite of copious amounts of paperwork for Frans in New Orleans, there was still time for a few trips in 1934. In the summer, Frans was back in Europe again, this time in Paris and London, and previously he had been in Mexico, presiding over a seminar on archaeology at the National Museum in Mexico City. From the capital he continued to his long-familiar Veracruz, where he met his father. Alfred Blom needed distraction in his new, sad life as a widower, and after his stay with Frans in Mexico he went on to New Orleans for a shorter period to see his daughter-in-law. It had been tough years for the family. In 1931, Frans's parents had had to move from their spacious apartment to a much smaller one. In 1933 Dora Blom had died, and the same year the family firm filed for creditor protection. Old Blom had to give up his apartment and move in with his daughter and son-in-law. Three years later, he had to sell his beloved country house, and in 1937 he moved to a nursing home where he spent his final years. With the collapse of the company, Mr. Blom was without an income, and for a time Frans had to step in and assist with financial support. Finally, Frans could repay some of all that he had been given by his father. Finally, he could – backed up by Mary's fortune – pay off a little of his debt. A reconstruction of the main company with import and sale of agricultural machinery was eventually carried out, and in 1934 the company was taken over by Frans's brother-in-law Jørgen Kiær. Alfred Blom withdrew completely from the business.

During Alfred's visit in 1934 the ties between father and son strengthened. Frans wrote to Mary, describing the moment when they had said goodbye, Alfred leaving for Denmark: "I just came back from the ship. Left Father there. We both did not want to drag out the parting. I took him to the cabin – he put his arms around me and cried. Then he followed me to the gangway. [...] In a way I am unhappy – but also *very* happy. Father's visit has been so complete. [...] I gave him much worry – because I would not sell plows and selfbinders – but wasted my time with writers and painters. The family tradition since my birth was that I should be the third generation to carry on



Frans Blom, c. 1935.

in the firm. There is a far cry between providing machinery for the tilling of Danish soil, and digging ruins in Mexico. The lovable old Viking chief gave his approval to my strange doings. He actually told me that he was proud of me. That's when I cried."<sup>283</sup>

In early 1935, Frans Blom went off in charge of a Tulane expedition for the last time. The goal was western Honduras, the southeastern limit of Maya culture. This expedition was a collaboration between Tulane University and Frans's old friend Thomas Thomsen's Ethnographic Collection at the National Museum in Copenhagen, and therefore the young Danish geographer and ethnographer Jens Yde joined the expedition. A third member on the trip to Honduras was Prentiss Andrews, a lawyer and amateur archaeologist from Chicago, who paid for his own expenses. The overall objective of the expedition, which lasted from February 12 to March 21, was to map the extent and influence of Classic Maya culture in the region, search for ruins that would be suitable for future excavations, and collect items for Frans's small museum at Tulane and for the National Museum. Unlike the previous Tulane expeditions, they covered most of the route by car, bus, and even plane, and in the press Frans referred to the expedition as a "great, big picnic" in the jungle.<sup>284</sup> So, Frans was finally back on an expedition in the Maya area, yet

there was something that was not quite right. Something had changed in him, and his handwritten diary from the Honduras Expedition is a clear and sometimes quite sad document of this change. Gone is the spirit of curiosity and adventurousness, and never in the many pages does his intuition spark a flash of insight, just as one barely finds a serious comment or idea about ancient Maya culture. It is only in a few intense, enthusiastic descriptions of the nature and landscape that we can recognize the old Frans. Otherwise, it is a rather negative, sometimes downright condescending Frans who jots down his impressions of the people and culture of a country that obviously does not attract him. That Frans's involvement was at an ebb is perhaps best illustrated by the scientific results of the expedition which were only described by Jens Yde.<sup>285</sup> Except for a brief article about their visit to Copan, Frans never managed to pull himself together to write a single line about the findings in Honduras.

Jens Yde (1906–76) had a degree in geography from Copenhagen and went on to study at Harvard under Tozzer, Frans's old mentor. Here, he took a great interest in Native American cultures. Yde was a quiet, extremely modest man who, in stark contrast to the outgoing Frans, rarely made himself noticed in the media, and preferred a secluded life devoted to his studies. While the two may have been very different in several respects, they got along very well and Frans was extremely pleased with Yde's efforts – which he had every reason to be, considering Jens Yde's detailed report about the expedition. Despite his modesty, Yde could not hide how much he had read and knew about the Precolumbian cultures of Honduras, and without Yde the results of Frans's last Tulane expedition would almost certainly never have materialized. Yde was later to be known for his work in South America's tropical lowlands, among the Waiwai Indians in what was then British Guiana, and for many years he held the post of Curator of the American Collections at the National Museum.

The expedition started out in Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras. Blom and Yde enjoyed Frans's good contacts with the president and his archaeology-interested wife, as well as the banana empire United Fruit Company (to which Zemurray had sold Cuyamel, and where he now held the post as vice president). When they later arrived at the town of La Lima they spent the night among United Fruit's small colony of U.S. employees, and the two Danes were waited on hand and foot; there were tennis courts, a cinema, and a school for the American children, and most conveniently a river separated the idyll from the poorer parts of La Lima where the native workers lived. The expedition focused on the almost unexplored northwestern part of Honduras, and more precisely the three fertile river valleys of Comayagua, Chamelecon, and Ulua. If there were vestiges of the Maya culture it had to be here, on the banks of the life-giving rivers that would have served as transportation routes in otherwise almost impassable terrain.

From Tegucigalpa they drive in a northwestern direction and into the Comayagua valley system. It is pure luxury: when they spot an overgrown mound from the car they simply stop, and get out to inspect the ruins. The mounds on the first part of their sightseeing are quite small and unimpressive, and it is only when they reach Tenampua that they come across a larger ruin complex. Yde is impressed with the location: "The site is standing on an almost inaccessible hill top, most expeditions to Honduras missed the

group."<sup>286</sup> They count 400 mounds of varying sizes, and Frans is enthusiastic when he discovers a ball court. To Blom and Yde the ball court is evidence that Tenampua had somehow been influenced by the Maya, although the majority of the population here had probably not been ethnic Maya. The trip continued to the site known as Siguatepec close by the Selguapa River, where they managed to get hold of a number of interesting polychrome ceramic vessels. Frans's diary, however, suggests that he enjoyed the landscape and vegetation more than he was occupied by the small groups of ruins, the pottery, and the population of mixed blood which he disdained. He thus refers to the country as a paradise had it not been for the natives and the insects<sup>287</sup>, and goes on describing the former as the most miserable people anywhere in Middle America.<sup>288</sup>

From Siguatepec, the small expedition moved into the Yojoa area, named after Honduras's largest lake, Lago de Yojoa. To the north the lake is surrounded by volcanoes, and dense tropical forest spills out over the lake shores. Yet, not everything about Yojoa was sheer idyll: "Although located in one of the most picturesque regions of Honduras, it is a very uninviting place to stay; the 'hotel' justly carries its nickname, 'Gran Hotel Rat's Nest.'"<sup>289</sup>

From the base camp in the "Rat's Nest," the expedition made its most significant discoveries here on the northern shores of the lake.

A large group of ruins, named Los Naranjos by Doris Z. Stone a few years earlier, is hiding under the tall trees and dense undergrowth. There are high temple pyramids; there are stelae and altars showing signs of influence or inspiration from Copan. The overgrown mounds are marred by holes and trenches – telltale signs of the destructive activities of looters, and shattered pots and jars lie everywhere. Blom and Yde themselves undertake a small excavation, and they uncover no less than 15 fine, polychrome ceramic vessels. In addition, they purchase another 75 vessels and large sherds from a local collection created by the botanist and amateur archaeologist J. B. Edwards, and they "share" the booty, so that Blom gets most of it, while Jens Yde brings a total of 22 pieces, mostly the sherds, home to the National Museum. Frans was thrilled when Edwards showed them some examples of the area's rare and stunning orchids. A boat trip along the shores of the lake revealed several Precolumbian settlements, but shortly thereafter, on March 6, they continued their trip, first through the town of Atima and then onwards to La Lima and the Honduran headquarters of United Fruit.

From here Frans will be using an aircraft as means of transportation for the first time on an expedition, and on March 9, a small passenger plane takes off and heads for Copan, the famous Maya ruins near the border of Guatemala. Famous travelers and archaeologists like Stephens, Maudslay, and Morley had previously admired and studied the beautiful stelae and sculptures, some still adorning the 1200-year-old buildings, some scattered among the ruins. After arriving safely in Copan the now-airborne expedition was received by Gustav "Gus" Strømsvik, who was now in charge of the Carnegie Institution's excavations and restoration work in Copan. Strømsvik showed his Scandinavian friends around, and explained the task of piecing together the collapsed Hieroglyphic Stairway, a tall staircase with approximately 2200 glyphs on the risers of the many steps leading to the shrine on the top of Temple 26. The reconstruction of the stairs was an archaeological puzzle of staggering dimensions. A few days later they were joined by none other

than Alfred Kidder who came to visit, riding on a mule from Chiquimula in Guatemala. That evening the cigarettes glowed in the dark between the portraits of Copan's ancient rulers, and there was lively talk about the good old times at Harvard, about new discoveries, and about Morley, who had now given up his attempt to place the glyphs of the Hieroglyphic Stairway in the right order, and therefore let Strømsvik rebuild it in a rather random, and not necessarily correct, order.

On March 12 they continue, now on horseback and with their luggage loaded on mules, towards a village with the alluring name of Paraíso (Paradise). In the modest municipal building they inspect a small collection of beautifully carved stone sculptures executed in the style of the masters from neighboring Copan. Frans is able to track the inspiration from Copan during the following days as they move northward into the upper Chamelecon River Valley. Jens Yde remarks: "This region is very rich in archaeological remains, but has never been subject to careful archaeological exploration. The 1935 expedition succeeded in finding several 'new' sites, at least one of which seems to be very important."<sup>290</sup> The site which Yde refers to is the ruins near Finca El Puente, about 37 miles from Copan and close to the Chamelecon River. It is a fairly large site, and Blom and Yde find several well-preserved stone sculptures, some of them even with a couple of glyphs. Why is it that Frans never described these discoveries himself? There were fragments of beautiful stelae, there were ball courts – but they barely attracted Frans's attention. It was as if the flame in him had been extinguished. Thus we only have Yde's sober descriptions to stick to, and he quite rightly considers that El Puente must once have been an important city on the southernmost edge of the Maya area. From Frans we mainly get observations such as that here even the young women smoke big cigars.<sup>291</sup> Which, of course, is not uninteresting, but the expedition did after all have the expressed goal of locating ruins that Tulane and Frans's department could excavate in the future. From El Puente they continued northeast, towards the Ulua Valley, and by the end of March 1935 they were back in La Lima. The area around La Lima is itself rich in archaeological remains, the underpaid plantation workers almost stumble over the many potsherds in the rows between the banana plants, and Blom and Yde get the chance to have a closer look at the "pots and pans in everyday use in the ancient Maya household"<sup>292</sup> before the expedition ends and they part. Frans travels directly back to New Orleans, while Yde continues his journey through the Maya area to the beautiful highlands of Guatemala before he too heads for New Orleans, where he is to begin writing his report of the expedition.

It is probably not wrong to conclude that the trip was a big disappointment to Frans, but as Yde's report shows, this can hardly have been the result of a lack of discoveries and exciting finds. Perhaps the disappointment had more to do with Frans's painful realization that nothing was like it had been in those happy, heady 1920s when the adventure was alive and the future looked bright for an ambitious young man. The journey to Honduras was only a breather before Frans returned to financial problems, a heavy workload, piles of paperwork, and a marriage that was on the brink of collapse. Upon returning to New Orleans Frans resumed his plans for the new buildings for the department, although there were other, much more urgent tasks to take care of. It was at exactly this time that the first serious economic problems

hit Frans and his department – problems that were self-inflicted. Frans had overdrawn the account of the institution, and had in fact been doing so for some years – but President Albert Dinwiddie, who obviously liked Frans, had turned a blind eye to his overspending.

In 1935 Dinwiddie had to resign due to illness, and the new president, Rufus C. Harris, and the new board immediately spotted the irregularities in the Middle American Department, and criticism poured down on Frans. The new president found the conditions so alarming that for a time he threatened to withhold the wages for all staff members at the department. A series of letters to Maurice Ries, who was Frans's deputy when he was away, shows that Frans acknowledged his own limited abilities as an administrator. Unfortunately, he was to lead his department into an even deeper economic morass. Rather than taking the warning from the Tulane Board seriously and trying to rectify the damage, Frans embarked on new projects, including a brand-new archaeological field, namely *History in the Garbage Can*,<sup>293</sup> thereby anticipating U.S. "garbage archaeologist" William Rathje's work by more than 50 years. Rathje who, like Blom, also dug in the Maya area, made a name for himself in the 1970s with his archaeological investigations of garbage in Tucson, and is considered one of the founders of "garbology." Perhaps Frans was inspired by the excavations of the Danish prehistoric kitchen middens that had been shown to provide so much insight into the ancient ways of life. In a brief article Frans attempted to show how archaeology was history, just without text in the literal sense, but "text" in the form of objects. Frans illustrated this with an example from modern New Orleans, where a dump, like an ancient midden, would one day become as valuable as archives of written material.<sup>294</sup> However, it never came to any further studies in the history of garbage, and soon Frans was once more fighting his former superior, the choleric William Gates.

Earlier the same year Gates had published the so-called Gomesta manuscript.<sup>295</sup> According to Gates this was a genuine Maya manuscript from the time of the Spanish conquest, complete with glyphic writing and some later annotations in Spanish added by a friar in the second half of the sixteenth century. Gates had presented the manuscript as a new "Rosetta stone" since he found it comparable to the famous stone that had been decisive in Champollion's decipherment of the Egyptian hieroglyphs. But as Frans showed in a well-argued and sarcastic article in *Maya Research*,<sup>296</sup> it was a forgery, and a terrible one at that. Frans concluded his broadside against Gates as follows: "That anybody claiming to be acquainted with Maya documents, Maya hieroglyphs and Maya history at the time of the Conquest and the century thereafter, should fall for such a blatant and childish fabrication is incredible."<sup>297</sup> It was a total humiliation for the old man, and in desperation Gates considered a lawsuit against Frans for what he considered defamation and a personal attack.<sup>298</sup> Frans, however, took the threat lightly, and wrote to Morley: "I would like to see him do it. It would be one of the great comedies of our age [...] I fear that the final results [of a trial] will be pretty fatal to him."<sup>299</sup>

Frans's dismissal of the Gomesta manuscript was partly grounded in the fact that he had become a connoisseur of old documents and manuscripts, and by the mid-1930s the department's library had grown from Gates's 2500 volumes to no fewer than 50,000 titles; 3000 maps, including several old, rare

originals; and hundreds of valuable, unique documents, including letters from the conqueror of Mexico, Hernán Cortés, and a sixteenth century Mixtec codex. Frans had secured this document for the library collection in Mexico in 1932 for the relatively modest sum of \$2500. The manuscript, later known as *Codex Tulane*, was the jewel of the collection, a nearly thirteen-foot-long roll of deer hide recounting the history of the royal lineages of two Mixtec city-states.<sup>300</sup> However, even successes like the purchase of the *Codex Tulane* could not blow away the dark clouds that had assembled over the department on the top floor of the Science Building.

Later in the year, from the end of July and two months ahead, Frans once again fled the problems at Tulane. Traveling across the Atlantic to France, he, Mary, and their red sports car sailed to Le Havre in Normandy. The couple then drove through Europe and in late August 1935 they reached Copenhagen, where Frans told the reporter from a major Danish newspaper: "I came to France from America, drove here by car, and will be here a couple of weeks."<sup>301</sup> Frans is now an international celebrity, and he is invited to show his films at the old, impressive University building. In a notice in *Berlingske Tidende*, one could read: "Yesterday, the Ethnographic Department of the National Museum could issue invitations to a film-screening of an unusual interest. It was a film which Frans Blom – once a well-known citizen of Copenhagen – now head of ethnographic studies at Tulane University in New Orleans – has shot on expeditions in the jungles of Mexico and Central America."<sup>302</sup> The black-and-white footage from the expeditions in 1928 and 1935 was presented by Thomas Thomsen, and for the occasion Jens Yde's collection of ceramics from Honduras was exhibited in the National Museum. Frans acknowledged the kindness by giving the museum a number of plaster casts, including copies of the reliefs from the royal tomb in Comalcalco which he had excavated a decade earlier. There was of course also time to visit the family. When Frans and Mary drove towards France again, Mary chose to remain in Paris where her mother was staying and let her husband travel back to the big, empty apartment on St. Ann Street in New Orleans on his own.

The following year, 1936, Frans's book *The Conquest of Yucatan* was finally published after more than five years of delays and rewriting. *The Conquest of Yucatan* is not a bad book, but it was not really adequate considering the amount of new knowledge of the ancient Maya available at the time. Frans had clearly strived to make the material vivid and interesting, not least to the uninitiated reader, but the first 115 pages deal more with Spaniards than with the Maya. It is only with chapter 21 (out of a total of 32) that Frans, almost slavishly following the Franciscan friar Diego de Landa's account of the history of Yucatan, begins to describe the daily life of the Maya, their trades and crafts, the classes of their society, their religion and rituals, architecture, writing, and calendrical system. Into his paraphrasing of Landa, Frans does, however, weave in several of his own observations and discoveries. He describes the discovery of ancient Maya garments on the Geddings Gray expedition, his observations on the ball game, Uaxactun's E-Group, and Uxmal, but on the whole Frans's attempt at a history of the ancient Maya is surprisingly lacking in references to archaeological evidence. Apparently Frans felt that archaeologists often construed too many of their own ideas into the rather limited archaeological data, and this may explain why he

preferred, at least for the time being, to write cautiously on the basis of the written sources from the time of the conquest: "We try to picture the history of the most advanced people of ancient America, try to re-create its life from scattered sources, and it suffices for us to review their burial customs to realize that we are only at the beginning, that our knowledge is sporadic, scattered, and that unless much more effort and much larger funds are thrown into this subject, we advance only very slowly."<sup>303</sup>

In the larger context of the history of Maya research, the most interesting thing about *The Conquest of Yucatan* is perhaps that this is where Frans reveals his thoughts about the nature of Maya writing to a larger audience. It thus becomes clear that he was deeply convinced that the inscriptions contained historical information and that someday they would be deciphered. "We must," he wrote, "wait until the hieroglyphs have been fully deciphered before we can attempt to write a real history of the Maya."<sup>304</sup> He also notes about Landa's "alphabet," a selection of glyphic signs recorded by one of Landa's indigenous assistants: "Some have said that it was the key to the reading of Maya glyphs, others that it was simply a fabrication. I believe that when we begin to study the sixteenth and seventeenth century Maya dictionaries with care, and from that study learn about the Maya association of sounds and ideas, then we shall find his alphabet a help in our research."<sup>305</sup> This was exactly what happened two decades later when the Russian scholar Yuri Knorozov, an expert in languages and writing systems, first put forward his now confirmed hypothesis that Maya writing is based on the use of phonetic signs (syllabic and vocalic) as well as word signs (logograms) – and not only logograms, as so persistently claimed by Morley and especially Thompson.<sup>306</sup> The idea of phoneticism was far from new with Frans Blom. A thorough reading of his letters and diaries reveals that, as early as the mid-1920s, Frans was looking for historical content in the hieroglyphic inscriptions and was working on the assumption that Maya writing was based on phonetic signs. On this point Frans was not in agreement with Morley, his old mentor and friend, and in 1928 he expressed his thoughts in a letter to Kidder:

Personally I lean towards the idea that glyphs express sound. [...] I have a collection of material toward the solution of this problem, but as yet I am not satisfied with the results. I firmly believe that we have reached the point in our studies of Maya hieroglyphs where we must have a proper knowledge of Maya linguistics before we can carry on.<sup>307</sup>

We also know from his letters that he was working to demonstrate the phonetic value of five or six glyphs. Unfortunately, we have no evidence of which glyphs Blom was working on, and therefore have no way of knowing whether he was on the right track in his attempts at decipherment. One of Frans's methods of approaching the ancient script was to go through old colonial sources and documents about the Maya, and in his hunt for a key to read the glyphs he got assistance from the eminent ethnohistorian Ralph Roys. To Frans the continuity in Maya culture from the Classic period right through to the Spanish conquest was self-evident; and since, according to some Spanish sources, the Maya wrote using syllables and recounted historical events in their books, why should they not have done the same during the Classic period?

Back in 1933 Frans had presented his view on Maya writing in a lecture at

the New Orleans Library Club:

Most of this part of the Maya books [the calendrical notations] we understand today, but our Spanish informants further tell us that the Maya wrote in their books about their wars, their pestilences, famines and storms, as well as lists of tribute to be paid. As yet no such records have been read by our scientists, but I feel confident that we are standing on the threshold of a door which soon will open to our full knowledge of Maya writing. [...] I think that it ultimately will be shown that Maya glyphs represent sounds, and a single statement in *Relación de la ciudad de Mérida* gives an indication in this direction: "They had characters of which each letter was a syllable and they expressed themselves with these."<sup>308</sup>

As we have already seen, the reason for Frans's employment of Hermann Beyer was partly based on Beyer's ideas on Maya writing. Later the famous linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf, who shared Frans's hypothesis that the glyphs were phonetic, was allowed to publish his (not terribly convincing) arguments in *Maya Research*. Unlike Frans, Whorf published his hypothesis in a more concrete form, and he was immediately torn to pieces by the Thompson school. Frans himself chose never to publish a more precise account of his own research, possibly because he did not wish to appear to be in too much opposition to Morley and Thompson, the heavyweights of the field. He had – in spite of many years of thoughts on the subject – too few arguments and too few results.<sup>309</sup> And to involve himself in a more technical discussion about the structure and content of Maya writing with Morley and Thompson could lead to an academic suicide similar to Whorf's. In *The Conquest of Yucatan* Frans's view on Maya writing is therefore expressed only in very general terms.

Frans concluded his book with a passage wherein he ridicules and rejects the far-fetched diffusionist theories which claimed that all advanced Native American civilizations had flourished entirely due to the influence from cultures of the Old World. To support his argument, Frans refers to the hypothesis of the physical anthropologist Aleš Hrdlička that the ancestors of the Native Americans had originally come from Asia. This again shows Blom's eagerness to prove that great civilizations had arisen elsewhere than in Europe: "In the soil of the Americas lie chapters of ancient history as thrilling and as important as the chapters which have been excavated around the shores of the Mediterranean. Slowly our knowledge is growing and slowly we present-day Americans are beginning to realize that we shall enrich our own culture by studying the book of knowledge which lies hidden below our soil."<sup>310</sup> Frans had dedicated the book to Mary, and she obviously still meant a lot to him. Yet the two saw each other less and less, and their marriage was slowly drawing to a close.

During most of 1937 Frans was occupied organizing a large and very successful Maya exhibition called "The Maya: Past and Present," which toured the U.S. visiting Dallas, Chicago, Baltimore, Detroit, San Francisco, and several other cities. At the beginning of the year he also made a six-week round trip to Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. He was accompanied by Maurice Ries and photographer Dan Leyrer, and their goal was to collect material for a travel book commissioned by the International Railways of

Central America and the United Fruit Company. The central theme of the book was to be the ancient, but still living, traditions of the highland Maya, and the text was to be written by Blom, Ries, and Webster McBryde from the Geddings Gray Expedition. Dan Leyrer took more than 2000 photographs on the trip, the manuscript was written, the title – *In the Shadow of Volcanoes* – had been decided upon, but for unknown reasons the book was never published. We also know that Frans's father visited him and Mary in New York as well as in New Orleans. The "old Viking" was still fit to cross the ocean.

In the beginning of 1938 Frans made a short trip to northern Yucatan. The purpose was to study Chichen Itza's largest temple pyramid, "El Castillo," built around AD 900 and also known as the K'uk'ulkan temple. He was accompanied by Gerhardt Kramer, the architect employed at the Department of Middle American Research who had also participated in the Uxmal expedition in 1930, and together they carefully documented the ancient building through photographs, architectural drawings, and measurements. Frans had changed his plans concerning the new buildings for his department, and had decided that instead of recreating the Nunnery at Uxmal, he would use the far larger and more monumental Castillo as his model. He also wanted to extend his staff and establish a Maya research center which would finally make it possible to carry out his idea of a multidisciplinary study of ancient Maya civilization. These were great visions. Or, to put it in another way, unrealistic plans which did not take the Depression and the strained financial situation into consideration.<sup>311</sup>

Changes did in fact take place at the Department of Middle American Research, but these were not at all to Frans's liking. In April 1938 the department became an independent institute – and changed its name to the Middle American Research Institute (M.A.R.I.). This meant that more teaching would be required, and this was not exactly Frans's cup of tea. In addition to this, all his beloved books were removed and placed at the central library of Tulane University and were thus no longer within Frans's immediate reach as he preferred them to be. In reality, the institute's new name meant increasingly centralized control, and Frans who until now had wielded absolute authority suddenly saw his powers diminished. A poor start for his new dream project.

On May 10, 1938, Frans made the following brief and hasty note in his diary: "M. left abruptly."<sup>312</sup> This may not have been the first time that Mary had left him, but this time it was definitive. We do not know what was the final straw for her, but after six years of marriage it was over. According to Brunhouse there were rumors that they had both had extra-marital affairs.<sup>313</sup> The sculptor Enrique Alférez is said to once have smelled smoke in the apartment, and apparently he found Frans asleep on the rug with two or three prostitutes, surrounded by empty champagne bottles and a lit cigarette which was about to set the rug on fire. Alférez put out the cigarette with the last drops of the champagne and went back downstairs.<sup>314</sup> Be that it as it may, on May 10, 1938, Mary had definitively had enough of Frans and life in New Orleans.

Frans had imagined that they would go to Europe together during the summer of 1938 and had started to organize the trip for the two of them. But instead, in August, Mary went to Reno where, without too much difficulty, she obtained a divorce "on the grounds of cruelty."<sup>315</sup> Although this sounds terrible, it should not be taken literally. In order to obtain a divorce quickly,

there had to be grave reasons such as infidelity or cruelty, and of the options available Mary chose cruelty. There is nothing to suggest that Frans had ever been “cruel,” at least not physically – but in this way the divorce was secured. There is no doubt, however, that Frans could be quite unpleasant when inebriated, and even half a century later Mary would painfully recall some of the humiliating and hurtful remarks that he had made.<sup>316</sup> That the marriage had also taken its toll on Frans can be seen in a letter from his old friend William Spratling in December 1938: “I would presume that you are a happier man since the ‘desenlace’ [outcome], at least I fervently hope so.”<sup>317</sup>

In a letter to the owner of a large old townhouse which Frans and Mary had once intended to buy, Frans briefly stated what can be taken as the official version of the story of their break-up: “She wanted to live in New York in order to develop her voice and I had to stay with my job in New Orleans, so as our interests were divergent, we felt it best to part.”<sup>318</sup> But Mary stayed in contact with Frans’s sisters and father in Denmark, and their relationship was very close, especially between Mary and Frans’s father. Mr. Blom called her “my darling youngest daughter” or “darlingest of darlings,” and Mary, who had lost her own father as a little girl, called old Mr. Blom “Far” (“Dad”), just like Frans did. She also visited the family in Denmark after the war. At the time of the divorce Mary was only 25 years old and she still had her life before her. She re-married twice, but never had any children. She died in 1990.

Some time after the break-up Frans had started to get on with his life again, and he made the following remark about Mary to a mutual friend: “Darned bright and charming little lady who just had the misfortune to marry a rolling stone.”<sup>319</sup> On the other hand, in 1947 Frans wrote to his father commenting that Dora Blom’s motherly advice to Mary before the wedding, that she should take good care of Frans, try to rub off the rough edges, and make him neat and well-groomed, had not exactly helped their marriage: “She is a lovable little person, but there was too much ‘mother-in-law’ about her.”<sup>320</sup> Although Frans had appreciated the expensive lifestyle and Mary’s wealth, he did not care for the bourgeois tidiness and prudery which reminded him of the stifling atmosphere that he had wanted to escape as a young man in Copenhagen.

With his recent marital collapse behind him, Frans went to Denmark in the summer of 1938. On board the Polish transatlantic liner *Piłsudski* he left New York on July 15 and arrived in Copenhagen harbor eight days later, in the morning of July 23. It was an absurd situation. His marriage with Mary had just collapsed, at M.A.R.I. there were lots of problems, and here was Frans in Copenhagen as the first non-American leader of the U.S. delegation to the World Congress of Anthropology and Ethnography. He carried President Roosevelt’s warm letter of support in his pocket and soon he was to speak in front of the Danish monarch King Christian X who would attend the opening of the congress.

It was Thomas Thomsen who through his position as president of the congress (Jens Yde acting as secretary) had offered his old friend the honor of leading the American anthropologists. Frans was deeply honored and accepted with pleasure, but only after he had been in contact with the U.S. administration in Washington to inform them that he was not actually an American citizen. The matter ended on President Roosevelt’s desk, and as he was well aware of Frans Blom’s expeditions, he quickly decided that he



International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, Copenhagen, 1938. King Christian X and Frans Blom are among the attendants.

saw no problem with a Dane heading the American scientists. Among the many distinguished lecturers in the main hall of Copenhagen University and in the elegant ceremonial hall of the National Museum were renowned American scholars like Franz Boas and Aleš Hrdlička as well as the British anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski.<sup>321</sup> The oldest guest was the Peking Man whose 500,000-year-old skull was displayed and discussed by the physical anthropologists.

Sylvanus Morley was there too, giving a talk about the connection between chewing gum and Maya ruins. A major Danish newspaper reported: “a reward is offered to the chicle hunters who on their hunt through the forests, where they tap the raw material of chewing gum, have the luck to come across remains of the ancient Maya culture and report it back home.” And the paper continued: “He vividly described his travels through the forests, and he made it quite clear that he hates them. He has absolutely no sense of direction, the jungle is teeming with bugs, and the drinking water is the color of tea.”<sup>322</sup> Morley also showed “a series of colored slides that was met with a storm of applause.”<sup>323</sup> In this respect Morley was a distinct contrast to Frans. Morley loved to have people around him, he loved to talk in front of an audience – and he hated the uncomfortable field trips.

Frans himself gave a short talk on his plans for the new university

building which would be modeled after the famed “El Castillo” at Chichen Itza. The building was planned to rise 345 feet and it would have eight floors. Of course, it was only the outside of the structure that would resemble the old Maya temple – the inside was to be like a modern warehouse: “It is constructed with movable walls, so that the rooms can be enlarged when necessary. The windows are in the ceiling of each terrace.”<sup>324</sup> An avenue lined with palm trees would lead to the entrance of this unusual and monumental building which according to Frans’s plans was to be completed in 1940 at a cost of \$750,000 (although an amount of up to two million dollars was mentioned at other times). During the week-long congress there was a day off with an excursion to Kronborg, Hamlet’s castle at Elsinore, where Professor Niels Bohr, the famous Nobel Prize laureate in physics, gave a lecture and “native Greenlanders” performed a kayak show in the castle moat in honor of the duly impressed anthropologists.<sup>325</sup>

After Frans had taken the time to have a good talk with his sisters and father about the break-up with Mary, and after visiting his mother’s grave once more, he left for New York on August 23, this time aboard Batory, the other great Polish liner. This was the last time he was to see his native country, his father, and most of his other family.

Back in New Orleans Frans told the press about war-threatened Europe: “There are many, surprisingly many, who feel that Hitler’s Germany is cracking [...]. They tell you that Hitler will bring on war for his own purposes, as dictators often must to remain dictators.”<sup>326</sup> Frans was clearly worried, but his own conservative upbringing showed when in a newspaper interview he referred to the day and age as the “Period of the Unfit.” Frans was quoted to have said: “We let the healthy and strong starve, and treat the physically unfit and those of diseased minds to luxury in sanitariums and penitentiaries. If we persist long enough our future will be comfortably unfit and our tribe will perish.”<sup>327</sup> The ideas of eugenics, which were not uncommon at the time, are inherent to his remarks. Frans, who had (nearly) managed to cope on his own in spite of problems and hardships, did not show much sympathy for people who did not have the same ability to be the masters of their own destinies.

It is important to mention, however, that Frans was never the least bit attracted to the far more extreme ideology of Nazism. When Nazi Germany occupied Denmark in the spring of 1940 he was deeply shocked, and two years later he wrote: “I am rather rabid on the subject of being anti-German.”<sup>328</sup> The prophecy about Adolf Hitler’s war plans did turn out to be true, and the imminent world war was to profoundly affect Frans’s plans for a new M.A.R.I. building. But so far, Frans still had high hopes, and the idea of the new Castillo was developing into a true obsession. Frans’s next step was to throw himself into a nearly two-year-long, hopeless and devastating fundraising campaign.

In the beginning of January 1939 a letter reached the desk of Rufus C. Harris, president of Tulane University. The content was, to put it mildly, surprising: “Since I shall be away from New Orleans for the greater part of the next two years, during the Institute’s endowment campaign, I am putting Mr. Maurice Ries in charge during my absence.”<sup>329</sup> So stunningly brief was the way Frans chose to inform the university’s president that he would be unable to attend to his managerial duties for two years. This ill-judged way for an institute director under pressure to handle things worsened the already

strained relationship between Blom and Harris. But Frans was not concerned with nurturing good relations with his superiors, he could only think of the campaign ahead.

In New York he had hired the advertising company Tamblin & Tamblin to organize the entire campaign. The plan was to launch massive public relations drives in the northern and eastern U.S. to ensure that a sufficient amount of donations would trickle in to pay for Tulane’s Castillo. And massive it was. From state to state Frans traveled, from hotel room to hotel room, from one lecture hall to the next. Sometimes there are several lectures per day; several thousand people watch moving pictures and listen to Frans talking about the ancient Maya. The lecture tour is only interrupted once by a short trip to the Maya area accompanied by Ries and Dan Leyrer in order to shoot a new film, *Middle America*, this time in color, to replace the outdated *Men, Mules and Machetes*. While Frans rushes from one luxury hotel room to the next, Ries does his best to run M.A.R.I. It is often impossible to get hold of Frans, and this causes a number of misunderstandings between them. Frans suspects that Ries is out to get his job, and a vicious tone appears in his letters. In the meantime, the many lectures start taking their toll on Frans, and more and more often he resorts to the bottle.

Nearly every day Frans is confronted with a large audience, a situation which he would rather have been without. It is quite a paradox that Frans, who would once flee deeper into the jungle whenever the oil-drilling people disturbed him in his solitude, now has to play the role of the entertainer. That he did not enjoy life as a traveling celebrity is clearly seen in one of his small literary sketches from around 1941. It provides a deeply sarcastic picture of the snobbish upper-class audience Frans had to entertain time and again and whose dumb questions he had to answer over and over: “Gradually the hall fills with people and noise. These men and women have not seen each other since the same afternoon, and there is so much *news* to exchange. They form groups, smile, nod and make caustic remarks about some friend at the other end of the hall. Eventually they find seats, but the verbal diarrhea continues running.” After the lecture and the film, people want to give him small gifts, they ask for his autograph and “ask questions and do not wait for the answers, clammy hands are extended, and conventional phrases are turned out automatically. [...] Twenty minutes later the ‘Professor’ was packing his suitcase. At midnight he caught the train to go to another ‘city,’ to give another ‘lecture,’ to acquire more ‘celebrity.’”<sup>330</sup>

It is interesting to note that it is exactly in these troubled years that Frans begins to write a number of sketches for short stories, often inspired by events from his early years in Mexico, some of which we have referred to earlier. Perhaps his growing dissatisfaction with academia spurred him to revive his former attempts at expressing himself in an artistic and more literary style. Nevertheless, the attempts remain today only as sketches, and in Frans’s busy schedule there was probably not sufficient time for polishing and finishing the texts. And things are only getting worse as the tour continues.

His escalating drinking did not escape people’s attention. He is reported to have turned up half-drunk, unshaven, in shabby and disheveled clothes. In Chicago it is a disaster; a lecture has to be cancelled as Frans is unable to keep his balance at the lectern.<sup>331</sup> And thus Frans continues his staggering course to the bitter end, for people want to see moving pictures, hear about

the professor's adventures, and forget their own lives for a little while. On the other hand, this is not a good time for risky investments, and when the Second World War breaks out in 1939 it is the deathblow not only to the campaign but also to Frans's last bit of optimism. The great dream of the El Castillo temple crumbles as the swastika commences its march across Europe.

As we have seen, Frans had for some years sought consolation and self-confidence in the bottle. Perhaps his intake of cocktails and champagne was one of the reasons why his family had sent him off to Mexico in 1919, but after the exciting years in the great forests it was probably not until his meeting and associating with the intellectuals, artists, and bohemians in New Orleans's French Quarter that Frans began drinking regularly again. It is difficult to say whether alcohol was part of his problems with Mary or whether it was rather the breakdown of his marriage which led to his increased drinking, but in any case Frans's drinking had now become so heavy and so frequent that he could no longer hide his alcoholism. According to Maurice Ries: "It was obvious to all of us that Blom's days were numbered [...]. He was no longer coming to his office regularly. [...] And he, when he came in, he usually looked like he had been through a wringer, you know, a bad night before and that sort of thing and it was a terrible thing to witness [...]. He simply lost control of himself for good reasons and bad reasons [...]"<sup>332</sup>

The popular, semi-official narrative about Frans's downfall is that he so badly missed the expeditions and the jungle, and that it was this longing which finally drove Frans the nature lover to alcoholism. The explanation, however, is hardly as simple as that. As already suggested, it was probably rather the failure of his marriage, the financial problems at M.A.R.I., his shattered dreams of a new spectacular building for the institute and an increasingly harder work program which all together brought about Frans's surrender to the infamous devil in the bottle.

Whenever Ries and the staff at M.A.R.I. did not have a clue as to Frans's whereabouts or his condition and they had to answer letters on his behalf, the official explanation was always that he was ill. Frans's employees, and most of all Ries, tried to warn him against the dangerous course he had embarked upon – but he stubbornly refused to admit that anything was amiss and swept aside each and every piece of well-meant advice. A photograph of Frans from this time shows us his deteriorated physical appearance; it is as though we're looking at a different person. Gone is the spark in his eye and his straight posture. He has also put on weight. This is a face that clearly tells a story of drinking and deep despair. Everything had indeed turned into chaos. He had very little money and had accumulated large debts, now that he could no longer count on Mary's inexhaustible wealth. He told his friends that he lacked money to pay his bills, his taxes, and insurance, but it was probably also his increasing consumption of alcohol, preferably gin or tequila, which made him begin selling off things from his apartment. He not only sold his own belongings but also Mary's, among them her large collection of expensive Royal Copenhagen Flora Danica china. As early as January 1939 Frans offered a part of the fine china to Matilda Gray for the modest sum of 500 dollars. This, however, did not improve his financial situation much, and at a time when he was still officially director of the institute at Tulane, gas and electricity were cut off at 511 St. Ann Street. The bills had not been paid for a long time.

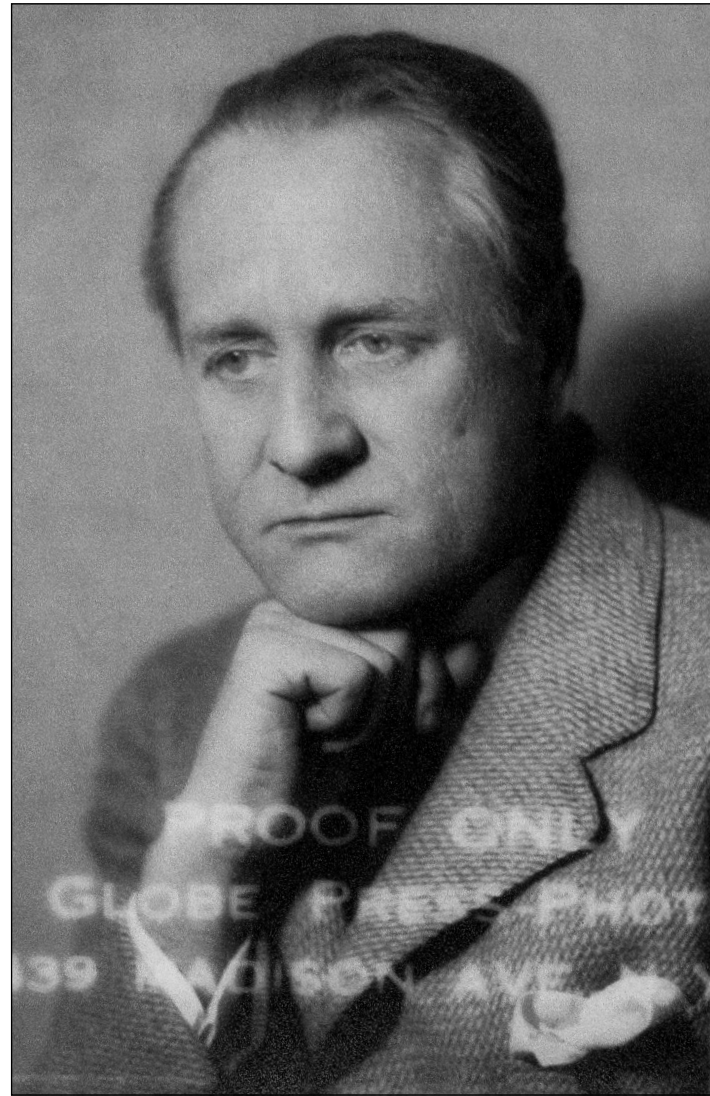
Shortly after the divorce, Frans had given up the third floor, which was now rented by a family with two children. The wife, Mrs. Della Andreassen, recalls the difficult time Blom was going through: "Frans's creditors were hounding him. In order to enter from the street, one rang a bell and the resident would buzz back. At the sound of the buzz the street door could be opened – nothing unusual about that, except that Frans had sawed an opening in the floor of the balcony above the door so that he could see who was at the door."<sup>333</sup> Then the rugs in the hallway were torn off and sold, even the brass knobs adorning doors and banisters were removed in order to bring in a little extra cash. Worst of all, in the end Frans began to sell his beloved books which he had so carefully collected and studied throughout the years. To Frans, it must have been like selling his soul.

At the university, dissatisfaction with Frans continued to grow steadily due to his long absence, his behavior during the publicity campaign, and the entire way he ran M.A.R.I. Even his casual way of dressing was now perceived by Harris as a serious problem. Frans had the habit of wearing a bright red Indian scarf with his expensive suit. In Harris's eyes, Frans had always been too conspicuous, too different, and simply too maladjusted to the university milieu, and now the limit had been reached. The historian John P. Dyer sums up the situation at M.A.R.I. at the end of the 1930s in the following unambiguous way: "[T]he department had not really found itself nor discovered how it might work most effectively. Its efforts were rather scattered and were lacking in scholarship, unity, and cohesion. There is also the fact that the department had not yet been integrated into the university. Its purposes and programs were only vaguely, if at all, known to the faculties. Poor communication often led many important faculty members to conclude that the goings on upon the fourth floor of the science building smacked of the esoteric or the crackbrained."<sup>334</sup>

At the beginning of 1940, after the campaign had definitively failed, problems at M.A.R.I. blazed up. One day Frans comes rushing up the many stairs and accuses Ries and Kramer of conspiring against him. Frans is convinced that the two are planning to throw him out and replace him with Doris Zemurray Stone. In a fit of rage and paranoia worthy of his predecessor William Gates, Frans continues to her house where he delivers the whole series of accusations once more. She tells him in no uncertain terms that *as yet* nobody is planning to sack him, but "that she was ready to take over tomorrow, to protect her family's monetary investment in M.A.R.I., and her own interest in it."<sup>335</sup> According to Ries: "She also told Frans that he was a fool, and probably had not much chance of recovering himself. [...] Blom cried. He asked whether he should resign. Doris told him no – that he should *try* to pull himself together, whether he *could* or not. But that she would *not* permit him to wreck the Institute; that she would stop at *nothing* to prevent *that*. That she was ready to step in and run the Institute until she was ready to pick Blom's successor – something her father had promised she could do."<sup>336</sup> There was thus no doubt about Samuel Zemurray's great influence over M.A.R.I. Humiliated and degraded, with Doris's harsh and all too true words resounding in his ears, Frans had to acknowledge the fact that his days as director of the institute were numbered.

At the same time Frans found himself cut off from academic circles in a way that hit him extremely hard. That year a large festschrift came out in the





Blom, c. 1940.

honor of Alfred M. Tozzer, the old master at Harvard and the most important Maya scholar of his time.<sup>337</sup> The volume contained contributions from all the heavyweights within Maya research, among them Ricketson, Kidder, Thompson, Morley, Spinden, La Farge and Doris Z. Stone – but nothing from Frans. His contribution had been rejected by the editors. The subject, the role of women in Precolumbian Maya society, was interesting enough, and Tozzer quite liked the article when Frans later sent him a copy. But Frans's attempt at turning the attention to Maya women, a topic nobody else seemed to want to touch, was a failure. And truth be told, the article is a messy, badly written text which is really little more than a heap of quotations jumbled together. This was way below Frans's usual standard. Even so, the rejection was an enormous disappointment to Frans who found himself shut out in the cold.

Furthermore, his connection to the Danish National Museum, where Thomas Thomsen had retired that same year, also seemed to be cut off – in the same way as so many of Frans's other connections to the academic world. Frans later did some more work on the manuscript about Maya women, and it was published posthumously in 1983.<sup>338</sup> By the irony of fate, it so happened that the article which had been intended to honor his mentor ended up in a commemorative publication in honor of himself.

During 1940 Frans's drinking and indifference towards M.A.R.I. reached new heights and finally, after they had let him have a long leash for a long time, the board at Tulane intervened. On November 14, 1940, the letter which Frans must long have suspected was on its way finally arrived: Blom had been suspended as director of the institute and Ries and the librarian Arthur Gropp were to take over until further notice. Frans was allowed to keep a position as a member of the archaeological staff, and it was still hoped "that when this period is over Mr. Blom may be able to undertake his duties as Director once more and carry them on as he used to do."<sup>339</sup> But the problems had only just begun. A short time after Ries and Gropp had taken over the management at M.A.R.I. they discovered that the institute had accumulated a debt amounting to the astronomical sum of \$50,000 and, even worse, that the university administration had never been informed of this debt. It seems that Frans had been even worse at controlling the finances than his predecessor Gates. Tulane's president Harris had to ask for help from Samuel Zemurray, who responded by donating the large amount to the bankrupt institute. Ries and Gropp also initiated a major clean-up in the library and in the collections of artifacts, partly in order to find out what might perhaps belong to Frans Blom personally, and once again they encountered a mess which was embarrassingly similar to that which Blom had taken over from Gates. Although Frans was in disgrace with the university administration, attempts were made to help him. They did what they could to persuade him to undergo treatment, and at Harris's urgent suggestion, Frans left five days before Christmas for several months of recreation at Matilda Gray's home in Lake Charles in western Louisiana, where Ms. Gray's personal doctor could keep him under surveillance.

In the spring of 1941, Frans was back in New Orleans – still an alcoholic and still in desperate need of money. He therefore began to make claims on the archaeological artifacts in M.A.R.I.'s collections which he maintained belonged to him. This led to an investigation which later that same year ended in a minor scandal. It was clear that Frans had a hard time adjusting to his new position at M.A.R.I.; it is also plausible that in his muddled state he had forgotten that he was no longer its director. When a journalist from *LIFE Magazine* visited the institute in April, Frans behaved in his usual grandiose style describing in great detail the building plans for El Castillo at Tulane – plans which by then had already been shelved for a couple of years. He gave the journalist a copy of the brochure describing the construction plans. A couple of days later Ries, deeply embarrassed, had to write a letter to the journalist explaining that, firstly, Frans was no longer director and, secondly, that the building plans had been abandoned long ago.<sup>340</sup>

Webster McBryde, the young man who had been a member of the Geddings Gray expedition in 1928 and whom Frans then considered little more than a clumsy fool, now tried to pull his old master out of the

quagmire. In May and June 1941, McBryde invited Frans to Mexico, first to the capital and from there on to Oaxaca and San Cristóbal de las Casas. This trip to beautiful Mexico helped Frans for a while, but the drinking continued behind McBryde's back and the zest for life Frans had experienced for a few weeks vanished abruptly on his return to New Orleans. Here he resumed demanding payment for those of his belongings that were still on the shelves at M.A.R.I. In mid-November, Ries wrote a long memorandum to President Harris in which he explained Blom's demands that the objects he claimed belonged to him be either returned to him or paid for. It also appears from the letter that Frans no longer shows up at the institute even though he still receives a salary, and that he has already sold off some ceramic vessels from Honduras which most likely did not belong to him. Likewise, Ries points out that several of the objects on Blom's list actually belong to his ex-wife Mary and to Doris Z. Stone – and finally that Blom's assessment of the value of the objects is much too high.

This is how bad things turned out in the end: the former director of the institute, the very man who was instrumental in making Tulane the center of Maya research, is now trying to profit from M.A.R.I., partly by altering the index cards and the information relating to ownership. Ries also remarks that Frans plans "to break up his apartment here and move to Guatemala permanently. It would be much more pleasant for me, personally, if he did this."<sup>341</sup> In the letter it is also implied that in his present state Frans could seriously damage the reputation of M.A.R.I. and Tulane if he continues to be affiliated with the institute. In other words, Frans has become a liability and Ries is obviously recommending that Frans be dismissed.

Shortly thereafter, President Harris summons Blom. It is made clear that there is no way of remedying the situation, and on November 30, 1941, Frans writes his own resignation. Harris accepts it the following day. Officially Frans has been asked to resign on account of illness, and shortly after, Blom's doctor declares that his case of alcoholism is completely hopeless.

Many years later when Frans recounted his life to the Danish travel writers who came to visit him in Chiapas, he reconstructed the events. To one writer Frans stated that he "suddenly longed back to the Indians, so I resigned and took to the jungle."<sup>342</sup> Another writer envisioned that, "The jungle got back her lover. [...] The jungle allured him with such tremendous force that he gave up his scientific positions at the American universities and returned to southern Mexico."<sup>343</sup> In this way Frans managed to effectively conceal what actually happened during the dark years at the beginning of the 1940s.

Just a few days after Frans's dismissal from Tulane, a dramatic event far away in the Pacific Ocean was to affect his already chequered career. On December 7, 1941, the Japanese carried out a surprise attack on the U.S. naval base Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, and the next day, the U.S. entered actively into the Second World War. Frans was more than keen to participate in the fight against Nazism and Fascism – at the same time hoping perhaps to get himself a job – and on December 19, he applied for the U.S. citizenship required if he was to join the American war effort. On the very same day, he offered his services as an interpreter to the local FBI office in New Orleans.

Several of Frans's colleagues at M.A.R.I. were also affected by the United States's involvement in the war. The German Hermann Beyer, who was an outspoken Nazi sympathizer and whom Frans had vehemently forbidden to

"heil" or wear the swastika when at the institute, was arrested and placed in an internment camp in Stringtown, Oklahoma, where he died a year later.<sup>344</sup> The matter of Frans's citizenship dragged on, and in September 1942, nine months later, he wrote a bitter letter to his friend Phil Roosevelt about his fruitless efforts to enter the U.S. army.<sup>345</sup> Frans, who at the time was 49 years old, was hoping to join the U.S. intelligence service in Central America. Many other American archaeologists did this, among them Morley who was investigating harbor conditions along the Caribbean coast.

In the meantime, M.A.R.I. was still busy trying to conclude its business with Frans who even now – several months after his dismissal – had not bothered to clear out his office. In March 1942 the matter about what was owed to him was finally settled. Originally Frans had demanded \$1825, but he had overestimated the value and made numerous other errors, and Ries only offered him \$750, "for which he [Frans] would abandon any and all claims against the University, or any part of it, henceforth."<sup>346</sup> Frans, who was desperately in need of money, immediately accepted, and the amount was paid out of the fund which M.A.R.I.'s old patron Zemurray sarcastically referred to as the "Special Fund to Pay Debts Contracted by Mr. Blom."<sup>347</sup>

It was also in March that Robert Wauchope, one of Frans's acquaintances from Harvard and the Uaxactun project, came for a job interview at Tulane. Shortly afterwards, the steady and reliable Wauchope was appointed as Frans's successor, and under his management M.A.R.I. once again became one of the undisputed leading centers of Maya research. Frans's ties to the Middle American Research Institute were now definitively cut. From now on his only contact was his former secretary, the unswervingly loyal Dolores Morgadanes. Frans developed a strong hatred of Ries whom he considered a traitor, and he had very little sympathy for either Doris Z. Stone, Rufus C. Harris, or – strangely enough, as she had helped him so many times in the past – Matilda Gray.

While Frans was still waiting for his citizenship, he received a visit from two colleagues, both great Maya scholars, J. Eric S. Thompson and Ralph Roys. When the two men entered his apartment they were met by a miserable sight: "He had lost his furniture and the library which he'd valued much. His once welcoming apartment in Jackson Square, scene of so many grand gatherings in the past, now only held a mattress on the floor. This visit brought us great sadness. Frans was finished and it didn't seem that he would ever recover."<sup>348</sup> It must have been difficult for Thompson and Roys to face this awful decline. The once so charming and energetic Blom had now been reduced to a bitter and unpleasant drunk. Frans had earlier toned down his temper and his sharp tongue, but now – unleashed by quantities of rum, gin, and tequila – his dark side was coming out. Frans did not want anyone's help, and like an animal in its gloomy cave, he bit the hands of those who tried. Thompson and Roys eventually gave up as did nearly all his other friends.

A large part of Frans's library had been confiscated and sold by the creditors – without his knowledge, Frans claimed: "The business of my books being sold is a very bitter thing for me, which still breaks my heart [...] and I do not think that you will blame me if I do not intend to set my feet in [the] U.S. any more in my life," he wrote seven years later from Mexico to Alfred Kidder, the only one of his previous colleagues from Carnegie and Harvard with whom he had stayed in touch.<sup>349</sup> But perhaps this was only part of the

truth. We know that Frans was interested in having Carnegie's publications sent free of charge to his new library, and it was unthinkable to admit that it was he himself who had sold his old library to finance his abuse of alcohol. As for his reluctance to return to the U.S., this may well have had to do with the unpaid debts that awaited him there.

As mentioned earlier, Frans now had new upstairs neighbors, John and Della Andreassen and their two children, and they seem to have gotten on rather well – most of the time. When Frans was drunk he sometimes became extremely vicious towards the family upstairs. In his messy, drunken handwriting, he wrote small letters of complaint which he threw at their door, complaining about the noise the children made or the mess they made in the courtyard. When Frans wanted to sell the carpet in the hallway, this was very much against Mr. Andreassen's wish. Shortly after, the Andreassens received a small piece of carpet and a scrap of paper with the words: "As a sign of friendship towards Mr. & Mrs. Andreassen I herewith make them a present of a short strip of carpet."<sup>350</sup> Frans had already sold the carpet but could not resist taunting the Andreassens further. As soon as he became sober, however, he was always overcome with deep shame about what he had done, and he wrote several apologetic letters to the family, who during this period were practically the only people he saw. Mary later described, from what she had heard, Frans's life at this time: "There were periods where for weeks at a time he never went out of the apartment and he was drunk constantly. At other times he sat on a bench in the park or wandered around the French Quarter looking like a derelict, and, sad to relate, was considered by the visitors to this historic section as a picturesque bum."<sup>351</sup>

In September 1942 Frans had had to leave his once so elegant apartment altogether. The second floor was taken over by a Uruguayan consul, and Frans had now been relegated to the old Bumbay, the former slave lodgings in a dark corner of the narrow small courtyard. Della Andreassen remembers him: "His soiled shirt was opened to his waist, his wrinkled pants were held up by a rope, and the usual boots [...] were now worn and shabby."<sup>352</sup> A more humiliating situation is difficult to imagine. In just four years everything had once again turned upside down for Frans. He had been married to a beautiful heiress, he had had a wonderful job, had lived in very attractive and spacious quarters in the most sought-after building in New Orleans; he had had a Steinway grand piano, expensive Danish Flora Danica china and Georg Jensen silverware, and a sports car. He had been a member of high society, and now he had absolutely nothing except solid debts. Rumor even had it that he was a drug addict. This was vehemently refuted by Frans, and in a furious letter to one of the rumor-mongers he threatened to take legal action and wrote indignantly on his borrowed typewriter: "You can not accuse me of being a narcotic addict without producing proof. I have made arrangements to undergo a medical survey and intend to get a doctor's sworn statement to the effect that I am NOT a narcotic addict."<sup>353</sup>

Drug addict or not, Frans had reached the bottom. He had to start begging, and it did not seem that he would ever manage to get out of the gutter and free himself from the slavery of alcohol. His days were now merely a question of surviving and having enough money for the next bottle. And yet, in a strange and amazing way, it is as if Frans's energy and interest in the Maya is still alive, although burning with a very low and flickering flame.

From his correspondence with Kidder we know that he was still living at 511 St. Ann Street until the summer of 1943 and that in spite of his drinking and his vagabond appearance he was still working on various projects, among them an English translation of the *Popol Vuh*, the K'iche' Maya collection of myths and history. Perhaps it is his love for the Maya, for Mexico and the great forests, and his dream of returning which keep him going. And Frans *has* decided to return, for it must be around this time that he begins his search for people in need of a man who knows the jungles and the mountains of Chiapas. It seems that after all, Frans has no intention of drinking himself to death in New Orleans.

On June 10, 1943, Frans Blom finally receives his U.S. citizenship, but his affection for his new country has cooled and he does not make another attempt to join the army. Instead he works energetically on leaving the States. New winds are blowing in Bumbay, and one day in the hot summer of 1943 Frans packs his few remaining possessions and puts a note on his door. This is his last greeting to his creditors, to the Andreassens, to New Orleans and to his new homeland which he was never to see again. No more than four words of farewell: "Have gone to Mexico."



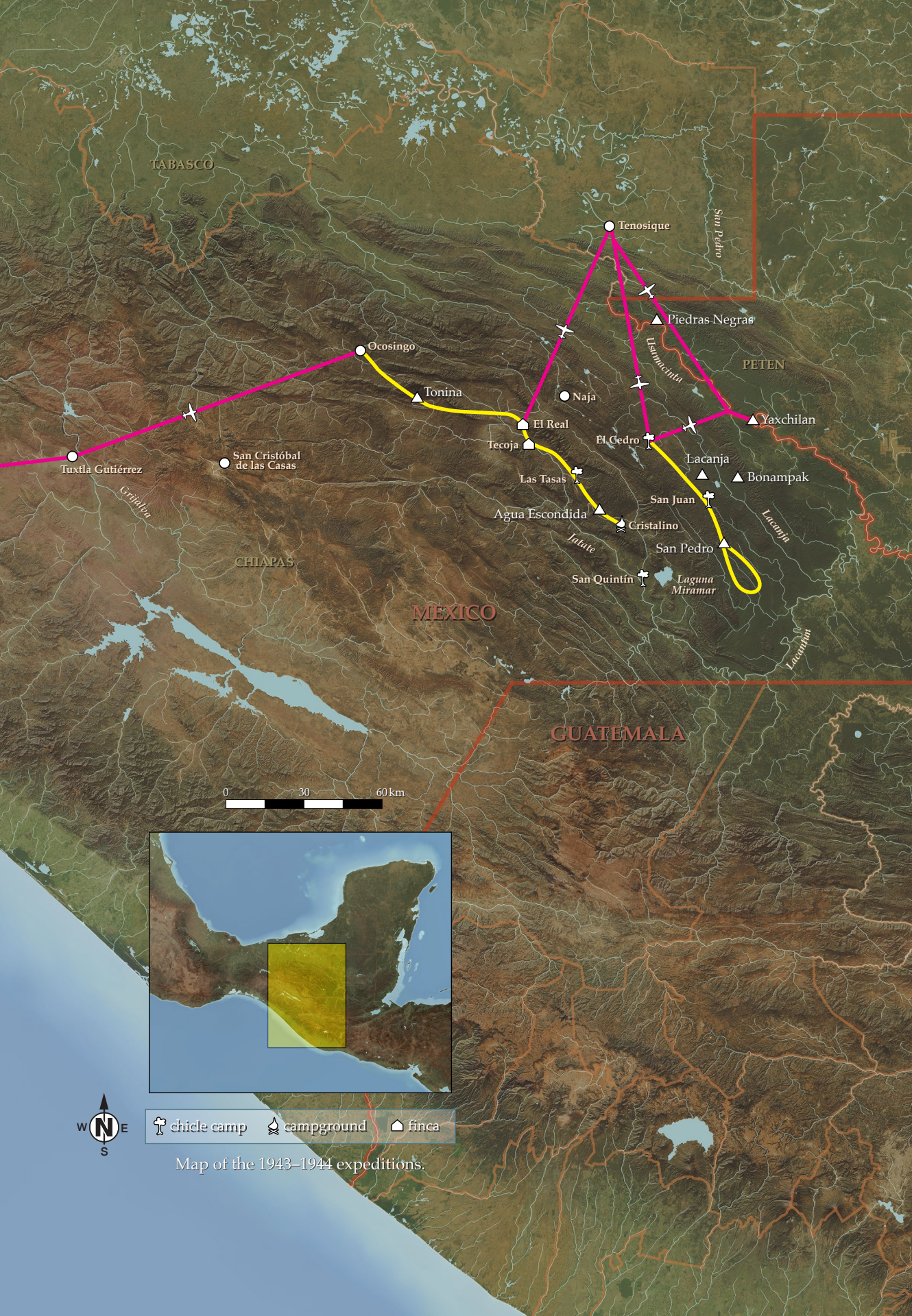
## Chapter 7 Return to the Great Forests (1943–1944)

*"There is a good reason why those of us who once have visited Chiapas must always return. It is the beauty of the country."*  
(Frans Blom, 1943).<sup>354</sup>

It is a transformed Frans Blom who appears from the shadows of Tulane University in the summer of 1943 and takes his first big step in a new and independent life. His spontaneous departure from New Orleans was apparently spurred by a sudden opportunity to go on an expedition in southern Mexico once again, this time sponsored by the U.S. government: "The second world war was going out, rubber was scarce and I was sent into the great forest to look for patches of wild rubber."<sup>355</sup>

It did not take long after he left New Orleans, before the expedition was organized and funded. On September 24 Frans, wearing a leather hat, Indian shirt, and khaki trousers, ventures towards new horizons as the only passenger in a twin-engine propeller plane on the way south to map new, uncharted regions of the great forests of southern Mexico, which he first became acquainted with more than two decades ago.

Now he's back to square one: a one-way ticket to Mexico, with virtually no



Map of the 1943–1944 expeditions.

money in his pocket but loaded with new energy, in search of a new identity. Meanwhile, Frans has come to know Mexico intimately. Here he is known as Pancho, the Mexican nickname for Francisco. The great forests have become *his* forests – and in towns he is received by influential people as an honorable man, Don Pancho!

During the expedition to the Zendales Jungle of Chiapas, from September 24, 1943, to mid-January the following year, Frans writes the most enchantingly detailed diary. It is written in his clear, beautiful handwriting, at mahogany desks and in hammocks, along the way through the jungle with all senses open, and in his, for a Dane, very upscale and varied English – albeit interspersed with numerous misspellings, which we have taken the liberty to correct for legibility's sake.

Although the official purpose of the expedition is to examine the forest's supplies of wild rubber, Frans brings his own hidden agenda to the trip. He has decided to write a book on the Zendales, the great forests that he knows so well. The working title is *Monteador*, and in the introduction he explains why: "Monteador is the Spanish word for a man who goes into the jungle to look for something. One can 'montear' for mahogany or cedar, for forest cacao or vanilla, for chicle or rubber and even for Maya ruined cities."<sup>356</sup> Ultimately the manuscript is only published in fragments over the years, reformulated and turned into small articles, but the project clearly affects the diary entries: When investigating the unknown, all observations are of interest.

The rubber trees of course are all registered, but so are the other major commercial species of wood in the forest, their distribution and use: chicle, cedar, mahogany. One small ruin after another is mapped, outlined, named – a clay figure drawn, or an unknown orchid, if he happens to find one. Day trips, distances, hours. Hunting and food – coffee, beans, and tortillas, always coffee, beans, and tortillas, but sometimes also turkey, wild boar, and deer in various dishes. The sun, moon, and stars, clear sky, wind, and rain – and the ominous Norte, the northern wind from the Gulf that unhindered hits the north side of the massif and pulls the cold rain with it. And finally, last but not least, life in the forest. Life on the fincas, the large self-sufficient farms on the edge of the forest, which are usually owned by Europeans and where a multitude of Indians from the surrounding villages are employed as laborers. Life at the chicle stations in the forest, from where the chicle exploiters venture out every day to tap the sap of the chicozapote tree for chewing gum. And not least the lives of the Lacandon Maya in the impenetrable interior of the jungle.

After a few low passes over the ruins of Monte Albán by Oaxaca City in honor of the famous passenger the propeller plane dashes southeast towards Chiapas and drops him off in the state capital, Tuxtla Gutiérrez. This is Frans's home field. He drops off his bag at his regular hotel, Hotel Brindis, and then he is off to arrange the necessary permits and stamps for the expedition with the governor of Chiapas, Dr. Rafael Pascacio Gamboa, in person. The fact that Frans feels entitled to consider his application for the expedition permit a personal matter for the governor indicates the respect in which he is held in the political circles of Chiapas. The very next day he gets an audience with the governor: "He was most gracious and friendly and received me as if I was a long lost brother. He practically issued a decree to give me the whole State."<sup>357</sup>

Such a reception naturally facilitates the bureaucratic processing

considerably: three days later the papers are ready, which in itself must be considered miraculous, but additionally they are on the desk in Governor Gamboa's own office and waiting to be picked up. Frans is excited:

Dr. Gamboa is a live wire. He may be a politician, but he is more than that. He certainly has shown that he honestly wants to do something for his State. [...] Not only has he fixed up the Capital, but all over the State he is working on roads, schools, public buildings and water works. It is clear that he is more honest than any other Governor who preceded him. He is a very unusual case in Mexican politics. [...] My reaction upon meeting him is that one talks to a man of quick intelligence. Being somewhat of an idealist he is a "politico" of all the "politicos" I have met during all the years that I have been in Mexico. Unfortunately he signs his letters "No Re-elección" and believes in it. It would be much better for the State of Chiapas if it kept him for a few more terms. If you can catch an honest man then why not keep him. In Mexico City I have already heard talk that he will be called there for a cabinet post in order to prepare him for president. Not a bad idea.

It was the non-reelection campaign which in 1910 started the Mexican Revolution. The campaign was directed at President Porfirio Díaz, who, as previously mentioned, let himself be reelected time and time again and remained in power for 35 years. In 1943, more than two decades after the end of the Revolution, Governor Gamboa signs his letters with the revolutionary slogans "*sufragio efectivo, no reelección*" ["real right to vote, no reelection"]. And even today you will find the slogan on official documents in Mexico. In all these years, the non-reelection policy bulwark against dictatorship has played a key role in Mexican politics.

It would take ten years of bloody civil war before Mexico could leave behind the autocracy of the Díaz era and step into the modern political age. Workers and peasants were united in demanding that the two big promises of the Revolution, workers' rights and land reforms, be fulfilled, and all over the country the political leaders, now more so than previously elected on the people's mercy, were forced to cooperate with the rapidly flourishing unions. Social stability was a prerequisite for the reconstruction of the destroyed infrastructure, roads, telegraph, and telephone lines in disrepair that along with a drained Treasury was the legacy of the years of unrest. The organization of the conflicting parties – employers and workers – would ensure this objective. The class struggle had to be institutionalized and thus kept in check.

Put mildly, underdeveloped Chiapas had a bad start in this development. One of the old guerrilla leaders from the Revolution days, finca owner Tiburcio Fernández Ruiz, controlled the state like the rebel king that he was, and stopped at nothing to protect those closest to him and his own interests. Slave-like conditions never completely disappeared in Chiapas, and a blind eye was turned to the tax debt of the large landowners from the war years who were also largely spared the consequences of the 1917 Constitution's promise of expropriation and distribution of land from the large properties.

The government of Chiapas has always been dependent on support from the central government in Mexico City, and the opposition between Mexico's poorest state and the capital was as striking as the dependency. Chiapas is

Mexico's problem child, always a bit behind in development. In the years of the Revolution the state was occupied by troops from Mexico City, and the Civil War which was characterized by the local dominance of gang leaders, was therefore not at its fullest in Chiapas before the takeover of Fernández Ruiz – at the end of the Civil War. And while land reforms were implemented subsequently in the rest of the nation, nothing happened in Chiapas.

In the late 1920s the expropriations had, not surprisingly, led to unrest around the country, and now commands came from Mexico City to set the reforms on standby. But in Chiapas the opposite happened, as usual. The indigenous population, which accounted for about twenty-five percent of the inhabitants of the state, still owned just three percent of the productive land, so the local government, which in the meantime had come under socialist leadership, was not prepared to stop the reforms. On the contrary, in Chiapas more land was redistributed than ever before.

In 1934, Lázaro Cárdenas was elected president of Mexico – and by virtue of his personal integrity and honest interest in the ordinary Mexican, it was he who would finally unite the divided nation. During his tenure from 1934–40, a serious effort was made, for the first time, to implement the labor and land reforms from the Revolution. The Cárdenas government was expressly on the workers' side in the struggle against the employers and the small farmers' side against the landlords. The number of strikes exploded, the minimum wage increased, and now land was expropriated and redistributed with unprecedented efficiency. In 1938, Cárdenas's popularity – and the Mexican national feeling – was so great that he could afford the venture of opposing the major foreign financial interests in Mexico. The oil industry – which had once brought Frans Blom out into the great forests for the first time – had been at a standstill since the crash of Wall Street in 1929, the old sources were slowly drained of oil, and the major British and American oil companies dug no new wells. It was about time that something happened: Cárdenas nationalized Mexico's oil industry.

When Cárdenas assumed the presidency of Mexico in 1934, General Victórico Grajales was in power in Chiapas, and with these two gentlemen the contradiction between the capital and the most provincial province was preserved. Cárdenas represented reforms and stability while Grajales reintroduced chaos in Chiapas. During Governor Grajales's reign from 1932–36 the land reforms were stopped, the unions were suppressed, and industry was exempt from taxes. The 1917 Constitution's attempts to hinder the power of the church, which had led to revolt against the revolutionary government in central Mexico, had so far been entirely unnoticed in Chiapas. But now, the anti-clerical campaign was initiated with all the greater force. Crosses and images of saints were burned in public bonfires in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, all priests were expelled from the state, and troublesome peasants were killed by government forces under the banner of anti-clericalism. In the fight against religious fanaticism a training program for socialist or "rational" information was put in place. The program was primarily aimed at the "backward" indigenous population who were seen as the main obstacle to state modernization and progress by Grajales. The Indians were to be "civilized" and become "productive citizens," and in the name of civilization, the so-called "trouser campaign" aimed at getting the Indians to replace their traditional costumes with real European trousers. However, the greatest

impact of all the initiatives was that corruption spread with the speed of lightning in the state-controlled bodies responsible for legislation.

In 1936 a report was published on the situation in Chiapas, issued by the newly founded Department of Indian Affairs in Mexico City. The report was commissioned by President Cárdenas with the intent of discrediting Grajales before the forthcoming elections of governors – and there is plenty to be done. The report concludes that slavery still flourishes in the central highlands, and that officials at all levels benefit from the inhuman working conditions, through bribery, fraud, and simple theft of wages.

But in 1940 Dr. Rafael Gamboa is elected governor of Chiapas, without dissent and without unrest. Gamboa is a man of the system and has good political relations in Mexico City, where he has served in the Senate. And, unlike his predecessors, he is an academic to the bone: in the years of his youth where he might otherwise have taken part in the Civil War, he was in France studying medicine. Doctor Gamboa is a man after President Cárdenas's own heart. And thus the way is paved for the post as governor. Three years later Frans Blom comes strolling into the governor's office as the most natural thing in the world, at a time when the winds of change are blowing in Mexico and in Chiapas. The unions are in place, infrastructure is developing quickly, and the living conditions of the Indians are on the agenda. Now it is important to maintain peace, so development and administration can take place. Mexico, and particularly Chiapas, benefit from the increased demand for the jungle's raw materials – oil, rubber, and chicle – caused by the World War, and the period is marked by stability and prosperity. The governor does his job well, and Frans Blom has heard rumors in Mexico City about a promotion to minister one day.

One of the things which Frans has undoubtedly discussed with Gamboa is the land reform's unjust division of the land in Chiapas. The finca owners have cheated and deceived with measurements of their properties, and many of them deliberately exceed their concessions. In the absence of accurate maps of Chiapas, the state is incapable of maintaining and enforcing boundaries, and thus without countermeasure against the fraud. Immediately after his visit with Governor Gamboa (and for several other reasons), Frans therefore embarks on a project that would last for the next ten years: mapping the jungle, his and the Maya's great forests.

"The official maps issued by the Gov. in Mexico City are an insult to the public. They are nice pieces of paper only useful as wall decorations and lampshades. As maps they are absolutely useless. Some of the maps showed the old lumber concessions. The old boys [the finca owners] saw to it that the boundary lines of their respective concessions were as vague as possible, so that they could expand stealing in every direction. What magnificent pirates they were. It is no wonder that they got rich, nor that with the change of times their descendants are getting poorer and poorer."

Along the way, Frans will see the political reality from several points of view, but so far his position is clear. A little too clear, perhaps, because after a five-page diary entry, he is getting thoroughly intoxicated. On the way back to the hotel with a stack of maps under his arm, Frans, after a successful day with many practical errands, has bought a bottle to calm down. And while he is sitting writing in the evening, his self-confidence increases as the content of the bottle dwindles. Gradually his views become more vehement



"After 45 days and malaria in the jungle, Carlos Frey and I were picked up by the Swiss lady Gertrude Duby." December 1943.

and sharp, while his handwriting becomes rounder and more blurred. "And all of it goes to prove my experience," he writes at the end, "that there never lived an honest and decent Spaniard [white Mexican]. All the lot of them are ruthless, brutal and selfish thieves. ALL OF THEM."

Yes, Frans is drunk again. His drinking has not ceased. But he is also full of vigor and energy. He has regained his optimism; he believes in the changing times and is keen to make a difference in a world full of crooks.

Two days later, on September 29, 1943, something completely unexpected happens. In a plane on the way to Ocosingo, where the expedition is to start, Frans sits and looks down on the jungle where he endangered the lives of his men in 1928, and which he now has to try to tame once again. "The topography was fascinating, especially as it was my first flight over a territory which I know on the ground. [...] A bump – a thermal up current, made me look forward. A steep cliff, an escarpment which I remembered as a mountain from previous trips – and there before me lay the Ocosingo valley. [...] In a distance lie the ruins of Tonina – farther away the Ranches, San Antonio, Tecoja, [El] Real and other familiar places. The Airport is like most airports here. It's a reformed cow-pasture, and often the plane has to circle several times until the cattle has been driven off the field."

A large reception committee is waiting on the ground, the pasture is filled with curious Indians. In addition, old Pedro Vega from the finca Tecoja, whom Frans knows from the old days, has sent his son, young Pedro Vega, to



Gertrude Duby, 1943.

bid the Dane welcome back, and along with him comes Charles Frey, a young American who has settled down opposite Tecoja, on the other side of the Jatate River. And then, the miracle! "Also an attractive looking woman, who certainly did not fit into the picture, the city way she was dressed in tailor-made gray flannel and turban. She turned out to be Gertrude Duby, Swiss, of whom I had already heard. She has been working among the Lacandon Indians."

The preparations for the jungle trip take a few days. "Takes time to get horses. In a way it is not as easy as of old. Then you just told the Presidente Municipal [the local mayor] that you wanted so many horses and so many cargadores [carriers]. Now the Indians are free to work where and when they like. So much better for them and I am absolutely in favour of this system – but it does call not only for extra talk – but also for extra dough." While Frans thus must await money from the capital, he and the small, middle-aged, and very beautiful Swiss lady in tailor-made suit and turban have time to get to know each other. "Miss Duby and I climbed up to the big pyramid on the mountain side back of town [...]. It is quite a steep climb, but worth it, from the main plaza is a magnificent view over the Ocosingo Valley towards the East father away to the forests of Tzendales. Many memories came to me as I looked out over the valley and the hills. There lay Campotic, Tonina, Cololté and other places which I had visited 20 years ago and my mental picture

had not changed. After a while we scrambled down the steep slope. There were many wild flowers, red, blue, strong in colour and pale shades. A small mountain stream chuckled along near the trail – it sounded happy." It turns out that Gertrude Duby wants to come along on the expedition, in fact, she has already spoken about the matter with Governor Gamboa! On the trip up to the pyramid, she has had the opportunity to show Frans that she is at least as tough as she is beautiful. If someone has to be the first female participant on one of Frans's expeditions, it is she. "The broad valley lay stretched out at our feet – far away rainclouds – a rainbow light and shadow over the pattern of fields. A complete calm that was restful. And La Duby is the kind of person with whom you can feel in close relation without having to do conversation. I like that girl."

That evening, October 1, as they stroll through the town after dinner, it is again the silence that captivates Frans. He tells her about the old days of 1922 when he first rode into Ocosingo and thought they had hanged a man right there in front of the church, and in 1925 when he was here with Oliver La Farge and old Tata, who taught him so much. "Then there were gay marimbas – now there are none. Silence lies heavy over the town – a few anaemic light bulbs flicker – and a million stars shine through the heavy black velvet of the night sky. It is the silence that is so beautiful."

Let us leave them here below the silent stars of Ocosingo. There is much to tell about the amazing woman of the world who has fallen into Frans's arms. She will become the queen of the forest, La Reina de la Selva, the great protector of the Lacandon and the jungle. But they have only just met – and before they really get together, they must separate for a time. While Frans ventures into the jungle, Gertrude Duby has to take a trip to Mexico City before she joins the expedition, and it will be two months before he sees her again, deep in the dense tropical jungle.

The mountains and hills on the way down towards the jungle from Ocosingo are covered with pine forest interspersed with open grassland. The Ocosingo Valley is located about 3280 feet above sea level and the climate is temperate. When moving down over the hills, towards the lowlands and the tropical heat, one encounters the big finca properties, located in the river valley by the mighty Jatate River. "Here starts the jungle trip," Frans writes with great satisfaction on October 6, 1943, when, after crossing the river, he arrives at Pedro Vega's finca Tecoja. The Jatate River flows southeast along the north side of the Sierra Madre mountain range and gathers water from the mountains through countless tributaries, before it – even more powerful and under the name Usumacinta – turns around and rages in the opposite direction, to the northwest and finally drains out in the Gulf of Mexico. The large and once pristine Zendales jungle lies in the area around this parallel river system. The soil to which the trees and plants and countless parasitic growths of the great forest cling is surprisingly thin, and the cascades of rain in the rainy season disappear directly into the ground, which is filled with caves and underground river systems. The bedrock under the forest consists of limestone – the stone that the ancient Maya used to build temples and carve their beautiful monuments and sculptures.

Frans knows that the area is dotted with ruins. Undiscovered ruins. "The old Maya had an eye for spots of beauty – or high isolated hills – or mysterious

rivers and caves. I therefore would not be surprised if we found something spectacular." In the first part of the trip through the jungle Frans wants to seek out the ruins at Agua Escondida some distance down the Jatate, which he first visited in 1925 with Oliver La Farge. From there he wants to search for new ruins. The temple at Agua Escondida is in itself a relatively minor piece of the big puzzle that forms our picture of the ancient Maya – but where there is one ruin, there are surely more.

"Eighteen years had passed since I visited Tecoja but it had lost none of its charm or hospitality. Before long I was seated in the dining room, with one of señora Vega's good meals before me and listening to Don Pedro's accounts of his long and interesting life in the great mahogany and cedar forests that lie close by behind the nearest mountains." While Frans is waiting to make a deal with a few carriers to assist him on the trip through the jungle, he stays in a small guest house situated in the yard behind the kitchen. "There is something feudal about a place like this. The last established house of brick and tile on the edge of the great forest. The lord of the manor is old Don Pedro, the old Asturian [from the province of Asturias in Northern Spain] [...]. He rules and his lady Doña Vida runs the house. The sons are raised to take over. One hears the tinkling of their spurs on the brick floor of the corridor."

The stay at the finca is an ideal opportunity for Frans to collect information for the map. Don Pedro and his men willingly share their great knowledge of the forest, and correct one detail after another on the official maps. "Rivers are either marked 25 or more kilometers [15.5 miles] from where they actually are or in some cases run *up* the mountains. Fine roads are indicated where there was a mule-trail 30 years ago, towns where there are only abandoned palm-shacks. But with Don Pedro's help things are sorting themselves out. Darn it, these people are nice." Perhaps not all "Spaniards" are equally bad.

After dinner,

the men sit for a while around the table talking about the happenings in the distant outside world where men are at war, where people are rationed, and where the price on the products of the big forest that lies behind the next mountain range are made. Profit or loss of these people depend on men who sit in comfortable offices – behind a desk made – maybe – of mahogany tree cut in these same forests. Several thousand miles away the fate of these people may be decided by men who know nothing and care nothing about what happens to the Vegas, the Bulnes, the Villanuevas and many others who go through the hardships of the jungle. It's an odd world.

Or they may be reminiscing by that table. "Do you remember when we watched the logs come down both the Santo Domingo and the Jatate. The two rivers were full of them." Don Pedro's eyes happy at the thought of all the fine logs which he had cut. "And then there came floating, in the middle of the maelstrom some logs on which some Lacandones were riding. They yelled at us to send out a canoe for them, but who would risk a canoe and his life among those wild logs. So the crazy Lacandones just jumped into the water and swam ashore." All of us around the table had met the Lacandones – and I was the one who knew them the least. A simple people of the forest; the men having their [hair] to their shoulders, a people still to this day using flint pointed arrows, a people still worshipping the gods of the sun, the moon, the rain, the forest and the maize.

Frans's interest in hearing about this "simple forest people" whom he met for the first time in 1922 has not exactly diminished after he has met the beautiful Swiss lady in Ocosingo. The Lacandon are her great fascination – and Frans finds no difficulties in making the fascination his own: Were these long-haired hunters with bow and arrow the real, true heirs of the ancient Maya culture? Was it *their* ancestors – and not the ancestors of the more acculturized Tzeltal, Tzotzil, and Chol Maya – who had built Palenque and the other large cities more than a millennium ago? The Lacandon had possibly lived in the pristine jungle ever since the Spanish conquest in the first half of the 1500s, and had thus, as the only Maya people, very rarely been in contact with the outside world. In that case, their culture remained unaffected – they were "pure," their culture was intact.

Finally, after a week's stay at the finca, the two carriers arrive, the Tzeltal Maya Luciano and José. On the back of a very slow mule Frans ventures along the river, accompanied on foot by the carriers. The trip from the finca Tecoja to the site of Agua Escondida is about 22 miles, which is equivalent to a three-day journey on muddy paths through the dense forest.

The trail winds endlessly – from time to time it is blocked by a fallen tree, then my ambidextrous Luciano sets to work with his machete. The steel sings and the branches fall. Soon the road is open. And all the time he swings the machete he still carries his and my bundle on his back.

Agua Escondida [Hidden Water] is certainly well named. Deep down in the sinkhole somberly darkened by dense trees runs a small stream only a few hundred feet long. It comes out of a rock and disappears into a rock. [...] As soon as Jose had got the fire going and the beans in the pot – Luciano and I went to the temple. There it stands as it did 18 years ago – and a thousand years before that – though tree-roots have broken one of its end walls and the rain or storm may crumble the old structure. I searched for monuments again – but found none.

Nor in the following days as Frans penetrates deeper into the jungle, is he successful in his hunt for ruins. "Alas," he writes on October 17. "Not a sign of ruins even though the friends at [the chicle camp] Las Tasas had given specific directions. For six hours we beat through the bush looking for this and that without results."

But Frans will not let a little adversity get him off track; he heads back home in excellent mood. When there are no ruins, he has all the more time to count trees – which is, strictly speaking, what he is here to do – and then there is plenty of time to enjoy being back in the great forests, time for hunting and for beautiful flowers: "It was getting late when I came to the camp at Agua Escondida and the boys grinned widely when they saw me. It must have been a sight. The mule had a cluster of orchids behind each ear, on the saddlehorn hung two birds and over the back of the saddle hung more orchids."

Frans has been sent out to look for raw rubber for the war industry, but the forests also contain another kind of rubber – namely chicle. Chicle is the dried sap from the chicozapote tree, a tree which in English is called sapodilla. On the way out of the forests Frans stays in the chicle camp Las Tasas. When he first arrives all is quiet in the camp, but in the afternoon the



workers are returning from the forest: "A troupe of about a dozen chicleros [chicle-bleeders] came in heavily loaded with their equipment, carried in tumpline. [...] They are a rough looking lot. Very few of them are Indians. Their clothing is drenched with gum."

The first piece of chewing gum was produced in the U.S. in 1848 from resin extracted from pine trees in New England. The stock was reduced so dramatically by the rapidly growing timber industry that soon alternatives were needed, and during the 1870s chicle from the chicozapote tree became the preferred basic substance in chewing gum. Chicle was collected in southern Mexico and the world's first chewing gum with flavor was, very fittingly, marketed under the name Yucatan – an exotic name for an exotic piece of candy.

The Mexican chicle, however, was second grade chicle, and while the popularity of chewing gum slowly grew, the chicle extraction moved out of Mexico and into the Peten, the vast lowland jungle of northern Guatemala, which contained copious amounts of chicozapote trees of superior quality. During the First World War, the chewing gum giant Wrigley managed to convince the world of the calming effects of chewing, and chewing gum became part of the standard equipment for American soldiers. In the Guatemalan jungle chicle extraction developed to such an extent that chicle came to form the third largest export from Guatemala (after bananas and coffee). The chicle industry created new life in the Peten and meant – as mentioned earlier – that many Maya ruins, which had been hidden and forgotten under the thick blanket of the pristine jungle for more than a millennium, now came to the world's attention once again and were brought out into the light.

Meanwhile peace and tranquility ruled in Frans's Zendales forests. The chicle extraction was sporadic and had no economic impact, either for the country or the state. But with the Second World War peace came to an end – even in the Zendales. The advancement of the Allies was also the triumph of chewing gum; demand for the soothing gum increased dramatically, and second-class chicle was once again a commodity. Frans had already been warned about the new times in Ocosingo: "There are many men in the forests, I hear, and camps are scattered all over the Tzendales. Where I used to travel for weeks on end without meeting a soul, there are now trails and camps." In Las Tasas he sees it for himself – and every detail is noted with interest.

The price of the precious resin is determined by presidential decree and is therefore relatively high, which has brought the industry a great reputation throughout the country. From July to March the chicleros are working hard in the forests in order to turn the dream of quickly gained wealth into reality. "During that time they lead a dog's life – and when they are through they are the rich Kings of their town for 4 months." The chicle workers in Las Tasas have come from afar, leaving wives and children behind, in order to participate in the pursuit of "white gold" in the best Klondike-manner possible.

With his rope and bare feet he climbs the selected tree and from top to bottom he makes a zigzag slashing into the bark. At once the white sap begins to run down along the cuts, into a small bag tied at the foot of the tree. He goes to the next tree and the next. Later he gathers the sap from each tree into a larger bag and brings it to camp where he dumps it into

a large cauldron and begins to cook it. The cooking takes from five to seven hours, after which the gum is poured into a rough mold made of sticks and broad leaves. After standing for about a week in the mold, [...] the block of gum is taken out of the mold and left on the ground until the mule team comes in from the Central to collect the production. Formerly the mule team took weeks to reach the shipping point. Now the gum is brought to the nearest airfield and taken out by plane.

When it rains [the chiclero] and his woman [...] sit drearily under their thatched roof. It is damp, chilly, unpleasant. Mostly they mope, some tell racy stories, or some strike up a song, and some lie shaking with malaria on their beds made out of sticks, dosing themselves with quinine and patent medicines. Yes, they have the women along, though rarely wives. The women tend to the men's needs, make their tortillas, posole [thick soup with maize kernels] and food. Wash their clothes and lay with them. There is no silly "civilized" shame about fornication. The horses and cattle fornicate, the monkeys fornicate in the trees, the birds on the branches. Fornicating is a natural action producing offspring. When night comes man and woman join under the mosquito net. There is whispering and tittering, then the mosquito net shakes, fast breathing, sighs of sexual satisfaction – then all is quiet. The roar of some howler monkeys can be overheard in the distance or a jaguar announces that it has killed. The chicle camp sleeps.

When Frans returns to Tecoja, it is with a violent northern wind close behind him. At night the rain pours, and at dawn on October 24 Frans can see uprooted trees, dead cows and mules, destroyed canoes, and a lot of good timber making somersaults down the stream. During the morning the river calms down, and at noon Tecoja gets a visit by the young American from the opposite bank, Charles Frey – or Don Carlos, as he is called in these parts.

[O]n this day of deluge [...] Don Carlos had been laboriously working in the mountain trails to bring in six pigs – on the hoof – to improve his farm. Think of yourself behind six pigs, each of which wants to go his own way – driving them over mountain trails for a distance over 12 miles before noon. That's tenacity and guts. Don Carlos stayed for supper and after supper we had a long chat in English – I fear that I as usual did most of the talking. A sort of monologue with pleasant interruption. It's about time that I learn to listen.

Possibly. At any rate the pig story changes Frans's vision of the peculiar American with whom he, in the long run, is going to have a lot more to do than he really cares to. "Carlos" Frey becomes part of the crew when the Dane again ventures into the jungle – and once you are under way, there is no turning back: in the jungle you are stuck together. Herman Charles Frey is 28 and the son of a coal miner from Illinois. He is something of a Robinson Crusoe to look at, long beard and hair, tall and thin, with clothes in disarray and a distinctive sway in the back. In 1933 he sold cheap souvenirs at the World's Fair in Chicago, where he saw Frans's replica of the Nunnery from Uxmal. Apart from that, Frans does not know much about his new travel companion. After leaving the United States, Frey crossed the Yucatan peninsula on foot – an impressive achievement that packs a punch with the seasoned explorer – and now he is in the process of building a new life from scratch, far, far away

from everything he has left, on the edge of the civilized world, at the entrance to the great forest. At first all that sounds very plausible, not least for an old jungle romantic like Frans. He is also in search of a new life after leaving the U.S., eager to put the past behind him. Frans admires the young man's drive, and may recognize a bit of himself in the American.

Frans can saddle up and move on a few days later – at first to the neighboring finca El Real, where a small runway for the aircraft carrying the processed chicle out of the forest has recently been constructed. The chicle industry has made it easy to get around in the Zendale, everywhere landing strips have been cut out of the wilderness for chicle planes to take off and land. This opens new perspectives for Frans. Where it used to be months of toil through the jungle, it is now one plane out of the forest and one plane in again to the new destination.

At El Real, Frans is warmly received as he waits for the weather to clear and let a plane through. November 1 is All Saints Day, Todos los Santos. Frans wakes up in an inferno of noise – rockets are being fired, and a phonograph sends a crackling Mexican male choir with guitars out into the misty morning. On this day, and especially the next, Mexicans celebrate their dead relatives. All over the country there are colorful processions of people on their way to the cemeteries to bring offerings to the graves of the deceased. And everywhere, the festivities are marked by local traditions. For Frans, Todos los Santos in the Zendale forest is obviously worth a special study.

It will be a great day. Frans is ready on the sideline from early morning on November 1 to observe and to take in all the impressions while the flow of Indians on the way to the cemetery at El Real is gaining in strength. The women glide elegantly through the crowd, wearing their beautiful, dark blue dresses with colored ribbons in the long, newly braided hair. They hold their backs straight and carry large baskets filled with bread and fresh fruit on their heads. The men are dressed in white and have their hands full of palm leaves and flowers, bottles of booze and calabash bowls with pig's feet and black strips of dried meat.

In the midst a thin, old man draws the attention. He is a *brujo*, a shaman who is in contact with the dead. “[W]ith a very royal gesture and with full knowledge that respect would be paid he stuck out his hand – and one and all bowed deeply and touched his hand with their lips.”

Frans follows the crowd to the cemetery. “Frail wooden crosses were irregularly scattered over the top of a hill. Troops of Indians were grouped around certain groups of crosses. For a while I stood at the rim – taking in the whole picture. It was colourful under the clean blue sky and the clear sun. It could have been a picnic in the Bois de Boulogne for its gay aspect.”

A woman is sitting and chanting in front of a cross. The cross shape is not only a Christian symbol, but also the ancient symbol of the World Tree of the Maya, decorated with palm leaves and flowers. In front of it a carpet of red and yellow flower petals is scattered, and oranges, limes, and bananas are offered to the deceased. Between the fruits are bottles with different kinds of liquor, and candles are burning.

As I was watching, I felt a touch on my elbow. I looked around. There stood the old chief brujo next to me. He held a bottle of some liquid in

his hand. He pointed to the ground towards the foot of the cross. Then he poured some liquor on the ground. Watched [it] soak into the earth, then with his toes he smoothed the wet spot. As he passed the bottle to me asking me to take a drink he said: “Down there is my mother. She became happy with a little drink.”

Suddenly the distinctive hum of a propeller plane can be heard on the other side of the hills, and Frans must run as fast as he can to return and collect his things before the plane takes off again. Chicle aircrafts only stay on the ground for the shortest amount of time – it is important to get going while the sky is still blue. In fifteen minutes 880 pounds of chicle is loaded and the plane is on the wing again. Frans is in place in the passenger seat and heading north to Tenosique on the edge of the forest from where the chicle will be brought by boat down the Usumacinta River or by train to Mexico City.

Despite its importance as a trading station Tenosique is an insignificant jungle backwater, with tin shacks and wooden huts thrown together in no time, ready to be left behind and forgotten as soon as the world market demands it. The tropical heat makes the flies buzz and the air tremble, everything else stands still. The food is lousy and the prices horrible. Not least when Frans shows up. The tall, pale man is a rarity in these parts, and his skin color is a sign of dollars. Everywhere, he is exposed to exorbitant prices – at the carpenter's, the blacksmith's, the harness maker's, and the grocer's. He can only get liquor at affordable prices. In a backwater like Tenosique there is nothing to do, it is a sure pitfall for a seasoned alcoholic like Frans.

Bacteria thrive in the hot and humid lowlands, and before Frans is aware of it he is stuck in a hammock with a terrible pain in his right leg. His insect bites are inflamed, and in his attempt to cleanse the wounds, the bites have become septic. After a few days, his leg swells to twice its size, and the pain flares up and down the leg. Bad luck. Of all the places one could end up, Tenosique is a deadly boring place to be chained to a hammock. For a fortnight he is limited to tottering over to the restaurant and back again while he clings to a mahogany cane.

After a few days Frans is joined by Carlos Frey, who has heard of Frans's illness and in a moment of inspiration has decided to come to his rescue. One day, Don Carlos has picked up food for the Dane and comes back with an entourage of curious Indians who recount conditions at Tecoja:

“[W]e heard that the Tata presidente [President Cárdenas] was going to give us our own lands and that we would be free to work our own way and for ourselves and we made a great fiesta – but dreamed to soon. We claimed our corn fields, but the big man made the Tata presidente believe that our milpas [fields] were cattle pastures. The big man told us to leave his property within two days and when we said we would not leave, he purposely broke down our fences and drove his cattle into our fields. That year we were near starvation.” This story is true. When I stopped to Tecoja I thought that it was perfectly wonderful the way the entire household was preparing to help the Indians with bread and candles for the Fiesta of Todos Santos. Now that I am away from there I hear a different story. The story is as old as the story of the Conquistadores. Mean, cheap cruel exploitation. Charming hospitality, graceful manners covering disgusting cruelties.

The “big man” is Don Pedro Vega, the old Spaniard, whose stories of life in the forest Frans enthusiastically listened to as they sat around the table in the kitchen at the finca. Now the whole story has a new twist.

On November 20, Frans and Carlos Frey are finally off with a plane heading for the chicle central El Cedro in the heart of the forest. Here the aircraft is met by a large crowd of local chicle workers with red scarves tied around their heads, and according to Frans they most of all resemble the pirates in an operetta.

Out went the load of maize. In went the bales of chicle. Up went the plane. So simple and routine. So matter of fact. Here in the heart of the vast Zendales forests, where only the primitive Lacandon Indians roamed a few years ago, an airplane is received in a most matter of fact way, and the only reason why the camp is here and the plane flies is that soldiers and stenographers insist on their chewing gum.

While Frey ventures into the forest to visit the settlements of the Lacandon, Frans spends some days in the chicle camp to gather information and make notes. One of the chicleros has brought scarlet fever with him and it has spread to the Lacandon in the forest. Carlos reports about an epidemic among the unprotected people who for centuries have been untouched by all the diseases the Europeans brought with them, epidemics that ravaged the indigenous peoples with much greater force than the Spanish steel blades, gunpowder, and bullets. Now history repeats itself – and the Lacandon population is particularly vulnerable because they are so few in numbers. Perhaps there are just a few hundred of them left, scattered around the jungle. If one of these groups succumbs, it is therefore, in the strictest sense, a unique culture that is lost.

One day the camp gets a visit. Two Lacandon, dressed in their hand-woven shirts, emerge from the jungle, with sugar cane and chayote fruits in their nets.

Serious of mien, they wanted anything from a cooking pot to a shot gun for 2 dozen chayotes (vegetable pear). This group is not nearly as nice as the group I visited in 1928. These have been spoiled by the chicleros, and a few visiting Americans. They want everything and give nothing. Have no idea of values. They take everything out of your pockets out of curiosity and put it back. They do not steal.

They pretend to be dumb – but are by no means so. Through one of the Yucatan Maya chicleros I asked about ruins – no, they knew nothing. Obviously they were lying. Their houses and fields are only one day’s walk from Yaxchilan ruins where one constantly finds fresh offerings, with Lacandon censers in one of the temples.

The Lacandon are well aware of the ruins, but their price for talking is high. They demand a shotgun with detonator cap, gunpowder, and bullets! The information is certainly not worth that much according to Frans, for several good reasons. First of all, there is a very high probability that the information is simply wrong or leads to insignificant smaller ruins. Secondly (and equally important): if the price is this high, just once, it can be very difficult to get it down to a reasonable level again. So Frans gives up for now.

On November 25, Frans and Carlos are ready to go on a jungle expedition:

“We have a fair mule, an old packsaddle, and a nice boy, by name José del Carmen Centurión, henceforth appearing as Pepe.” The trip is headed for a group of ruins by the small tributary San Pedro. Already after the first day, where they spend the night in one of the forest chicle camps, the first problems arise.

At 6 all were up and we had the standard breakfast of fried beans, tortillas and coffee. Then we discovered that our boy did not know how to load a mule. C[arlos] had never tried, and I only vaguely remembered. That took us a while to figure out but at 8 we got going. Everlasting muddy trail, beaten up into a sticky dough by the muletrains that go in and out for the gum. I developed a quite new set of muscles which I call “pull the feet out of mud muscles.” I did not know that I had them, but I certainly could feel them after a couple of hours work (not walk).

Then something happens that is going to make its mark on the rest of the trip.

By 10 I stopped at some empty huts by a small stream, I took out my glasses, read the watch and made a note. Then I continued to the next arroyo and when I was going to make another note, I discovered that I had lost my glasses. I remembered that I slipped in one place but not exactly where. The whole distance was about 500 meters [550 yards]. We therefore made a camp at the huts, and searched for hours. The glasses never turned up. [...] Well, we have to go on, but it’s going to be a little tough to keep up with notes. A sad day.

It is a worn-out man who loses his glasses. After two months of fighting the jungle Frans can feel that he is past fifty. Even *with* glasses his eyes hurt working with the maps. It has been many years since he was last in the jungle – and even more years since he has been under way for so long. The old marksman is starting to miss. He is sore from riding, and the work with the machete is giving him blisters on his hands. Worst of all, though, is the endless struggle against insects, the most ferocious predators of the jungle. They plague Frans more than ever. The two weeks in bed in Tenosique have exhausted him considerably. He has become more fragile, more vulnerable to the whims of the forest.

By the San Pedro River, he takes a bath in a small, warm stream.

It is quite a performance. Armed with a machete to cut a trail to a deep pool one sets out with soap, towel and a sheet to cover one’s nudity. Not that there are any people who would be shocked by your nudity, but there are gnats and mosquitoes who greedily attack every exposed spot. At last you find a suitable spot and proceed to undress and at the same time take cover. It’s a job. Once under water to your chin you find that the gnats attack your ears, and also that the soap will not lather. Then, emerging after a while the fight is on again and you return to camp thoroughly uncomfortable and scratching. [...]

Right now something is wrong with my left ear. It pained a lot for several days. Now the pain has gone, but I am deaf on that ear. Wonder what it is. No use worrying as there is a long way to the nearest doctor.

Moreover, Carlos Frey has begun to get on Frans’s nerves. He’s a lousy

shot. Half of the shots are lost because he doesn't know how to load the gun properly, and when he finally comes home with a turkey it is completely smashed by shots. His fires go out, and he cannot tie an honest knot. And after a fortnight in the jungle he has developed an ability to disappear into thin air every time there is something to do at camp. All in all, the young American is a nuisance for the old scout, just when he is losing strength and needs all the help he can get.

But wonders never cease. On December 7, in the late afternoon, Frans hears yelling in the forest, and soon a caravan of ten or twelve mules and their drivers arrive at the camp. And there, like an angel of salvation, she comes: "They were followed by Miss Duby, dressed in a red flannel shirt, a straw sombrero and cakes of mud. She is joining our outfit. She brought some mail and also Hurrah! a pair of glasses for me. These glasses had traveled all around Chiapas after me and caught up with me when most needed."

With the arrival of the Swiss woman the forest is transformed. A bunch of crazy spider monkeys are dancing and scolding in the treetops, and game birds stand as petrified on the path and let themselves be shot. The mood in the camp has been turned around and the difficulties of life in the jungle have again become exciting challenges. When the mule gets detached at night and sits hopelessly stuck in the mud, the Tzeltal boy Pepe starts singing one of the Mexican classics: "Canta y no llores," Sing and do not cry!

Only Frey is as hopeless as ever. Frans decides to send him back to El Cedro along with Pepe, to find an extra mule and collect different small supplies – but perhaps just as much in order to enjoy the enchanting company of Gertrude Duby in peace. In any case, Frans intimates to the young man that he no longer needs his help. And he must not worry about coming back with the animals, Pepe will take care of that. Carlos Frey leaves the forest crestfallen.

Frans and Gertrude Duby will not enjoy much peace and quiet, while they are on their own in the great forest. Now that Frans feels that he is in safe hands, his body gives in to the fight against the insects. His deaf ear is starting to hurt again, and the pain has spread to a violent headache. And Frans's malaria is back.

A week before Christmas, they sit huddled in front of the fire in the morning. A bitterly cold wind freezes them to the marrow, and although Frans sits right up against the flames, his cold bones refuse to warm up. He and Miss Duby do not leave camp before around noon. After three hours of heavy hiking they reach a small chicle camp where everything is muddy and the rain drips down through an old, half-rotten palm roof. "I fixed camp and D[uby] took charge of the food question. She is a brick on the trail, always ready to help."

Saturday, December 18, 1943. On trail. I took a big dose of quinine, and woke up with the shakes several times. It rained. We decided to move on to San Juan, closer to El Cedro and with much better huts and no mud. What a trip! [...] I had forgotten that malaria made you so weak. Sliding and stumbling, getting stuck in the mud, my cargo slipping from side to side throwing me off balance. [...] I don't know what I would have done if I had not D along.

After hours of fighting the mud, it is clear that they cannot reach San Juan the

same day. Gertrude decides to go ahead and look for a stream, where they set up camp for the night.

I felt so exhausted, and completely without drive that I wanted to camp right there, water or no water. But the little energetic lady, who is by no means a spring chicken – insisted. She walked ahead with her pack, and I came slowly behind with mine. [...] Every log that had fallen over the trail was an excuse to sit down. All the logs were soaking wet and therefore wet my pants. As an excuse to myself I smoked a cigarette, just so that I could sit a little longer knowing though, that I had to go on. Then I began to stumble and fall. (3 times I fell flat on my face, must have looked very attractive.) The sun was going low behind the trees soon it would be dark. I came to a small dry stream. I could not stumble through all the mud in the dark. Rather sleep in the bush. [...] Between two trees, right smack across the muddy trail, I made up for the night stringing the poncho above in defense against the rain.

I was in a daze with my head spinning, when I heard D calling far away. It was dark now. Then I saw her flashlight. Well there was only one sensible thing to do, wherefore I told her to climb into my narrow hammock. That was that, and what a night.

Sunday, December 19, 1943. Camp San Juan. It rained again. We were most uncomfortable. Every time one of us turned it woke up the other. Cold on the side towards the hammock and warm on the side towards the neighbor. Sometimes the rain cape (poncho) slipped and the rain woke us up. Thus passed the night. I slept in snatches, I suppose from exhaustion, until I awoke by D informing me that it was morning. How I hated to get up, but it had to be done. D took my load and I carried the shotgun, mostly using it to support me. Again it was 100 yards go, some minutes sit. [...] At last I saw a light spot ahead of me, an opening in the jungle. [...] Then the camp came in sight. The sun broke through the clouds. Soon I was comfortable in my hammock – a dose of quinine, a double strong bowl of coffee. All the agony forgotten. I went to sleep.

When I woke up at 13 her ladyship was all fixed. She had brought her own bundle, rice and beans were on the fire, muddy clothes and shoes were clean. She is most efficient. What relief as compared to the absolutely useless C[arlos] who could not move without being told. [...]

Monday, December 20, 1943. In the hammock, Camp San Juan. Much better this morning. Oh, yes, much better when I lie down. An attempt to do a little walking brought me to the floor.

There are two major "non-events" in Frans Blom's career as a Maya archaeologist, two major discoveries he not did make – both of which would have placed him among the greatest in Maya archaeology. The first of these events had occurred many years earlier, on his first major assignment as a caretaker in Palenque. It was when he wondered about the holes which he had found in the stone floor, in the innermost chamber of the Temple of the Inscriptions. If he had lifted the stone slab back then, he would have found the entrance to K'inich Janaab Pakal's famous burial crypt, and thus have made a landmark discovery.

The other major "non-event" is the discovery of the Bonampak ruins. These ruins are located on the other side of the Lacanja River, just across from

the abandoned chicle camp San Juan, where Frans writes his notes in the intervals between the bouts. In December 1943 the ruins are still hidden in the wilderness and hide their fabulous treasure: arguably the most beautiful and well-preserved murals from the Classic Maya culture.

That is, they are hidden to archaeologists. But the people of the forest already know the place – and it is only a matter of time before the information will emerge. The forests abound with information about ruins, reliable and unreliable, expensive and cheap. In El Cedro the Lacandon demanded shotguns, gunpowder, and bullets to reveal what they knew – but as we shall see, a little kindness and enthusiasm is often enough.

On December 20, late at night, Frans and Gertrude Duby get an unexpected visit. Frans has been asleep for a while when she wakes him with a muffled cry:

“Pancho, Pancho! Somebody is coming, there is a light.” Not very enthusiastic I suggested that it was a Cucuyu, a lightning bug, but she insisted – and she was right. Among the trees a man was coming with a “candil” [lamp] tied to his hat, the red yellow light flickered on the trees and opened a narrow passage in the darkness. [...] We were jubilant. Xmas was a few days away, but our present came right there, and even though young Landeros doesn’t look much like an angel, to us he came direct from heaven. He brought rice, beans, sugar, condensed milk, batteries for D’s flashlight and 2 pairs of socks and a pair of shoes for me (they were the right number but none the less much too small). It was not difficult to make him stay and [he] was served our last beans and the traditional coffee. He told among other things that the Lopez’ men at a jato [meeting point] 3 leguas from Cedro to the West, had found temples, statues and a tablet with inscriptions. Fine news.

However, Bonampak lies “3 leguas” – three hours walk – southeast of El Cedro, not west, so if the chiclero’s information is correct, it was almost certainly completely different ruins which were found. We cannot know for sure. Frans is too sick to go ruin hunting.

It is quite symbolic that right here, where Frans lost his glasses, he now also loses the opportunity to discover Bonampak. Here he is to find rubber trees, map the forest, and hunt the ruins in it. And he believes that something spectacular awaits him. It is almost as though he has come out here to find precisely these ruins. And now he lies with fever raging in his body and is mostly concerned with where the mules are so he can get out to El Cedro and get treatment.

But fate is twofold. Frans has Gertrude Duby at his side. Amid all the misery Frans has turned on his charm towards this impressive woman who does not break her fixed principle of always being stylishly dressed, but at the same time never lets this principle hold her back from life on the muddy trails. She has already begun to use his nickname, Pancho. And before Christmas is over, he calls her Trudi. Frans might have lost Bonampak at the chicle camp of San Juan – but he wins love.

On Christmas Day, help from El Cedro finally arrives. Unfortunately, in the person of Carlos Frey, who was otherwise told to stay away. Frans is bursting with rage:

C[arlos] F[rey] had forgotten most of the things I had ordered including my mail. He is the dumbest moron that I have ever met. [...] [He] is mentally crippled and as he has to be ordered around and shown everything, he is a burden to any outfit. What a fool I was to hire him, but his big trip on foot from Ocosingo to Yucatan and back via Quintana Roo, visiting ruined cities, as well as the fact that he is a young American who needs the money made me blind to the fact that he was mostly in his house, and usually smelling from lack of a bath. What a fool I was, I am kicking myself in the pants every time I look at him. I gave specific orders for him to send the efficient little Pepe, but I suppose the jackass had to come out to “save” us.

Frans gets injections of quinine to soothe the malaria in El Cedro. And the shakings have hardly begun to abate before Frans starts to get bored. The restless blood is rushing through him. The last goal of the expedition is nothing less than Frans’s favorite ruins, the breathtaking Yaxchilan, where Frans stayed for five unforgettable days in 1928, and where, even in 1943, it was possible from time to time to find traces of the sacrificial ceremonies of the Lacandon in the temples. He is excited to show Trudi the place and to tell her everything he knows.

On January 5, 1944, a plane drops them off by the banks of the great Usumacinta, on the border between Mexico and Guatemala, where they are going up the river to the ruins the next day. In the evening, Frans lies awake – and dreams:

The sky was covered with a thin layer of clouds through which the moon cast a fairy light. The rapids murmured and the river wound by as a dull steel band. I was filled with inner excitement at the thought of going back to Yaxchilan after all these years. Tikal is majestic, Palenque is beautiful, Copan has strength, Chichen Itza leaves me completely cold and Uxmal holds a bit of my heart – but Yaxchilan stirs me more than any of the other Maya cities. Its situation and plan as well as the fineness of its art thrills me. *That* is a place where I would like to work, not only cut the underbrush to make a park of it, but to spend years in study, restoration and excavation, I would like to open the place up so that other people could enjoy its magnificent sculptures, buildings and location.

Frans was denied the chance to fulfill this dream, and although several teams of researchers have worked on the site over the years, the ruins of Yaxchilan appear today much like they did in Blom’s day. When you arrive, one temple after another emerges from the forest before your very eyes. Yaxchilan had its heyday around the same time as Palenque (AD 600–800) and was characterized by the same exquisite aesthetics: soaring temples with high roof combs, spacious plazas and palaces, all built and decorated with stucco facades and stone monuments. The strategic location of Yaxchilan on the banks of the great Usumacinta River, exactly where it makes a tremendous bend between the jungle-clad hills, gave the rulers of the city the ideal control over the region’s main thoroughfare and trade route. Everywhere the city beamed of life and wealth.

Slowly we progressed up the Usumacinta River. The high mountain banks are covered with rich tropical foliage and to the water’s edge grow

beautiful white lilies. [...] The sun broke through and the picture of the river and the forest was lovely. As we came to the beginning of the horse-shoe bend which makes the peninsula on which Yaxchilan is located our oarsmen rested and drank posole. Along the bank lay several large mahogany logs, stranded there during the last flood. After about 4½ hours we beached below the house of Ulises de la Cruz [the caretaker] which lies by the ruins, and though we knew that one of the largest ruined cities of the Maya lay right close to us, we could not see a single building as they all are covered by the forest.

Soon Frans and Trudi are on their way to some carefully selected places among the ruins, accompanied by the old caretaker. Don Ulises has cut paths that lead through the city to the main monuments and buildings, and after a steep climb from the river banks they find themselves on a narrow plateau. It is the main square of the old city. And it is, according to the Lacandon, the dwelling of the gods. They come here to burn copal incense and offer prayers to their old gods.

We saw their broken incense vessels in the temple with the broken figure [Temple 33] and the Temple that [the explorer Teobert] Maler calls the Red house, on the lower terrace [Temple 6]. This is the building, where one can go inside the roof comb. Don Ulises also told about the Lacandonones coming there and stated that he had seen them dance. Maybe? The old boy tells some pretty tall stories now and then.

The big trees shaded us and up and down hill we climbed, here pausing before a tall stone slab, covered with delicate carvings, and there entering the rooms of temples. What an enormous place, and how impressive it must have been at the time of its glory. What one does not realize from Maler's map is the height of the hills that have been reshaped by man. Hill upon hill has been reshaped to the shape of pyramids with flat tops upon which stand temple next to temple. From the river bank the city rises in high steps towards the temple of the masked priest [Temple 40]. What a joy to be here again and to revisit the many places which had imprinted themselves upon my memory from the first visit. From the highest hill one looks steeply down towards the river that encloses three sides of the city. Across the river are low hills. In the past when the ground was clear of trees it must have been an impressive sight to approach the city, with its temples painted, red, blue and yellow, as vestiges of paint still show. We wandered around and among others took photographs of the monument with the masked priest, which always has fascinated me. Then we returned to Don Ulises's house on the river bank where the wife received us with coffee and later served us lunch of fried bananas, frijoles flavored with some kind of wild herb, and scrambled eggs. Quite a luxury meal for us. These people were so very pleasant and nice. The sun was shining on the river, and a cool breeze blew. Before leaving they loaded us down with lemons and oranges. We really hated to leave.

Frans and Trudi leave the forest as a couple. It is written in the stars, they are meant for each other. Two cultured, humanistic-minded people from the European bourgeoisie. Two ethnographically interested, passionate, and

curious middle-aged people, full of energy. There are only two of this kind in Zendales. And although Frans and Trudi have not been together for long, they already know each other well. Together they have overcome malaria and the heavy mud in the forest, and they have now walked through Yaxchilan, the home of the Lacandon gods, the finest jewel in the collection of Maya ruins.

It is said that love bears, believes, and endures all things. But it will not be without tremendous struggles along the way. Frans has chosen a very principled lady, and in Trudi's world, alcoholism is *not* tolerated.



## Chapter 8 A Lady in Gray Flannel (1944–1950)

*"Your mind and mine are like steel and flint. Sparks must fly."*  
(Frans Blom in a letter to Trudi, 1946).<sup>358</sup>

January 1933. While Frans is busy with the preparations for the World's Fair in Chicago, dark political clouds have gathered over Germany. Gertrude Lörtscher Düby – as she is actually named – is in the eye of the storm. In Berlin the negotiations to ensure Adolf Hitler the post as Germany's new chancellor are under way, and meanwhile Trudi has taken the podium at one of the communist meetings in Hamburg. Her clear voice blares through the speakers facing the large audience. The mood is at a boiling point. With her firm voice and her great rhetorical talent Trudi has earned a reputation as one of the leading whips in the left-wing struggle against Hitler. She agitates as loudly as possible against the Nazis, without a thought for her own safety, ignoring the Nazi sympathizers who always stand ready to spoil the meeting when the battle speeches are over. To avoid riots in the hall, she speaks beyond her script without hesitation, improvising, and continues to speak until the doors are closed. But the real battles begin in the streets – and on one side of the bloody confrontation the echo of Trudi's socialist slogans resounds.

It was a frightening experience for me to see how an audience, a mass of people, could be maneuvered with words. At times, I felt as if I had strings in my hands and could create a mass psychosis among the puppets out there simply by moving my fingers. [...] Many times after meetings, the audience would ask, "When do we fight, when do we go on the barricades?" I would have to calm them and explain the Nazis would tear us to pieces.<sup>359</sup>

Gertrude Lörtscher was born on July 7, 1901 in the Swiss mountain village of Wimmis, where the streets around the small church were paved with

cobblestones and the gardens overflowed with apples that were stored for the winter. She was the middle child of three. Her father was the Protestant vicar of the town, a conservative with a strong social commitment. Her mother performed extensive social work and was constantly visiting the farmers up in the mountains. Trudi did not see her much.

In 1910, her father was appointed social inspector for the canton of Bern, and the Lörtscher family moved to the capital of the nation, where they, after some time, moved into an apartment. The landlords, living downstairs, were the Düby family. As opposed to the conservative Lörtschers, the Dübys were active in the socialist movement. The father was a union man and his son Kurt, who studied law, was a member of the Socialist Youth. This new acquaintance eventually paved the way for the dramatic life course that led Trudi to the speaker's platforms in crisis-ridden Germany. Kurt Düby excitedly talked about the impending world revolution, and Trudi, who from a very early age had found it difficult to sit still and be quiet, seemed impressed by the notion of an active struggle. Soon she stayed downstairs more often than at home. "In many ways my father and I were extremely alike – both fighters in a way and neither of us very tolerant of different opinions. Once I started to think for myself, I became the black sheep of the family and we didn't get along very well anymore. In fact, I left home at quite a young age."<sup>360</sup>

Trudi was sixteen years old when she moved to the horticulture school Niederlenz near Zürich, where she developed an interest in gardening and a delight in producing her own food, which she would revive many years later with Frans. For a while her stay at the boarding school was interrupted when Switzerland was hit by the first general strike in the country's history and all schools were closed. Back in Bern, Kurt's father was heading the rail workers' campaign, and Trudi and Kurt went to the center of town to attend the heated debate in Parliament on the eight-hour day and workers' right to celebrate the Russian Revolution. It evolved into a scuffle in the hall – and Trudi was not in doubt whose side she was on. Having finished her horticultural studies, she enrolled at the School of Women's Social Work in Zürich, where she was an energetic participant in the political discussions and worked nights through to found a local socialist youth movement. From 1923, when she received her diploma, she put all her inexhaustible energy in her political work, and she traveled through Europe, as self-appointed correspondent for left-wing magazines, to document the rise of socialism – and perhaps also to hide the fact that Kurt Düby had made her pregnant. First stop was Paris, where she had an abortion.

In England, Trudi celebrates Labour's election victory in December 1923 and has the opportunity to closely study the leading politicians speak to the masses. From there, she heads on to Mussolini's troubled Italy, where the oppression of political opposition is complete. In Florence she gets arrested for possession of suspicious literature. She succeeds, after five days of interrogation, in persuading the police that her passionate interest in socialism is purely journalistic. They send her back to Switzerland on the first train. The rumor precedes her, and Kurt Düby meets her at the border, accompanying her the rest of the way to Bern. "We were greeted by a big delegation of the socialist party with red banners and prominent speakers. From that moment, I knew my parents would never want me back at home, nor would I ever want to go there again."<sup>361</sup> A few days later Trudi Lörtscher married her

childhood friend Kurt Düby and added his name to hers. Somewhere on her long journey through the world Düby became DUBY – and as we have seen, Frans got to know her as Gertrude DUBY.

For the next three years Trudi worked for the Social Democrats. She became an active and unifying secretary for the women's section of the party. Meanwhile, her marriage slipped into the background; she fell in love and had affairs with leading politicians when she traveled to meetings and conventions, where she was more and more often invited to give one of her stern talks. In 1928 she was invited to speak in several places in Germany on behalf of the German Social Democrats. For Trudi this was a unique chance to make her voice heard on one of the largest political battlefields of Europe. From then on she placed her forces in Germany, where she gained fame for her speeches. And in 1929 her marriage with Kurt ended.

In 1931 Trudi left the Social Democrats and was involved in founding the German Socialist Workers Party, which would cooperate with the Communists. At the founding congress in Berlin, she was elected one of the party leaders, but only six months later she took a leap to the left and joined the Communist Party. Shortly thereafter, she went to Belgium to report from a large mine strike and was immediately arrested. Again she was released and expelled from the country, and although the ground was burning beneath her feet, she was already back on the speaker's platform in January 1933.

The Reichstag in Berlin was in flames less than a month after Hitler had gained power. The country was under martial law and the Communists accused of arson. Suddenly the situation was decidedly life-threatening for Trudi. Her eloquence had secured her a prominent position on the Nazi blacklist. After five weeks of flight through Germany, she managed to get out of the country on a false passport. She went through France to Barcelona, where she kept a low profile for about a year. Thereafter she moved to Paris to take part in the management of the World Committee of Women against War and Fascism, and helped organize a series of international peace congresses.

In Paris, she moved in with a man from the party, and in 1938, while the war drums rumbled louder and louder, she became pregnant for the second time. During her pregnancy, she was offered three years of ideological training at the Lenin University in Moscow. She accepted the invitation. Stalin's terror and the recently concluded Moscow processes had not shaken her faith in the party, and in October 1938 she went off alone, with the intent to raise her child in Communist Russia. But it was not meant to be. Shortly after arriving in Moscow she experienced problems with her pregnancy and suffered a miscarriage of twins.

After this incident it was a shocked 37-year-old woman who left the Soviet Union in the spring of 1939 and returned to Paris, where she almost desperately continued her work for the Women's Committee. In late August 1939 the war was imminent and the nonaggression pact between Hitler and Stalin turned the Communists in France into the enemies of the Allies. Once again Trudi was hunted. Soon she was arrested and interned in a prison camp in southern France, where she went through the exceptionally icy winter with hundreds of women, crammed into the dormitories of the wooden barracks. In early 1940, Trudi was released after pressure from the Swiss authorities, and going through her home country she fought her way to the port of Genoa in northern Italy. The city was swarming with refugees who wanted to escape

war-torn Europe, and the Atlantic steamers were already overcrowded. But somehow Trudi managed to persuade fate to grant her a ticket for the last steamer departing for New York.

Europe had gone mad before her very eyes. Now she saw the continent, perhaps for the last time, disappearing behind the horizon while the steamer passed the sharp corner at Gibraltar and stood out to open sea. With her she had a book that lit her curiosity to such a degree that it helped to determine the direction of her escape. It was the French anthropologist Jacques Soustelle's book from 1936, *Mexique: Terre Indienne* [Mexico: Land of Indians]. In the book she would read about the ancient cultures, collapsed temples, and stone figures with writing, but also about a group of "forgotten" contemporary Maya and their "primitive" and pristine life in the jungle. The Lacandon. She absolutely had to see them with her own eyes. Moreover, President Cárdenas had opened Mexico to leftist refugees from Europe, and many of Trudi's friends and comrades from Paris were already in Mexico City.

During her first year in Mexico Trudi spent most of her time learning Spanish and taking care of the steady stream of new refugees from Europe. Around her, German associations and magazines bloomed, where the many writers, artists, and journalists tried to express their talents. Trudi held a series of lectures for the friends of the German Cultural Association, the Heinrich-Heine-Klub – but she preferred to talk about Mexican rather than German culture. Trudi was one of the few members of the Heine Club who was deeply interested in her country of exile. She wanted to see the country, and before long she managed – by impressing the Labor Minister – to participate in a trip along Mexico's Pacific coast to document the working conditions of textile workers. Along the way through the Indian villages, where she met sickness and hunger, she stumbled on information about the female soldiers of the revolutionary hero Zapata. She felt a strong sense of identification with these tough female generals, and at the same time her journalistic nose sensed an untold story. Trudi purchased a used Agfa box camera, a simple camera that was easy to handle, which she immediately operated to perfection, despite her total lack of interest in the technical side of things. The intense portraits she made of the women of the revolution laid the foundation for the international fame she would achieve as a photographer.

In 1943 she has the chance to realize her dream of visiting the "forgotten" Maya people in the jungle. The first government-led expedition with the aim of making contact with the Lacandon is in the planning, and Trudi wants to join. She goes to Tuxtla Gutiérrez in Chiapas and charms governor Gamboa, and soon she is under way through the jungle on muleback, 42 years old, on a journey that changes her life forever. She meets the Lacandon for the first time. And then she meets Frans Blom. After 25 years of serving the higher cause of socialism she is barely aware that there are other ways of looking at the world than through the optics of the political battlefield. Frans's lifestyle enchants her. His endless curiosity and genuine interest, his infectious humor. When she is with him, she can leave behind a troubled world of harsh opinions and eternal worries.

Complete peace and quiet was rare in Frans's company. The two have just come out of the forest hand in hand, when Frans's inner demons appear again. A controversy that would last a lifetime takes its beginning. In Tenosique where Trudi has to take a train back to Mexico City, a tearful farewell is under

way when Frans goes to town and gets too drunk. The next day, she finds a handwritten note from him: "Darling, I have a hang-over from my parranda [spree], and frankly do not want to see you or anyone the next few days because some nice Mexicans disliked me and beat me up pretty badly. Please do not insist on seeing me. All I want is to be alone. Love, Pancho."<sup>362</sup> While he sleeps it off, she gets on the train to the capital.

The small intermezzo cannot hide the fact that her world has changed. And only Frans fits into the new world that has opened before her eyes.

[I]t had only been few months since I had left the capital and yet everything seemed so strange and unreal as I arrived one night at the Slate Hall for an event at the Heine Club. Even though everyone was perfectly the same – and yet they appeared so different to me. In the meantime, I had crossed centuries of time and come back from the pre-Christian era.

And now I suddenly found myself in the midst of a crowd and was asked a thousand questions I could not answer. Everyone seemed to believe that I came back from the savages. How could I explain that the Lacandons are not savages? They wear only a rough shirt on their bodies, and my trousers were sensational however not because I was a lady wearing pants but because they were entirely unfamiliar with pants.

But savages? They asked many questions down there in the rainforest, almost as many as Grete, Lore and Lise [in the capital]. Will I offend my women friends if I told them that the questions of the Lacandons were quite as intelligent as theirs. And somehow easier to answer. I think I was able to explain the notion of modern warfare between civilized nations to the Lacandons. But would the members of the Heine Club grasp the notion of the peaceful existence of the "Savages" in the jungles of the old Maya gods? To this day, I do not know.<sup>363</sup>

"Dearest," Trudi writes to Frans in the summer of 1944 in her somewhat halting English:

I [need] to ask you a few questions. I ask them in writing because I don't seem to be able to speak with you. [...] I certainly think that you ought to stop to drink, if not you finish in the gutter. I am brutal enough to say that it is better to kill yourself, if you can't stop your drunkenness. What means you will end as a tramp – I tell you this because I love you and love you without egoism, first time in my life (probably because I [met in] you an ever stronger egoist). The questions: Do you wish to get rid of your drunkenness? Do you think you can get rid of it? Are you capable to care for somebody? If yes, do you really care for me? Is it of any importance to you, to have me in your life? Can I be of any use in your life?<sup>364</sup>

Unfortunately we do not know Frans's answer, but it must have been both yes and no. On the one hand there is no evidence that Frans ever makes an honest effort to stop drinking after leaving New Orleans. On the other hand, he is undoubtedly very fond of Trudi. It is crucial for him to have her in his life. Because of her, her love and her admonitions, in spite of drinking, he avoids repeating the humiliation that he has just escaped from in the United States. Trudi is just what he needs to realize his dream of a life in Mexico. She



is able to keep up the good manners so that all the goodwill he has saved up over the years, and which they enjoy wherever they go, is not squandered away in senseless intoxication.

It is a struggle for Frans to get back on track, but slowly things are getting under control. After sleeping it off in Tenosique, he embarks on another journey in the spring of 1944 through his beloved Chiapas. He has – through his honorary membership in the Historical and Geographical Society in Guatemala and the influence of his friend, the Guatemalan Minister of Education – acquired a copy of the diaries of the Spanish Dominican friar Tomás de la Torre from 1544–45. These diaries describe the journey of Brother Tomás from Salamanca in Spain to Ciudad Real, the City of the King, in Chiapas. Ciudad Real, or San Cristóbal de las Casas, as it is called today, was the provincial capital at the time. Frans loves the small colonial mountain town dearly – he dreams of one day moving there – and he loves the area that the Dominican traveled through back then. Now he is celebrating the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Tomás de la Torre’s long journey by following his footsteps through Chiapas. The following year he publishes an edited version of almost 200 pages of Tomás de la Torre’s travel diaries.<sup>365</sup>

During 1944 he works on his manuscript about the people of the forest and gets a few articles published on the discoveries he has made on the expedition, and in the fall the second half of his *The Conquest of Yucatán* from 1936 is released in a Spanish translation, *La vida de los mayas* [Life of the Maya].<sup>366</sup> The book is published by the Ministry of Education in a series of popular scientific literature. The small book has great symbolic value: Frans is back in Mexico. He dedicates the book to Manuel Gamio, who once took care of young Frans and sent him to Palenque on his first archaeological assignment. Gamio has since become director of an institution in charge of Indian affairs. *Mi maestro*, Blom calls him, my teacher or master – and the gratitude is well received. Once again Manuel Gamio lends Frans a helping hand.

The coffee plantations in southeastern Chiapas have been hit by a frightening disease, *onchocerciasis*, known as river blindness. A tiny black fly transmits an organism which over time spreads in the human body and causes blindness. Entire villages are said to be hit. Early in 1945 Gamio sends out an expedition with the sole purpose of reporting the state of affairs. The crew consists of an expert in disease-transmitting insects; one mule driver; Trudi, who benefits from her training as a social worker and who also brings along her camera; and Frans, who leads the expedition through the remote mountains near the Guatemalan border. Visiting a hospital, they are shown through a microscope what they are up against: thousands of small, filamentous roundworms twist and wind in the small tissue sample. The microscopic larvae of the worms move up through the body to the eyes, where, according to Frans, they are one of the last things the infected see before “the night of blindness comes upon them.”<sup>367</sup>

When the group arrives in the small village of Unión Fronteriza where the disease is reported, they enter the town hall and show their papers. The official who greets them holds the paper to his eyes, struggles with the words and eventually gives up. He is going blind. It turns out that the whole city is affected. Those who are not yet blind cover their disease-ridden eyes against the bright, painful sunlight. Colonies of worms grow under the skin and settle as abscesses around the bite, and the small expedition has no difficulty

tracking the disease from house to house and from village to village.

Quickly the news went around that we had come, and just as quickly the sick, the near-blind and blind began to gather around our quarters. It was awful to see. Our group was not equipped to operate on the onchocerciasis tumors. The object of our visit was to inform ourselves about the daily life of these suffering people; yet now they came to us for help.<sup>368</sup>

Frans’s letter to Gamio on the situation in Chiapas is interesting. The disease hails from the coffee plantations, where the poor villagers work under squalid conditions. Even after having been operated on they are forced to return to work in the plantations, where they instantly become infected again. Frans is indignant. His report almost has the character of a cry for help, and one is hardly wrong to think that somewhere in his report is an echo, an inspiration from the old socialist demagogue who rides through the mountains by his side:

It is easy to say that there is no remedy for onchocerciasis. It is easy to believe that it is a remote danger. *I have seen that sickness is spreading. I have seen that we are not safe in our houses. I fear the advance of evil among ourselves, and no doctors have convinced me otherwise. [...] It will not be done by laws and ordinance. It must be attacked seriously. We must penetrate the suffering settlements. We must give better pay to the nurses and doctors who carry on this mission. We must make them enthusiastic. Finally, we must select fanatics, as fanatic as the Catholic frailes [friars] of the Conquest [...] Pardon me, querido maestro [dear master], but your commission made me see incredible suffering. I saw the old blind men who asked for schools for their sons. The badly paid teachers flee in view of the blind sickness. I have seen even young men who do not see the beauty of their land. I’ve seen an abundance of orchids forming a covering in the trees, which they cannot see.*<sup>369</sup>

From the mountains of Chiapas they head north along the Pacific coast to the state of Oaxaca, where the disease is also widespread. In the mountain village of Villa Alta Frans makes a discovery that warms his archaeological heart. “For many



“Blind. 6 years old.” 1945.



Frans's drawing of a detail of the Lienzo de Analco showing the arrival of Spaniards to Oaxaca during the conquest.

years I have known that there were still documents, codices [screen-fold books] or canvases from the ancient times guarded in remote places by the Indians. Always I was told that the owners or guardians never show their treasures to anyone, and I always dreamed of seeing these treasures."<sup>370</sup> This time he is lucky. The mayor organizes a visit to a neighborhood named Analco, on the outskirts of Villa Alta. Until the previous year Analco had been an independent village and according to tradition the residents of Analco were not Mixe Indians, like those of Villa Alta, but the descendants of the Indian auxiliaries of the Spaniards who came from Tlaxcala near Mexico City to locate the country's gold mines in the aftermath of the conquest. In Analco Frans is invited into the former town hall.

A few men were putting up a large table as I asked for; others looked suspiciously at me: they were the guardians of the Analco archive. For centuries they had zealously guarded their documents: few outsiders had ever seen them. Some men entered carrying a number of bundles wrapped in old papers; from one of them they pulled out an old cloth, or at least it looked like that. Some of them spread the "cloth," and it turned out to be a miracle: an original canvas from the days of the Conquest, all its surface covered with figures and paintings.<sup>371</sup>

The finely woven cotton canvas measures 70 x 98 inches and is in a remarkable condition. Crisscrossing with no apparent regard to up and down, a tangle of rivers and trails that connect mountains and cities are drawn in all corners and edges of the old map. Around the geographic swarm (which of course makes excellent sense for those who know the depicted area), there are detailed scenes of people and animals. Frans holds up his magnifying glass. There are battlefields, Spaniards on horseback, Tlaxcalan warriors and their local prisoners who are being chased by Spanish war dogs, tormented and tortured, burned, hanged, and cut to pieces. *El Lienzo de Analco*, as Frans baptizes it, the Analco canvas, is a legal document. It tells the story of the heroic deeds performed by the Tlaxcalans in the service of the Spaniards, of the indispensable military support they contributed and the sacrifices they made. The tale of the canvas was used to raise the claim for compensatory measures, such as land and beneficial rights of the conquered territory.<sup>372</sup>

In other words Frans has made an excellent discovery and can now write up his first significant academic report in years. On the whole, the expedition, from January 15 to June 15, 1945, was a great success. In an article, which he and Trudi wrote together for the American magazine *Natural History*, they point out that the expedition has also served its intended purpose. When the article is published in the spring of 1946, their mutual friend, the incorruptible doctor and now ex-governor of Chiapas, Rafael Gamboa, has risen to a position that has enabled him to devote no less than one million pesos of the Mexican State Budget to fight the terrible onchocerciasis. It is an uplifted couple that returns to Mexico City in June 1945. Now it is time to move in together.

On the other side of the Atlantic the War has recently ended. During the Second World War, Denmark was under German occupation, from April 9, 1940 to May 5, 1945. Jews and political opponents of the Nazi regime were forced to escape the country or work underground as part of the resistance, and many of those who did not make it were taken by the Germans to the concentration camps. Compared to most other European countries, Denmark made it relatively unharmed through this severe crisis, but many families were still scattered and unable to stay in contact with one another, due to the general breakdown of communication channels.

Therefore the end of the war is the starting signal for a quest to retrieve all the lost connections, relatives, and friends whom the war has kept apart. Telegraph wires are glowing hot and the time is full of amazing stories of reunions after many years of separation and uncertainty – and terrifying stories of those who did not survive. The tracking is often a long process, and the wait is a time of tense emotions. This is also true for the Blom family where the search for the lost son triggers a drama. No one has heard from Frans since the beginning of 1940, that is, six months before his suspension from Tulane, and no one is aware that he has left New Orleans. No one knows that – for the second time in his life – he has decided to seek his fortune in Mexico.

While there is no news from Frans, until the end of 1941 the family in Denmark maintains contact with the United States. Old Alfred Blom corresponds with Frans's friend from the early New Orleans years, the patroness of M.A.R.I., the cultured millionairess Matilda Geddings Gray.

Frans's ex-wife Mary Thomas also remains in contact with the family. She and Frans's oldest sister, Esther, write letters and birthday greetings to each other. For Christmas 1940 Esther sends a letter with Christmas wishes and recounts the family's sad situation. "Poor [...] father has grown old, it has been too much for him, he is sad about it all. We have not heard a word from Frans for about 7–8 months, poor father, he feels hurt."<sup>373</sup> It is not an easy time to be without contact with one's closest relatives. Why doesn't Frans write? As mentioned, Matilda Gray has seen Frans's total downfall up close, and Mary also knows the state of things. But they both hold their tongue to the Danish family. There are things one does not talk about.

With the U.S. entry into the war after the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the postal connection between Denmark and the United States was interrupted. And along with the lost contact with Matilda and Mary, Alfred, Esther, and Vera lost hope of hearing from Frans for a while.

Some six months later Alfred Blom celebrates what would have been his and Dora's golden wedding anniversary by making a splendid family photo album. For Frans. The book is bound in soft, light brown leather, the back is bound with leather cord on the side, and the front is encased by a simple, embossed trimming. The years are humbly pressed into the leather in the center of the front page: "1892 May 20 1942."

On the pages of the album Alfred inserts photographs of himself and Frans's mother as a couple around the time of their wedding and silver anniversary, but also individual portraits and pictures with their children. He pastes a picture of Dora from 1891 on one of the first pages, the days of falling in love. The last photograph Alfred puts in the album shows himself as he appears now in 1942, cigar-smoking behind his office desk – and with a fixed gaze directed out towards Frans.

When Frans turns fifty on August 9, 1943, his father has still not had the opportunity to send him the photo album. In Europe the war is raging stronger than ever. Alfred Blom puts a new photo in the book of himself sitting in an armchair in the office, with a large photographic portrait of the young Dora framed in gold on the wall behind him. Moreover, he cuts out small, enthusiastic birthday articles about the "Copenhagener who became an Archaeologist in America" from the newspapers and sticks them onto the last page. While he has not heard from Frans for three and a half years, he can at least read about his son in the Danish newspapers.

It is hard to comprehend that twenty-five years have gone by since the son of now 80-year-old Alfred S. Blom left the capital to travel to Mexico. [...] Many thought when he went away: We will probably see Frans Blom again soon, he will not last for long as a Mexican. But things went differently. Now twenty-five years later Frans Blom is a highly regarded archaeologist at Tulane University in New Orleans.<sup>374</sup>

Not exactly. Right around this time, his fiftieth birthday, Frans puts the sign with the words "Have gone to Mexico" on his door and leaves New Orleans. But no one in Denmark knows.

The occupation is not an easy time to get through for the Blom family. Just like Frans, the family in Denmark is strongly anti-Nazi; his nephews take part in the Resistance and some must go underground and flee to Sweden. "Every decent person had theirs to do," Esther writes to Mary after the war, "death

meant nothing, but torture, it has been a hard time for mothers, all over the world. It seems extraordinary that none of us has been in prison."<sup>375</sup> Thank God the war is over. Now it is time to look for Frans. Five long years have passed since they have last heard from him.

In his eagerness to obtain news about his son, Alfred Blom has written the first long letter to Mary and posted it, even before the transatlantic postal mail has been officially opened. The rushed work does not pay off. The letter apparently never reaches her. However, another letter arrives from the opposite direction, from Mary to Copenhagen, dated July 8, 1945. This letter is addressed to Esther and briefly narrates Frans's fate at Tulane University. Esther decides to spare her father the sad news. She fears that Frans is dead in the meantime, and puts the letter aside.

Less than a week later, however, Alfred Blom also receives a letter from Mary, who is apparently unaware of the secrecy and in all innocence mentions her letter to Esther. And then peace is over at the nursing home. "Mary darling," Mr. Blom writes.

Very happy to get your sweet letter of [July 14]. I went straight down to Esther, but she said hers had not come, that was an untruth. Your letter of [July 8] she had withheld from me owing to a misunderstood regard for my feelings, it was of course meant for the best, but I hate things being kept from me even if they are sad, and I feel, that I ought to be the first to hear about my nearest. Well, she has promised never to do it again.<sup>376</sup>

To further the investigations Mr. Blom writes to Matilda Gray in New Orleans. And on August 11 an answer finally arrives. And what news! Matilda Gray has met Frans in Mexico City in August the year before and has since exchanged postcards with him. Alfred Blom even receives the address of a Mr. Griffith, who is supposed to know more about Frans. As recently as a year ago, Frans was certainly alive.

Frans himself described the meeting with Matilda Gray in a letter to his old friend Webster McBryde: "Million dollar Matilda was here a short while ago, and I passed her on the street. Cut cold. Suppose that I am not famous anymore. Frankly, those things do hurt me some, and it warms one's heart to realize that one has real friends like you."<sup>377</sup>

The mood in the family is tense. Despite the news from Matilda, Esther prepares for the worst: "it would be nice to know where he is and so on, but I doubt if he is alive. For father's sake I hope we will find out about him. I must say I dread the thought that he might come home."<sup>378</sup> While she fears that Frans is dead, she also fears the return of her alcoholic brother. In late August, another letter arrives from Mary, which certainly does not help to dampen the worry. This time the letter is neither for Alfred Blom nor Esther, but for Esther's husband Jørgen Kiær: "I am writing to you because I think you should know whatever I can tell you about Frans and this will be a letter which you will not want to show to father [i.e., father in law, Alfred Blom]."<sup>379</sup> Considering that Mary otherwise almost exclusively wrote to Esther, it might seem strange that she addressed these words to Jørgen Kiær. But as Esther has vowed to her father not to hide the letters from him, Mary cunningly gets around it this way.

In the letter Mary gives a vivid description of Frans's incredible downfall in New Orleans and his sudden disappearance. Mary's intention to ease

some of the tensions in the Blom family with her outspoken letter to Jørgen seems somewhat half-hearted. At least she does not hold back from nurturing Esther's worst imaginations on the basis of unfounded rumors: "From this time on [after Frans's escape from New Orleans] I have had no definite information regarding him, only many rumors through various friends, none of which are recent. I have even heard that he is dead."<sup>380</sup>

Mary has had Frans listed in the Missing Persons Bureau through her cousin who is a lawyer in Washington. "If any one can find him, *they* can, and I hope to have some word in about a week. Perhaps when you receive this letter you will already have had a cable from me. Let's hope that we will at least find out something definite. I see no way in which father can be kept in ignorance of the final outcome of all this and I only pray that it will not sadden him too greatly."<sup>381</sup>

It has not escaped Alfred Blom's attention that the secrecy surrounding him is gaining strength again. There are still things he is not told. In late August, shortly after the letter's arrival, it becomes too much for him. He rushes down to Esther in Copenhagen and demands that all secret letters be handed over. Esther gives him Mary's first letter, which is now more than a fortnight old, and tells him nothing about the letter to Jørgen. Alfred Blom is not satisfied; he feels that Esther and Mary have conspired. He demands that Mary stop her investigations. Esther must immediately send her a telegram.

Esther promises to do so – but does not keep her promise. The next day she sits down and writes the following to Mary:

My dearest Mary. Just a few lines to explain matters, as you might get a letter from father [and] perhaps can not quite understand his point of view. [...] Father is old in some ways, and impatient, he thinks he can find out where Frans is through Matilda Gray. Anyhow father made an awful fuss here yesterday, and asked me to send you a cable saying stop investigation. To calm him down I said yes, but of course I would never think of doing such a thing, and we only thank you ever so much. Your letter to Jørgen father of course will not see. I hope you understand that it is a bit difficult with my family now and then, father is old, I do much for the sake of peace.<sup>382</sup>

Mary receives the letters from both Esther and Alfred Blom on September 4. She answers Esther immediately.

I understand perfectly about Far [Alfred Blom] and his being upset about what you call the investigation, and I shall pretend to him that I have received a cable from you instructing me not to proceed any further. Poor darling, he has small realization of what the true state of affairs is – and it is hard for him to realize that even such a good and old friend as Matilda Gray lost patience and interest. So far we have traced Frans up to eight months ago, at which time he was in Yucatan. As these things are usually done fairly quickly it surprises me that we have not gotten any further after several weeks of this thing – but evidently he has managed to lose himself fairly completely.<sup>383</sup>

The same day she writes three more letters concerning the investigation of Frans's fate, including one for Matilda Gray, with whom Mary has not had contact since her divorce from Frans in 1938. "I am sad that in all these

past years we have not seen each other," Mary writes, "but I know that you will understand that I felt Frans needed you as a friend and that under the circumstances it was impossible for any one to be a friend of both of us at the same time – and certainly he did have the prior right. However I have not forgotten how sweet you were to me that first awful year of my marriage – and my affection and friendship for you has not changed one wit since then." Despite the nice words the message from Mary cannot be mistaken: "I know that you have already written Denmark saying that you know nothing [about Frans] and it is best just to abide by that as I expect to have some definite information very soon."<sup>384</sup>

In other words Mary asks Matilda to stop her search, contrary to what Alfred Blom had in mind. Although it has now been more than a month, he has still not received a reply from Mr. Griffith in Mexico City, whose address Matilda had sent him, and he still considers her information the most reliable.

Deliverance comes, however, from an unexpected corner. In late September 1945 there is finally a sign of life from Frans. It is Jens Yde from the National Museum in Copenhagen, Frans's old companion from the trip to Honduras, who has received a letter from Frans. And only a few days later, on September 29, a letter finally arrives for Alfred Blom from Mexico City, where Mr. Bob Griffith, who works at the fabled stage-coach postal and banking company Wells Fargo, reports that he personally takes care of Frans Blom's mail. And periodically, when he is not on an expedition, Frans sticks his head into Griffith's office and picks up his mail. Thus another welcome indication that Frans is alive.

Before long, stacks of letters from the family arrive in Frans's mail. The same evening that Alfred Blom receives the letter from Griffith, he writes his first letter to Frans:

My dear son. Soon it has been five years since I last heard from you, and your sisters and I have been anxious to know how you have been doing in those long and terrible years, and interested in hearing how you have spent them. [...] Why you have not written to me or your sisters (if you for instance thought I old man had died in the meantime) is incomprehensible to me.<sup>385</sup>

While the search has been going on, and Mr. Blom has been waiting in vain for signs of life from his son, Frans and Trudi have found a charming little apartment in Mexico City, just off the main park Chapultepec, not far from the center of the rapidly growing capital. They have fallen for a four-story, whitewashed building in which the top floor is cut in half so that one half constitutes a beautiful open terrace. Here, in Los Alumnos no. 48, three small rooms and a nice large terrace under the sky, with the park on one side and the city on the other, and the two volcanoes Popocatepetl and Ixtaccihuatl on the horizon behind the city – here Frans will have his first real home since he left the large, razed apartment on Jackson Square in New Orleans. For two years he has continuously been on the road, and his belongings are largely confined to what he could fit into his backpack.

We do not know how much Trudi has brought about during the five years she has been in Mexico. But we know that the recent expedition has brought them a small income, and soon they manage to pull together a small,

well-functioning home, with beds, tables, and chairs, bookcases with a little collection of books, and a few antique pots and large maps on the wall next to photos of the Lacandon. And outside, where half of their life is lived, there are comfortable lounge chairs on the sunny terrace, which on all sides is filled with newly planted pots of flowers soon to be in full bloom to make it look as if they have brought a piece of the jungle back to the big city. One room is used as living and working quarters, and Frans and Trudi each get their own room with a view of the city and the volcanoes. Eventually Frans develops a passionate relationship with the two beautiful mountains that constantly disappear and reappear on the misty horizon: "For several weeks I have not seen the volcanoes because of dust," he writes to Trudi after a longer period with few jobs and no money: "Today they are out again. You know how I feel about them. Any day they are out is a good day. It cheers me up, and I feel things will go well. Maybe that a turn to the better will come today."<sup>386</sup> At this time their economic situation is disastrous, but Frans takes it – unlike Trudi – relatively easy. Life on the edge of an economic abyss had long since become part of his everyday life, and Frans had made a virtue of necessity. Now he preferred what he saw as a simpler life and developed a real expertise in surviving on the reputation he still had in Mexico. For Frans and Trudi the move to Los Alumnos marked the beginning of a long life in what one could call a poor man's luxury – surrounded by wealth and power, but without a peso to weather the storm.

Thus it is in a home where they are often several months in arrears with the rent that Frans and Trudi open their arms and doors, and especially on Saturdays receive a stream of the best of the bourgeoisie, the city's biggest celebrities and bohemians. Here, both Mexican and European left-wing intellectuals meet. A whole raft of government ministers are frequent visitors, Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo – Mexico's world famous painter-couple – lead a flock of recognized artists, and Frans's old connections from Mexican academia also pass by. Furthermore Trudi's friends from the Heine Club show up, refugees from the World War and veterans of the Spanish Civil War, actors, writers, and scholars, and travelers and envoys from all over Europe, particularly Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. Word of the Saturday gatherings in Los Alumnos spreads rapidly, and eventually the small living room and the large, flowery terrace are filled with people from near and far, and the hosts eventually have to give up keeping track of who is who.

Around five o'clock in the afternoon the first shouts can be heard from the street. Frans throws the key over the whitewashed wall, and the guests let themselves in through the gate into a fine, well-kept garden with a large avocado tree. Up in the apartment, coffee, purchased on credit at the local market, and perhaps a taste of Trudi's excellent homemade bread, are served by Frans and Trudi's beloved housekeeper, Doña Carmen, who has not received her salary for weeks. And then the chatter about Mexico and Europe, books and art exhibitions, ruins and government, politics, politics, and politics sets off. Frans is a master of conversation, he knows enough about everything to make everyone feel welcome, and when the conversation threatens to stall or become embarrassing, he always has one of his famous jungle stories up his sleeve.

Frans's travelogues serve multiple purposes: they are also advertising. During the five years that Frans and Trudi live in Los Alumnos they are

out of the city as often as possible. Preferably in the forefront of large-scale expeditions, but also on smaller excursions, which they arrange for wealthy friends and acquaintances. Whether the trip goes for months through southern Mexico or just for a weekend in the neighborhood of Mexico City, is determined by the ones who pay the bill – Frans can serve as a guide in most of the country, and he misses no opportunity to draw attention to this fact. Along the way through the jungle Frans and Trudi can put their everyday worries aside, and when they get home they can at least pay some of the bills.

The time between the trips is financed haphazardly, by writing various unsolicited articles to the capital's magazines. In the midst of misery, Frans has a private secretary to whom he can dictate his Spanish articles. At one point she disappears when she gets a more stable job elsewhere. Frans is desperate; he knows very well that his spelling is horrific, and his typing equally poor. So it's a great relief when after a while the problem resolves itself, and the solution couldn't be better: "The kid is smart and intelligent and her novio [boyfriend] comes along to watch me. Furthermore, he thinks that it is an experience for her and won't allow me to pay her. The novio is a young abogado [lawyer], and he helps me all the time by correcting manuscripts. They come every day from 4 to 6."<sup>387</sup> Two secretaries, for free. That's a poor man's luxury.

For Trudi, life as a freelance journalist is a continuation of her previous life in Europe; for Frans, it is the fulfillment of an old dream of passing on his sprawling specialist knowledge in a popular way. He produces, especially in his first years in Mexico City, several popular scientific and journalistic articles: "El indio se vuelve ciudadano" [The Indian Becomes a Citizen], "Treasures in the Jungle," "You Have No Idea How Much Work It Takes: Chicle from Mexico," "El gran camino de America" [The Great Road of America] (on the construction of the Pan American Highway), "Mil años de olvido" [A Thousand Years of Oblivion] (on Yaxchilan), etc. He also writes a few more serious papers but mainly he recycles what he can and rewrites the things he knows by heart. This is not always inspiring, and since he has trouble getting the work paid for from the outset, and even greater difficulty receiving the money agreed upon, the precarious freelance life eventually becomes a greater burden than pleasure. And with the declining enthusiasm, the number of articles also dwindles over the years.

Instead Frans's commitment to a different and somewhat more structured public information project increases. Every summer, he teaches at the University Summer School for American students who are offered a variety of courses on Mexico and its history. Frans teaches classes on Mexico's indigenous cultures, past and present, and takes his students on excursions, so they can see for themselves what he is talking about. Year by year the assignments get bigger and bigger, and he is an immensely popular teacher – which is a bit surprising, since he has never cared to teach before.

Unlike Trudi, Frans never gave political speeches, neither in the auditorium for his students nor when he spoke at the Saturday gatherings in Los Alumnos. Born a bourgeois, European anti-communism was innate in him. He had grown up with it and had, as we remember, proposed to a Russian princess, just as he had complained about the pampered laziness of the "Bolshevik workers." But in Mexico, he meets communism from another



Frans on the terrace, Mexico City, c. 1947-48.

side. Here many of the people he appreciates have declared themselves socialists or even communists.

Suspected by the FBI in 1952-53 of harboring communist refugees from the U.S. in his and Trudi's Mexican home, Blom is investigated and interrogated by the FBI and (according to the FBI agent) states:

that he is a socialist inasmuch as he believes that type of government will actually bring about "the greatest good for the greatest number." The subject stated that the U.S.A. type of democracy fails in this respect. The subject further stated that the Communist-like regime (expropriation of lands and establishment of machine centers by the government) in Guatemala was brought about by necessity due to the capitalistic discrimination against the native Indians. [...] The subject stated that he considers Russia and Guatemala as having progressive types of government.<sup>388</sup>

Because of his experiences in Mexico, where he has seen the poor Indians being exploited and cheated by ruthless land and plantation owners, Frans tries to bridge the gap between his own practical humanist attitude and the ideologically motivated Moscow-communism that characterizes Trudi's circle of friends.



Trudi on the terrace "with admiring Lacandon Santos" as Frans humorously noted, 1948.

However, this is not always quite straightforward. There are people whom Trudi would rather not have in her house because of their political views. One of them is Frans's friend, the in-all-respects great painter Diego Rivera. Admittedly, Rivera was a loudly avowed communist; he immortalized the Mexican Revolution as the popular triumph of socialism in numerous monumental murals under banners with the words: "Workers of the world, unite." But he was not and never became a loyal, pro-Moscow Stalinist like Trudi; he called himself an anarchist, a principled opponent of state power. And furthermore, in 1937 he had helped Stalin's biggest opponent, Leon Trotsky, obtain a residence permit in Mexico and had him living in his own home. Frans is adamant in convincing Trudi that it is a gift when someone like Diego praises her portraits of Zapata's female generals and even expresses a wish to buy one of her photos. Frans writes to her: "I wanted you to meet a dear friend of mine with whom politica is his own business and his art is impregnated on our time. Slow up a little from time to time and be nice to MY friends. Your mind and mine are like steel and flint. Sparks must fly."<sup>389</sup>

In the spring of 1946, Frans and Trudi are away separately for the first time. Trudi is in Chiapas to promote an expedition to the Lacandon, and Frans is on his way to the ruins at Malinalco, some hours' journey south of Mexico City. His mood is down to zero and Trudi has left in a black cloud of anger. Once again the rent has not been paid, and perhaps the power will even be shut off. Frans awaits a bit of money for a few articles he has not been paid for, and in a letter he promises Trudi that he will personally go cap in hand to the magazines to collect the much-needed pesos: "I will take care of the rent and the light and the soles of your old shoes. [...] Don't worry, my darling. There is a saying in English that absence makes the heart grow fonder, and another one which says that too much intimacy breeds irritation. I do believe that you can see this point. And our temporary separation does not mean that we separate. In love, in mind and in companionship we are one, even though we get mighty mad with each other from time to time."<sup>390</sup>

Frans and Trudi's good friend, Dr. Rafael Gamboa, the ex-governor of Chiapas, has been promoted, just as Frans predicted two and a half years earlier. The major ruling party, the P.R.I., has reformed itself at a large congress in January 1946, and here Gamboa has been elected as the new party's first leader. Therefore he has taken up residence in Mexico City, and Frans and Trudi see him quite often. It is an important year for the big party. 1946 is an election year, and the successor to President Manuel Ávila Camacho must be found. It is almost certain that the party's candidate, Miguel Alemán, will be elected, but obviously he has to go on the mandatory election tour throughout the country to ensure the triumph. Right now, Mexico's future president is on his way to Chiapas, and the party chairman, the old governor of Chiapas, plans to meet him there. Blom advises Trudi on the excellent opportunity to advertise an expedition: "Gamboa leaves tomorrow for Chiapas to meet Alemán. Try hard to turn up with a few Lacandonese when Alemán arrives. It's a good trick. [...] I believe that things are breaking for us."<sup>391</sup> The occasion is so obvious that Frans reiterates his request in a follow-up letter: "It's not going to hurt the Lacandonese to meet the Tata future presidente, and it's certainly not going to do YOU any harm to appear as the head of the tribe."<sup>392</sup>

Frans, in turn, is back home in Mexico City working on a large-scale expedition to go through Chiapas and Tabasco, to study the use of irrigation

systems in the agriculture of the ancient Maya. He has sent a project proposal to the president of the National Irrigation Committee and the National Agriculture Organization, Marte R. Gómez, former minister of agriculture and current member of the International Olympic Committee – an influential man. Frans's friend, the Maya-interested diplomat and poet Antonio Mediz Bolio, knows Gómez, and Frans hopes to get the chance to have a conversation with the busy man.

It didn't look so good. We got to the office of Marte Gómez, and Bolio came out with a sad face telling everybody that the big man could not see them. Then he whispered: let's go downstairs. We climbed into a Packard about 5 kilometers long and soon Marte Gómez also climbed in. He is a good guy. Off we went towards Chapultepec and we talked [about] my project which he said that he had read with keen interest. As we got around to the Cambio de Dolores [near Los Alumnos] I thought that I had imposed enough and asked to get out. NO.

Ten minutes later I stepped into [the outgoing President] Camacho's house and stayed for lunch. They say that the project will be pressed through as very important. A presidential car and two motor police delivered me at Alumnos 48. I DID get a kick out of that and am sorry that you were not with me. But get busy about Alemán and the Lacandonese.<sup>393</sup>

Within a few days, Frans and Trudi are in contact with the party chairman and the outgoing as well as the future president. Great things are in the pipeline. But at the same time Frans has to borrow twenty pesos from a friend for the weekend trip to Malinalco. And this is all that he has. Luckily it is not difficult to buy on credit at the local market. Especially when people in the neighborhood have seen Frans arrive in the presidential car with escort.

Frans's family in Denmark is finally in contact with the prodigal son after the World War. Many loving letters go back and forth across the Atlantic, but not everything is told as it really is. Trudi would really like to get married, but Frans does not want to. He does not tell his family that he has an extramarital relationship with a woman and even lives with her. He is not entirely comfortable with how his father, and perhaps his whole family, will react to the news and therefore he introduces Trudi with extreme caution, as a close friend and expedition participant with whom he writes articles. In one letter after the other he mentions Los Alumnos as "my little apartment"<sup>394</sup> not "our." To give his father the impression that everything is going splendidly, he calls himself "General Inspector of Archaeological Monuments."<sup>395</sup> And he completely shies away from talking about the last, catastrophic years in New Orleans. When his father asks what happened at the university, Frans replies cryptically: "There is still a Middle American Research Institute by name at Tulane. There is no staff, and they do not answer letters. All the hard work was for nothing."<sup>396</sup>

But of course Alfred Blom immediately realizes that something is missing in Frans's reports: "Now I hope that you will take the time one day to tell me about you and your life in the time period 1940 to date," he writes in 1945, "it would be very dear to me to hear about it *in detail*."<sup>397</sup> The best answer Frans can come up with as to his deeds during the war is an extremely poor lie: "what my service for Denmark was through the hard years, I cannot

reveal. It is buried in the G2 files, but one day I saw you on Bredgade [in Copenhagen] a few years ago. Shut up about it."<sup>398</sup> This is really a miserable and very transparent lie. The claim that Frans should have been on a top-secret mission for the United States in Denmark, which during the war was not part of the American but the British sphere of interest, and should have seen his old father in Copenhagen is farfetched. No one knows this better than Alfred Blom. The retired businessman gives up getting his son to tell him about the disastrous years.

And Frans Blom, the merchant's little, insecure boy is 52 years old.

A woman like Trudi cannot stay hidden for long, though. She is on her way to Europe, and the plan – although somewhat uncertain – is that the last stop of her journey will be a visit with the Blom family in Copenhagen. And she is certainly not going to pretend to the family and present herself as anybody other than their new sister- and daughter-in-law.

Many of Trudi's old friends have already returned to Europe, and first-hand accounts of bombed Germany have long since reached her. She yearns to come back to fight for the cause of socialism in a new Europe, and the stage is set for a major political tour in good old Trudi style. This is not exactly Frans's cup of tea, so he declines the offer to come along. Her journey will take her through New York to Paris, Bern, Prague, and Berlin – and finally, if all goes well, Frans's Denmark. But there are many uncertainties along the way, many ifs and maybes. How will she be received in France, where she was interned in the first freezing winter of war? And in Germany, divided and destroyed, whose fate is now in the hands of the occupying powers? How difficult is it to cross the borders? How much will she want to stay and settle in Europe? And how much will she want to return to Frans and Mexico? Frans and Trudi have had their first big argument, and no one knows if their love can withstand a prolonged separation.

The myth that Trudi left Frans and went to Europe to settle down for good has been repeated so many times – not least by herself – that it has almost become a reality. And the thought must have been nagging that perhaps they have seen each other for the last time when Trudi in February 1947 sets off towards Veracruz to take the steamer to New York. But Frans has a sum of money in Copenhagen, which he inherited when his mother died in 1933 and which Trudi may need for her fare back to Mexico. And it is clear from their extensive correspondence that from the outset the plan is for her to end her journey with the Blom family in Copenhagen, collect the money, and return to Frans in Mexico.

"I have changed your room into my 'SALA'," Frans writes on March 1. "It is so nice to work with a view to the volcanoes. I put your bed into the front room and sleep there, and my bed and book shelves into your room. One day when I can buy a camera I will send you some photos. Doña Carmen is very particular about the flowers and especially about your midget plants. I gave her your old shoes [and] also a lot of your junk. You certainly had to dispose of junk. I had to hire a truck to get rid of your left over suit-cases, patent medicine bottles, etc. The frayed nylons, old shoes and pieces of blouses I gave to Doña Carmen and I bet that she and her daughters will be the best dressed people around where they live. [...] The little song bird comes around every day and says thanks for his seeds by singing nicely. The Jacaranda

[trees] across the street have lost all their leaves which means that in a week or so they [will] be covered with pastel blue blossoms. And our friends, the volcanoes send their greetings to you every morning."<sup>399</sup> Trudi is in New York, where she will take the ship to France. On March 5 he writes: "You must know that I love you very much. Soon you will be on the high sea and when the ship rolls and you feel sick as hell then remember the place where a lonesome man is sitting on a roof thinking of you."<sup>400</sup>

A welcome change has happened in their economy shortly before Trudi left. Trudi's trip has cost a lot of money they did not have, and the situation is worse than ever. Luckily, their old friend from Chiapas, Dr. Gamboa, is ready to lend a hand. He has switched his post as party chairman with the post of minister of health in the government of the newly elected President Alemán. Just two months after his accession he offers Frans and Trudi a ministerial gift, a kind of scholarship, with a fixed monthly salary, no strings attached.

It is apparently their trip to Chiapas and Oaxaca to report on the prevalence of onchocerciasis that has been used to legitimize the appointment. On principle this is the kind of work they will be performing. So far, the ministry is not getting very much for its money – not least because one of the new recruits has just gone to Europe and may never return. On the other hand, the money still hasn't been paid. Apparently the salary for February has disappeared into a black administrative hole. However, Frans has no qualms about the arrangement. "[I] have exactly 85 cents today, so I must borrow from Ola until the money comes from El doctorcito ['the little doctor', Gamboa]," he writes to Trudi. "WE are writing a report on oncho[cerciasis] in Oaxaca to turn in to the doctorcito. Something has to be done for him; I don't like somebody to say that we are 'aviadores' [Mexican slang for people who do not keep their promises]."<sup>401</sup> Frans has always distanced himself from such dishonesty. Unfortunately, he is temporarily without a secretary, so the report on onchocerciasis in Oaxaca must wait for now – and will apparently never be written.

In 1946 Carlos Frey, the young American who drove Frans absolutely mad in the jungle three years earlier, has passed through the city. "Oh, yes. PIIIIIGS turned up. As dumb and stupid as ever. Some American millionaire is going to send him 1000 dollars, says he."<sup>402</sup> Frans and Trudi refer to him by the unflattering nickname referring to his pig transport across the mountains the day Frans met him in Tecoja. "He must again have fooled somebody with his talk just as he so completely fooled me."<sup>403</sup>

Now, a year later, he is back again. Carlos Frey looks like a mess after so many years in the forest. He is stooped and thin as a skeleton, his skin is ravaged, and his teeth are beginning to fall out. His clothes are worn to rags, and he has to borrow some in order just to look fairly respectable. Frans lends him a coat. "Heaven knows what he does," Frans writes to Trudi.<sup>404</sup>

The answer is that Carlos Frey has come to the capital carrying the "disease" which Frans is going to name Bonampakitis. He is here to fight for his personal share in the greatest archaeological discovery in Mexico in many years. The ruins of Bonampak by the Lacanja River, on the opposite side of the camp where Frans was sick during Christmas 1943, have finally come to the world's knowledge – and Carlos Frey feels entitled to receive the credit. However, it is not as straightforward as it may sound to determine



who should be accredited for the great discovery. One thing was to find the small ruins – a different, and perhaps more important thing was to find the amazing murals hiding in one of the many overgrown structures.

The story is as follows: While Frans was ill in 1943 Carlos took his time to seek out information in the chicle camp El Cedro, where he met the Lacandon Chan Bor, who offered to take him to several “undiscovered” ruins in the area. In return for the appropriate payment, of course. So some two years later, in the company of another American, an heir to the sewing machine giant Singer, John G. Bourne, Carlos Frey brings nothing less than a phonograph with a crank and a stack of records to the jungle. This is payment for Chan Bor. And on February 9, 1946, Carlos and John Bourne arrive at the overgrown ruins in the middle of the great forest as the first “white” people. It is in one of these overgrown buildings that the great treasure is hiding.

For days they investigate the ruins, taking pictures of stelae and temples, measuring and making a map of the place. They are in wonderful spirits, they feel that they have made a great discovery. However, they never find the structure with the murals because their bliss is suddenly interrupted. A group of pirate-like chicleros show up, accusing them of grave robbing and forcing them to cough up \$200 in ransom. Carlos acts as interpreter, John Bourne pays, and soon after, the two Americans head off as fast as they can. When they come out of the forest, John Bourne returns to the U.S., but Carlos shows their work to a few representatives of the National Institute of Anthropology and History (I.N.A.H.) and proposes an expedition to examine the site more closely. The ruins are thus on the world map. But without the murals Bonampak is just another ruin cloaked in forest, and the proposed expedition is not of interest. It is the discovery of the murals that will be the key to Bonampak’s fame.

During May 1946 Carlos returns to El Cedro, where he encounters Giles G. Healey, who has just emerged from the forest after a visit to the newly discovered ruins. The two know each other from before. Healey is an American photographer, sent out by the United Fruit Company with the aim of searching the forest for unknown ruins. The banana giant’s budget gives Healey the freedom to distribute great gifts as payment for good information. He brings boxes of beads, blankets, ammunition, and much more, and he invites the Lacandon on air tours to Tenosique and pays for everything they point at. In 1948, Frans writes that Healey “had been throwing money and presents around in a perfectly idiotic way, when he barnstormed through this country making himself a ‘famous discoverer’ by making snap visits to snapshot ruins. Any ordinary investigator with limited funds will find that Healey has created plenty of difficulties for him.”<sup>405</sup> Nevertheless Healey’s method has proved to be effective. From 1945–47 he reports as many as 21 newly discovered ruins in the area. In late 1945, he, Carlos Frey, and John Bourne have followed Frans Blom’s old route to San Pedro, and with the Lacandon Chan Bor as an undoubtedly well-paid guide, the three Americans have discovered two ruins which Frans had overlooked. In just one day.

Chan Bor has given his second tour of the Bonampak ruins, this time to Giles Healey. And they have been lucky. One of the jungle’s small, red-brown deer has sprung up from the dense undergrowth, and Chan Bor sets out after it with his new rifle. The deer leads the small, long-haired man in his traditional cotton tunic and bare feet across the temple plaza and up

over the stairs that were built into the hillside more than a millennium ago and have now turned into dense jungle again. The deer disappears behind a little mound on a terrace on the hillside. Chan Bor follows it, reaches the mound, and there it happens. The discovery is a reality. On closer inspection the mound turns out to be a building with three long rooms decorated inside from floor to ceiling with colorful figures and hieroglyphs.

These murals were unique in the Maya area at the time; nowhere else could such well-preserved and extensive murals from the Classic Period be seen. At other sites one had to guess and imagine how the interiors of temples and palaces were decorated, but Bonampak provided a magnificent example. The paintings in the three rooms relate a single historic event: the ruler Yajaw Chan Muwaan’s presentation of his little son, and the elaborate rituals that accompany the inauguration of the new heir to the throne. In Room 1 the infant boy is presented to the city’s elite. Room 2 shows a war scene where Yajaw Chan Muwaan and his army take prisoners and conduct bloodletting sacrifices to celebrate the boy’s entry in the line of succession. And in Room 3 the ritual is completed with a public celebration and by the ruler’s own bloodletting sacrifice.

Immediately after its discovery the war scene in Room 2 aroused particular interest. For many years, Maya research had been characterized by a romantic notion that the Classic Maya were a peaceful people who only learned how to wage war later when warriors from central Mexico conquered the south. In Room 2 it was now possible to see a fully equipped army, lavishly outfitted with feathers and animal hides, shields, spears, and war clubs, engaging in a brutal attack on a group of unsuspecting adversaries in everyday clothing and without weapons. War trumpets blow, spears and clubs are lifted to attack, and droves of prisoners are gripped by the hair, tied, and bound. As was so often the case with war in Mesoamerica, the primary purpose was not to kill the enemy, but to take prisoners who could be used for sacrificial rites. On the opposite wall in Room 2 the prisoners are presented before the ruler; several of them have apparently had their nails ripped out, and the sacrificial blood is flowing from their fingers. One prisoner is dead, his severed head lying on the stairs in front of Yajaw Chan Muwaan. With the discovery of Bonampak the myth that the ancient Maya were less violent and ruthless than all other civilizations in world history was rejected, once and for all.

The discovery is sensational, and in the spring of 1947 Carlos Frey has come to the capital to get his share of the credit. Giles Healey’s photos from Bonampak have gotten the Carnegie Institution on their feet and photographers have already visited Bonampak two more times in the company of a handful of the leading researchers of the time. With them and backed by the big banana company, Healey has a huge lead in the race for the honor. Carlos, on the other hand, has only just obtained a proper suit.

The breaking news of the discovery of Bonampak soon reaches the Mexican media, and Frey succeeds in having his name mentioned in Mexico. On May 10, Frans writes to Trudi: “Somebody showed me a copy of a new magazine called VIDA, with a long article by the great explorer, Carlos Frey, who had discovered a lot of Maya ruins. You and I are casually mentioned. HE made the expedition and we were his assistants. Ain’t that nice. But why get sore. He isn’t worth it.”<sup>406</sup> From Frans’s point of view, in a sense Carlos deserves the praise, maybe even a very loud praise – because if Frey has part

of the credit for the discovery, so does Frans Blom. He was the one who led Carlos to El Cedro, where he got the important information. Without Frans, Bonampak would not have been discovered.

Frans must have thought: if only I had found the ruins. "We were only 3 hours away from one of the greatest things of Maya art ever seen," he writes to Trudi.<sup>407</sup> He, too, is affected by Bonampakitis.

Meanwhile Trudi has reached Switzerland, where she lives with her younger brother in Emmental. In order to make money for her stay, she writes articles for newspapers and gives lectures on the radio about Mexico. It's a great success, but she is in dire need of research materials, books, and magazines that she could not bring with her when she left. And Frans finds it more than difficult to raise the money to pay the expensive postage on heavy packages to Europe – not to mention *buying* things he does not already have. The money from the Ministry of Health still has not come, and just to get food on the table has developed into a big issue. There are times when he just eats one meal a day, to keep costs down. When Trudi finally receives a package, an important book is missing. She rushes to the typewriter: "Sweetheart, a minute ago I thought I was going to burst into thousand pieces and that because of you, you son of a bitch. You were the meanest guy when you packed the caja [case] with books. You didn't pack me a single *Vida de los Mayas* and that is now the thing I need most. Really I am goddamn angry. How the hell could you. Now please run to the post office and send me one by airplane. I mean it absolutely. I do not care if you don't eat for some days, as you were so mean."<sup>408</sup> Her frustration is twofold. The book about the life of the Maya is important not only for her work. It is *Frans*, her beloved, who has written it. And she is really beginning to miss him. "Sometimes, when I am in town, I think that I am going to meet you suddenly [...] but mayuk [i.e., no], no guy with 'wild white blond hair.'"<sup>409</sup>

In Mexico City, it seems that Frans's friends have become aware of his worrying situation. At Los Alumnos the electricity has been turned off, Frans is thin and starved, and his white blond mane is in wisps after he has had some abscesses from insect bites removed from his scalp. Dr. Gamboa makes an effort to shake the money out of his ministry, and with three and a half month's delay the money is finally paid out in the middle of May. "I was told that if it had not been for special orders from the doctorcito, I would have to wait two months more," Frans writes. At last he can pay the rent and electricity bills, and all the debt he has incurred with friends, acquaintances, and at the local market. When the debt is paid, the money is almost gone. "After all one has to eat now and then. I did make a great splurge. Went to [the restaurant] Prendes and filled my belly with 10 pesos worth of good food. Unfortunately I had paid the check when a guy with money came in to invite [treat] me. It was too late."<sup>410</sup>

On June 25: "Tonight there will be the first and only showing of the colour reproductions from Bonampak. Imagine that in El Cedro we were only three hours from there. It's a crime that we didn't go, but you remember how sick I was." Everybody who can walk or crawl in Mexico's prestigious archaeological circles is present during the presentation. Afterwards, Frans writes to Trudi:

It was a memorable evening which you would have enjoyed. First Villagra [who took part in the making of the reproductions] gave a rather long, dry technical talk, with lantern slides in black and white. He was too serious and boring about it and the slides were badly projected. He also made me mad because he did not mention that it was our dumb friend, Carlos Frey, who took Healey and the Carnegie to BONAMPAK. – Then the colour copies of the frescoes [...] were dramatically unveiled. It's really a great thing. Borbolla [one of the organizers] asked me to say a few words, and I don't think that certain people liked it. I told them that the first man from the outside of the jungle was Carlitos [little Carlos] and that nobody had given him credit. All was Carnegie glory. I asked Carlitos to stand up, and he was applauded. It was his due. – Then I was surprised that Diego Rivera was sitting in the audience and I called for him to come up to speak [...]. Diego was very pleased and gave one of his extemporaneous talks that are so delightful. We broke up at 10:00 and at eleven I was home. It was an unforgettable evening. A creative evening.<sup>411</sup>

"Sweetheart," Trudi writes from Bern in early July, "I can't send you flowers for your birthday, but I send you some seeds. The Stiefmütterli's [pansies] colour is like that of your eyes. And the Enzian [gentian]. We might [be] the first ones to introduce them to Mexico if they will grow. Treat them well and when I come back, I shall go and plant them at the Ixtaccihuatl and Popo[catepetl]."<sup>412</sup> Trudi has not forgotten the craft she once learned at the horticulture school near Zürich. Actually, she would prefer to return home to Los Alumnos immediately, but she has no money for a ticket, and according to Frans's friends at the embassy in Mexico City it is impossible to send money from Denmark through ravaged Germany to Switzerland. So she sticks to her original plan and stays a little longer in Switzerland to earn money for her onward journey to Czechoslovakia and Germany.

"There are many nights," Frans writes, "when I would like you to call for the 'Old man' and other nights when I would like to knock your door so that I could hold you in my arms. [...] ARE YOU COMING BACK TO MEXICO? I begin to doubt it."<sup>413</sup> "Sweetheart, dear old man," Trudi replies, "Why dear, do you ask that now? I am away only 5 months and you ask already. Do you wish to throw me out of your heart, or what. You are in it stronger than ever. The Mexican government gives me a [travel] permit of two years and you, how long will you keep my place warm? *I absolutely wish to come back.*"<sup>414</sup> On his birthday, August 9, she writes: "I wonder if the pants I gave you last year still are alive or if another woman tore them from you with such passion that they have gone to pieces."<sup>415</sup> Frans responds: "It's rather sad but no woman has as yet tried to pull my pants off. I suppose that it is old age, and I can assure you that many a night I have dreamt of you hoping that you were here to do just that. – What are you going to do about it?"<sup>416</sup>

In the summer of 1947 Frans is facing a daunting task at the Summer School. Another teacher has to give up teaching, and Frans takes on around 200 highly dedicated students, many of whom are young veterans of the Second World War. It is the largest class in the school's history. Frans rents a brand new bus with a driver for his field trips and charges a small amount for student participation. That is not exactly by the book. The students have already paid for school attendance, but as Frans writes: "Temptation was too

great."<sup>417</sup> A group of particularly keen students urges him to take an extra trip, all the way down to Oaxaca in the south, to see the ruins of Monte Albán, and Frans impresses the young people by inviting the state governor Vasconcelos for dinner. Every year at the end of the course Frans receives a select group of students at his home in Los Alumnos, but in 1947 over half of his class shows up. More than a hundred people arrive at the small apartment. "It was a nice tribute."<sup>418</sup>

On the whole it is a summer of intense activity. Considering Frans's economic situation it has never been more important to maintain social connections. "Last week I received a very formal invitation from Mr. Høst [the Danish envoy to Mexico] for dinner. I was the only civilian in the party. All the cabinet ministers, and all the ambassadors. I sat between the U.S. minister and the coal black and very intelligent minister of Haiti. I wish I had a picture of that to send to New Orleans. [...] Oh, it was funny to see Høst's face when Perez Martinez, Torres Bodet, Caso, Gamboa and a few other cabinet ministers gave me the Mexican abrazo [embrace] when they came into the hall. He did not realize that we were that good friends."<sup>419</sup> Frans does indeed surround himself with a pretty impressive crowd of friends. The ministers of Health and Foreign Affairs are there, as is Mexico's most powerful archaeologist Alfonso Caso.

In late August 1947 Trudi arrives in Prague, where she lives with a few Czech friends, whom she has known since the good old days in Paris. Together they dream themselves back, not to the political battleground in Paris, but to the exile in Mexico. Unlike her, they have moved back to their home country. While in Czechoslovakia, Trudi ventures out to the countryside with great alacrity to report on the state's seizing of privately owned factories and the impressive efforts of the Czechoslovak workers to rebuild their country. Yet it is as if politics have slipped a little into the background. After she has met Frans and not least the completely different world of the Lacandon, the old socialist slogans no longer carry the same magical appeal. She prefers to stay in Czechoslovakia rather than Switzerland where she feels completely foreign. "But I feel the Mexican way and feel the Mexican problems and then there is no other Frans around. The hell with it. Even if you are a goddamn son of a bitch hijo de la ch... [son of a wh...] I am stuck with you. So, keep the place warm and the flowers nice and the electric stoves fixed (I want my coffee at six in the morning, if you like it or not). Don't cook the coffee yet, but do tell your father and sister about that ticket. I will be glad to get back on a cargo or any damned kind of cayuco [dugout canoe]."<sup>420</sup>

During the fall there is a steady flow of books and journals from near and far to Los Alumnos. Frans has an uncomfortable feeling of being behind when he meets his colleagues in Mexico City. Maya research is at full speed, and so many years on the sideline can be felt. Now he has written to everyone he can think of and asked them to send him publications so that he can rebuild his lost library. Soon chairs and sofas in the small apartment are filled with tall stacks of books, which have to be moved to the floor when the many guests need a place to sit. In November he writes to Trudi: "I do not know where you will hang your clothes or put your boxes when you get back. Everybody is sending books and soon I will have to put shelves into the bathroom. You will have to sleep, either under my bed or under me."<sup>421</sup>

On December 4 Trudi arrives in a Berlin in ruins. She is offered a position

as a lecturer at the university and another one as an administrator of a state-run farm. But she prefers to give radio lectures on Mexico, and although she has the opportunity to do so, there are limitations as to how much interest the strange jungle people in forgotten corners of a distant country can generate in a Germany where people are still struggling to ascertain whether their families have survived the war. And the minute she leaves the Soviet occupation zone, all the money she might earn is worthless. Her efforts in Berlin will not help her get back to Mexico – which is all that she wants. By now it can only go too slowly.

After spending Christmas with friends in Prague – because it is not possible to go directly from the Soviet-occupied sector of Berlin to Denmark – Trudi arrives in Copenhagen on January 7, 1948. A while ago Frans has finally pulled himself together and alerted his family that his Swiss girlfriend is coming. The news has indeed created a furor, and a minor family consultation has been held about the precarious situation. Old Alfred Blom insists on calling his daughter-in-law Mrs. Blom, but little sister Vera protests. She herself has left her husband and has great sympathy for the idea that her brother has fallen in love with an independent woman. The middle sister, Esther, is a posh lady who keeps to forms, and she would certainly prefer that Frans be married – but if things cannot be different, so be it. The case is therefore settled and the family, eager to see what their dear Frans has now gotten himself into, greet Trudi with great warmth. And they are deeply impressed. Trudi has turned on her charm, she is an impressive personality, and now she even acts the part of a cultivated lady. On Frans's insistence she avoids talking about politics and puts a damper on her otherwise unrestrained cursing and swearing.

In Copenhagen, Trudi is naturally accommodated at the exclusive Hotel d'Angleterre, where the family owns shares and Alfred Blom has been on the board for years. When she arrives, there is a message from Alfred Blom that he and his family are on their way. A quick shower to get the new permanent curls under control, and then she dresses up in the most fashionable outfit she can pull out of her suitcases. Not even a life in a suitcase and almost a year of traveling through a ravaged continent can prevent Trudi from arriving in style. Soon she is surrounded by the whole family, father Alfred, sisters Esther and Vera and some of their children and in-laws. "Looking at your people," she writes to Frans, "I start to think I really ought to marry you. But as you don't want, what can I do, go on in sin."<sup>422</sup>

"[I]t is a hell of a thing to be the Blom's guest in the d'Angleterre, from the bell boy to the manager they fuss around you. And of course it is agreeable to sit at a table and just sign a bill. But I decided not to eat at nights. The bills look big to me and I have to give the tips and all that is your money. I would rather love to spend it with you, dear."<sup>423</sup> She spends the days with one family visit after another. Frans's small nephews and nieces have grown up and are sitting behind the wheel when she has to be driven out to Rungsted on the fashionable coast north of Copenhagen to visit Alfred Blom at the nursing home. She has sent him some of her articles from Switzerland, and Frans's 84-year-old father is game. She shows him her photographs of the Lacandon, and he on the other hand pulls down the large family album from the shelf. Trudi goes strolling with Esther in Copenhagen, which is all nice enough, but perhaps a bit awkward. "With people like your sister Esther," she writes to Frans, "as a whole it would of course [be] easier to do things [as] Mrs.

Blom."<sup>424</sup> On the other hand, she quickly gets along with the divorced sister Vera, whom she visits several times in her small apartment. "She is a very dear person and told that she and you are the black sheeps in the family."<sup>425</sup> In connection with her divorce, Vera has had problems with her nerves. Now she has come through the crisis and found her own legs to stand on. Vera certainly does not find it difficult to identify with her older brother, and his beloved Trudi is, as she puts it, "quite her number."<sup>426</sup> Vera would love to go to Mexico and reunite with her brother.

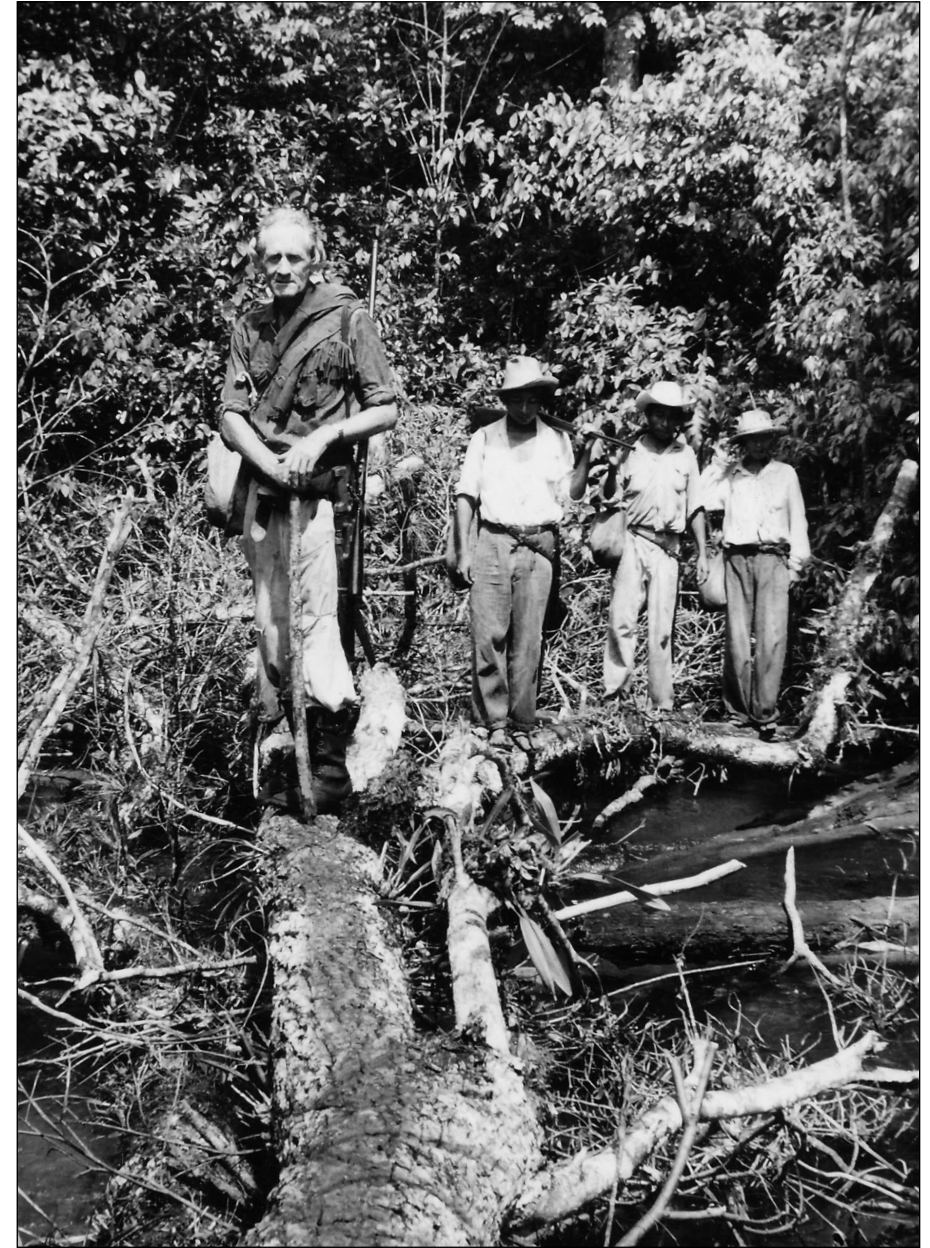
Apart from the family Trudi has time to see quite a bit of Frans's old friend Jens Yde from the National Museum during her eleven days in Copenhagen. He invites her home to see pictures from the trip to Honduras. She also manages to visit the Danish Broadcasting Corporation and one of her lectures is recorded. On top of that, Professor Niels Nielsen from the Department of Geography, who has visited Frans and Trudi in Mexico City, invites her to repeat the success in front of a distinguished audience at the university.

On January 18, 1948, she takes off to Gothenburg in Sweden, where she takes a ship back to Mexico. During the day a snowstorm strikes Denmark. While she is struggling to get all her things to fit in the suitcases, Niels Nielsen stops by at the hotel. He has a gift for Frans, a fine Danish clay vessel from the Middle Ages. Not the most practical thing to bring along across the Atlantic, but the idea is so beautiful that Trudi cannot say no. "At six father [Alfred Blom] came, unwrapped three carnations, a white one and two red, and said: The white and the red are for the Danish colors and the other red is for love. Really charming."<sup>427</sup> Afterwards, there is a farewell dinner with the whole family at Esther's, and then it is finally off into the blizzard with suitcases, hand luggage, flowers in her arms, and "that goddamn pot wishing to smash it all the time."<sup>428</sup> From now on she goes straight home.

Frans stands at the dock in Veracruz with open arms and big kisses ready to receive the love of his life. Thirteen months of separation have not been able to change his feelings for her. Before long Trudi is back in place at Los Alumnos, "either under the bed or under him."

Shortly after Trudi's homecoming Frans takes off on a small tour to Bonampak and Yaxchilan. The trip is of the usual kind, with a small team of paying and quite often a bit too civilized guests. But this is nevertheless an important trip because it is Frans's first to the ruins of Bonampak. And the small group of travelers has the good fortune to meet Carnegie's third official Bonampak expedition, which continued the task of making color reproductions of the amazing murals, led by Frans's old friend, the Norwegian Gustav Strømsvik.

Nevertheless, the journey is only an appetizer, there are bigger things in the pipeline. In May 1948 Frans and Trudi go on their most legendary joint expedition. This is nothing less than a Mexican government expedition, the money comes from the Ministry of Health, and thereby Frans and Trudi are finally making up for the money they receive from the ministry every month. The expedition can be seen as Frans and Trudi's attempt to give a Mexican response to Healey's and the United Fruit Company's lengthy ruin-hunting in the great forest of the Lacandon. They bring along gifts for the inhabitants of the forest, and the plan is to draw up a comprehensive, current report on the living conditions of the Lacandon. Along the way, Frans wants to visit



Frans on the 1948 expedition. Sent as a postcard to his father.

some of the many newly discovered ruins and investigate some information he got in 1943. Perhaps there are still ruins that Healey has not caught on to.

The expedition has a slow start. In mid-May, when Frans and Trudi arrive in San Cristóbal in the heart of the Chiapas highlands from where they send a telegram to Mexico City, it turns out that Dr. Gamboa has gone on vacation, and the Ministry is unable to pay out money for the expedition before the minister returns to the capital in early June. But Frans and Trudi use the



Trudi on horseback with camera, 1948 expedition.



"A crossing in the jungle," Frans named this photo, 1948.

delay to take an alternate route through the highlands of the Tzeltal Maya to Ocosingo where they can retrieve the money. It has become harder to travel in the Zendaes forest, the chewing gum industry has found an artificial substance to put in chewing gum instead of chicle, and chicle extraction has dwindled. The planes are gone, and the many chicle camps and the paths between them are overgrown. It is impossible to bring in enough supplies for the entire period that Frans and Trudi expect to be in the jungle, so they need to have a contact outside who can bring in provisions when needed. This time around they bring much larger loads than usual, gifts to the Lacandon from the government.

We have previously encountered these Lacandon with long hair, bare feet, and traditional shirts made of white cotton. But who are they really, these "unspoiled" Maya, who, as we have heard, are among the indigenous groups of Middle America who have had the least contact with the invading Spaniards? Where do they come from?

The Lacandon whom Frans and Trudi meet live in the Zendaes jungle, but they do not hail from there originally. During the conquest of Mexico there were known to be a number of smaller towns in the Zendaes, and in 1695, after several rounds of penetrating the dense jungle, the Spaniards defeated the inhabitants of the forest. Their largest town was destroyed and



Among the Lacandon at Bonampak, 1948.

razed to the ground in a bloody battle. But these Maya were not Lacandon. Their language belonged to a different Maya language group, namely Chol. The language of the Lacandon belongs in the Yucatecan group, and the Lacandon must therefore somehow originate from the northern part of the Yucatan Peninsula.

The first definite evidence we have of the presence of the Lacandon in the Zendale comes from 1646, when a group of Franciscans asked for assistance, an interpreter who could speak Yucatec, in their attempt to convert some 300 rebellious Maya in the heart of the forest. But this, of course, does not exclude the possibility that the Lacandon may have lived in the Zendale Forest long before 1646. Frans and especially Trudi apparently imagined that the Lacandon had even lived in the area since what we call the Classic Period (AD 300–900) in which case they might have been the founders of the great Classic cities like Palenque and Yaxchilan. In her photographs Trudi compares the faces of the living Lacandon with the many beautifully crafted portraits on the walls and stelae, to substantiate the theory that the present-day Lacandon are the direct descendants of the grand, ancient civilization's greatest men and women. The somewhat romantic dream of having a unique direct contact with the past through this forest people inspires her enthusiastic efforts among the Lacandon. And apparently she succeeds in convincing Frans or getting him in on the idea, despite the fact that the book he calls his bible on



"Young K'in smoking his afternoon cigar."

the subject, Alfred Tozzer's book on the Lacandon from 1907, has a rather different explanation. Tozzer's theory, which in the 1940s was prevalent at universities in Mexico and the United States, was that the Lacandon had immigrated from northern Yucatan after the conquest, fleeing the gunpowder and bullets of the conquistadors, the bondage and tyranny of the new Spanish landowners, and the brutal oppression of the Catholic Church.

Today we know that Frans and Trudi were wrong. During the 1970s the hieroglyphs began to be deciphered, and the texts in both Palenque and Yaxchilan have proven to be written in Ch'olan Mayan, and thus not the Yucatec of the Lacandon. How Frans with all his archaeological knowledge could be persuaded that the technologically very simple forest people were directly comparable with the great old urban culture, is a bit of a mystery. Frans himself noted the conspicuous lack of artistic creativity and specialized craft production of the Lacandon again and again. But the answer undoubtedly has to do with Trudi. The matter of the origin of the Lacandon was very close to her heart. She was ardently enthusiastic about "her" Lacandon and their claim to be the legitimate heirs of the forest. As always, she worked for a higher cause, and now the case of the Lacandon had taken over the place once filled by socialism.

There are two groups of Lacandon in the Zendale. When Alfred Tozzer visited the Lacandon in the early twentieth century, they hardly knew of each other's existence, despite the fact that they occupy areas just 30 miles



“Pancho’s study in a hut abandoned by mahogany workers.”

apart – or four of Frans’s day journeys through the jungle. One group is concentrated around the lakes Naha and Metzabok in the north, the other group lives by Lake Lacanja in the south. The many years of separation have led to a number of minor differences in language as well as culture, but both groups live by hunting and fishing in combination with slash and burn agriculture that, without depleting the soil, provides them with all the fruits and vegetables they need, maize, beans, squash, root crops, bananas, tomatoes, tobacco, and so forth. “Their milpas [fields] are very clean,” Frans wrote on the trip in 1943, “not a weed, not a blade of grass, and if one throws a fruit peel or the like on the floor of the milpa they immediately pick it up and carry it outside the milpa. They clean their feet before stepping into the milpa, as they do not want to bring in seeds of weeds which may stick to their feet.”<sup>429</sup>

The sporadic contact between the Lacandon and the Spaniards apparently had no great influence on life in the peaceful jungle, but around 1900, the timber industry penetrated into the forest, and brought European diseases, smallpox, influenza, and rubella to the defenseless Lacandon. With the delay of some centuries the epidemics made their gruesome entry here, as they had across the entire continent. And the old story repeated itself once again when the Second World War and the chicle boom sent a swarm of disease-carrying workers into the forest. In 1943, Frans could count a little less than 250 Lacandon. Now, five years later, as the chicle workers have largely disappeared, one might think that the Lacandon have the forest to themselves again. But that is not quite the case. Bonampak is located to the south, not far from Lake Lacanja. It was in this area that Healey traveled from 1945–47 and, according to Frans, “created the idea that all people from outside are created for the sole purpose of making presents.”<sup>430</sup> To the north, by Lake Naha, Frans and Trudi are now entering with gifts from the government. And they are not the only guests from the outside.

Not far from Naha there is a camp of American missionaries, working for

the so-called Summer Institute of Linguistics, whose purpose it is to study and document the world’s lesser-known languages in order to promote literacy among the communities and translate the Bible into their languages – and eventually convert them to Christianity. As Frans and Trudi are approaching the camp on July 3, a plane with the self-taught linguist and missionary Phillip Baer is landing.

He is a husky guy, with very little education of the unattractive American type, who say folks etc. Obviously more fitted to be a truckdriver or mechanic than to spread his special version of the bible among the “heathens” or “romanists.” But he has been bright enough to find himself a soft job, good pay, plenty of food and special trips on airplanes, when he needs it. Judging from his Spanish accent he is not very fit to do linguistic work among any people and would even do well by himself if he learnt to speak his own language, Americanese, a little better.

Frans has a pronounced aversion to missionaries. To him they represent – with few exceptions – the suppression and destruction of indigenous cultures. But actually Phillip Baer may prove to be one of the exceptions. After the first detour into the jungle to study a few of the newly discovered ruins, Frans and Trudi are received by Phillip and his wife, Mary, who invite them into their house on the shores of Lake Naha.

They have a house built of local material, plank walls and palm roof. Cook on a kerosene pressure stove, have phonograph and a radio and are studying the language for the Summer Institute of Linguistics (whatever Summer stands for – I still think it stands for Summer vacation all year round). She is a *very* nice woman and Phil gains very much by closer contact. [...] The Baers have been around here for 4 years, off and on, and in a quiet way have helped the Indians, both the Tzeltal and the Lacandon. He is not over bright [...] – but here he is, using involved philological terms to describe the Lacandon language. She tends to house and babies.

The house is only a few yards from the large god house of the Lacandon, the house where they hold their religious ceremonies and store their censers, the so-called “Santos” or “Saints,” and right beside the god house are the houses of the two Lacandon, Mateo and Chan K’in, and their large families.

Mateo has a shotgun, and still can use his bow and arrows. He also manufactures bows and arrows for sale to outside people, but these, he says, don’t have to be really good as they don’t know how to use them. He uses inferior wood for these. In a corner he has a cardboard suitcase, and under many covers a radio, of all things. His battery is dead, and Don Felipe [Phillip Baer] has sent for a new one. Mateo knows all about the mechanics of a radio. Under the ceiling hung a row of bottles with wild honey and a few bundles of tobacco. He is a great tobacco grower, and for what he made on tobacco last year he bought the shotgun and the radio. But for these things he lives and dresses as his ancestors. Mateo had his face badly burned when a boy, and his face looks more like a skull than anything else, but he is an intelligent and friendly fellow.

Frans and Trudi live in a village nearby, a lonely Tzeltal enclave in the middle of Lacandon country. Here Trudi gets the opportunity to play on all keys. She acts the role of the wise government representative settling the strifes of the Indians, she tells them about the good vitamins in fruits and vegetables, and she protests against their free-range pigs and asks them pressingly to put up fences around their houses so that their children do not grow up in a pigsty. Frans notes the poor state of health. "They pay exorbitant prices for worthless patent medicine sold by unscrupulous traveling merchants. It's a pity to see how these poor people get jipped all the time."

A few days later, in late July, Frans and Trudi go back to Naha to visit Phillip and Mary Baer to share their exciting experiences and exchange notes on the Tzeltal and the Lacandon over a freshly brewed cup of coffee. "With a sigh Maria declared how wonderful it was to talk with somebody who liked their Lacandones. We walked out to look at the lake, among the reeds along the shore white water lilies were blooming and little waves rippled the surface. A shallow of white limestone made a spot of emerald green in the midst of the blue waters."

Frans and Trudi have brought three Tzeltal carriers along on the expedition, whom they have hired from their old friends at the finca El Real. As the trip goes deeper into the jungle, two of the men go in advance and build a hut at the next camp – and when the job is done they fire warning shots and blow cow horns. So the next day, when Frans and Trudi arrive, the nicest little cabin is ready, and the local Lacandon have heard the signals and have already emerged. "It always thrills me to see them coming," Frans writes, as they reach the domain of the two Lacandon Pepe and Enrique. "They blend with the forest and I have a vivid feeling that *they*, not we, belong there. [...] These men were much healthier looking than those who live close to syphilization [sic]. Their hands are delicate and of fine shape, in spite of the fact that they are agriculturists. Their bare feet well formed as they are unhampered by the footwear. Their walk is balanced, and like an even glide through the forest."

Pepe and Enrique's low huts, thatch roofs on stilts without walls, are located in a small clearing only shielded by the dense vegetation. The huts are scattered in the forest, and inside the huts are the women and children. The Lacandon usually live together in groups of two or three families and share a god house where only men are allowed to come and perform ceremonies with their Santos. Each family consists of one man with a number of wives and preferably a large crowd of children. The encounter with the world outside the forest and its diseases has affected the men more than the women. The Lacandon men also fight and kill each other, and the conflicts with the Tzeltal settlers also claim casualties. So polygamy has become an increasingly urgent necessity, and boys are in high demand.

"Trudie distributed red bandanas, beads, combs, mirrors, etc. to the women. The men got a file for their machetes and some small fish-hooks, and admonition to bring maize." Barter is over and the crowd begins to stir. "The two women with babies got up and as they walked away they made a little song or signal to the gods to protect the baby. It started with the most exquisite birdlike cry, repeated several times. It reverberated in the silence of the forest and will linger in our memories for times to come."

The next day, Pepe and Enrique come with maize for the mules in

exchange for blasting caps and gunpowder. And then Frans and Trudi set off on unknown paths. On August 17 after a few weeks of leisurely journey they have almost reached their goal, the old chicle camp El Cedro. Two paths meet near a spring, a so-called *ojo de agua*, "eye of water." "The stream came gushing and boiling out of the ground at the foot of a hillside. A chiclero [...] from Tenosique told me 5 years ago that a 'templo aislado' [isolated temple] was to be found at this place." While Trudi and the Tzeltal men continue along the stream to find a suitable place to set up camp, Frans searches the nearby hills. No sign of ruins. He follows the rest of the team, and when he meets up with them, they have found a nice flat spot in the hilly terrain. Strikingly flat. Frans is not in doubt for one second: the small expedition has camped directly on a plateau that was carved into the rock more than a millennium ago. The temple ruin must be nearby. It can only be a matter of time before they find it.

Before nightfall, Frans has found some large stone walls on the top of a high hill, and the next day they can continue their investigations. It turns out that the walls constitute the back of an entire ruined city extending down over the side of the mound.

Walking around to the front we saw that the mound was crowned by two temples quite in ruin. A stairway led steeply down to the lower terraces hidden under the trees. We also noted through the forest that the view from the top must be magnificent when the trees are cleared and the main acropolis dominates a vast plain. It is possible that one can see Yaxchilan from here. Sliding down the ruined stairway we came to a terrace on which we could see the stone heaps of two large buildings. "There must be one more over in that direction." I pointed out the place to Trudie. Soon I saw this structure among the foliage. A vibrating excited voice yelled: "Frans, a Stela." To my left stood what looked like a tree trunk, but it certainly is a fine stela, about 2.5 meters [eight feet] high with a row of incised hieroglyphs giving the [...] date 9-7-15-0-0, 12 Ahau 8 Yax.

This corresponds to September 20, AD 588. Such a date is obviously of crucial importance when archaeologists attempt to place the ruins in a historical context. Already, Frans can determine that the ruin belongs to the middle of the Classic Period, a time when Yaxchilan and Palenque were still only emerging powers. "The inscription is in perfect condition and simple to read. I brushed it off and observed the best time to photograph it. Then we went on and located a large ball court – Old style with low, slanting walls, and some more ruined buildings." It's a great little find, a small triumph for the expedition. A new discovery! They name it Ojos de Agua, for they have found a number of springs in the vicinity.

The Tzeltal guides have gone to El Cedro in advance, and before night falls on August 18 Frans and Trudi arrive after a long and lovely day at the new site. The old chicle central is transformed.

We got to [the] air runway, which was fairly clear. All the houses which had stood along its edges 5 years ago had completely disappeared. The second growth bushes and fast growing trees covered and hid all. Only one palmthatched house leaned sadly towards disappearance and oblivion. [...] It was the best-built house at Cedro, with several rooms,





Frans and Trudi, 1948.

stick walls and a shady porch. I had looked forward to camp here [...]. A badly tattered palm roof and some sturdy posts was all that was left. The stick walls had probably been used as firewood by the last chicleros who worked here, and the stamped dirt floor was littered with mule dung. Here then would [be] the headquarters and operations center of Zendales Expedition for a couple of months.

It is not comfortable. And Frans has just reached 55 years; Trudi is 47.

After a few weeks the camp is rigged up and in use, everything has got its place, and everyday life has arrived. They have fired warning shots and blown cow horns, but so far none of the southern Lacandon have shown up. They have to leave. It is August 31 and the Bonampak ruins await ahead.



The path leading to Bonampak divides at a specific tree but even though the tree is marked in some way, it is obviously difficult to spot. The small group overlooks the sign and continues in the wrong direction. While looking for the right path, Frans is scouting for plateaus and mounds in the forest. One place he hears the sound of another spring, his attention is sharpened, and lo and behold, a few large cut stone blocks and a low terrace quickly turn into buildings, stairways, and small plazas.

We turned a corner and came upon a building in fairly good state of preservation. Trudie darted in and out. In one of the three temple rooms, partly opened by the action of tree roots stood a flock of old Lacandon "Santos" all turning their funny faces towards the wall, like that many naughty school boys. On one side of a doorway on the outside of the building some glyphs painted in red colour are quite clear.

They name the ruin after the forest god of the Lacandon, Kanan Kax. A second new discovery.

Actually they are lost, but Frans has his surveyor instruments and is pleased to add an unexpected area to his map. Once they get out, they will have no difficulty finding their way back. After having wandered around in the forest for a few days, with mules loaded with eighteen old Lacandon censers wrapped in palm leaves, they finally succeed in finding the ruins of Bonampak on September 5. The hut which the Carnegie Expedition had used as a dining room earlier stands in front of the main plaza. Frans is furious. "It boiled in me to see how these supposedly educated people had left their camp." The place is full of garbage, even the building with the murals. "It was littered with wood and cardboard boxes, paper wool, empty medicine bottles, rags, an old sack and more. [...] All this will be properly cleaned before I leave." Later Trudi would help to put the environment on the agenda, but so far the issue was primarily of aesthetic importance. The cleanup simply consists in carrying the waste into the forest where it cannot be seen.

Earlier that year Antonio Tejada and Agustin Villagra, who were responsible for the reproductions, had shown Frans how they made the dirty and faded murals come to light. Now he has the opportunity to repeat the experiment.

We had brought my heavy black blanket, a strong electric lamp, a bed-sheet, a brush and kerosene. The blanket we hung before room #2, the sheet acted as reflector and then I painted the 2 figures of the tortured prisoners with the Kerosene. Again they emerged as by magic from behind the film of travertine which covers them, to disappear into obscurity after a few hours when the kerosene has evaporated.

This method has since proven, not surprisingly, to be devastating for the delicate frescoes.

Frans and Trudi have camped nearby. "Approaching the main trail I noticed what looked like a tribal migration. Many steps of bare feet, large and small were imprinted in the soft earth of the trail. Apparently the guests had arrived. The contrast between the small, graceful imprint of the bare feet and the heavy clumsy print of boots was striking." It is the first group of southern Lacandon that has arrived. Obregón and José Pepe, each with his large family. Here at Lake Lacanja to the south, culture has changed after the encounter with the chicleros. In these parts the Lacandon no longer make their traditional hammocks of forest materials, but buy canvas hammocks in the towns. They do not grind maize with their old stone metates, but instead they have a mill grinder from the market. They have guns, but when the chicleros disappeared the steady supply of cartridges was gone as well, so they still shoot with bow and arrow, and "unfortunately some of them have learned to steal."

By now it is early September, and it is time for new supplies to arrive at an old mahogany disembarkation by the Lacanja River. Only three boxes of medicine arrive for the Lacandon, along with paper for writing reports and some clothes. Not one ounce of provisions. This must not happen. Trudi will have to go to a trade center by the great river, Usumacinta, to get things organized.

Back home in El Cedro Frans is waiting for Trudi when bad news arrives. Trudi is ill at the trading post with her first bout of malaria, and it turns out that she is so ill that she has to be flown out of the forest with the first plane for treatment. Luckily the expedition is approaching its end. Frans goes back to El Cedro to carry out a thorough study of some ruins, which Carlos Frey and John Bourne have reported by Lake Lacanja. As time passes he becomes more and more tired of never being left in peace by the Lacandon, and his Tzeltal men are starting to quarrel with each other and get on his nerves. On October 25 Frans begins the long journey home. Once again he is going back north to the northern Lacandon where, on the evening of November 4, he lies down and falls asleep to the sound of Pepe and Enrique playing their "oboes," as he calls them, and singing in the house of worship. "It sounded weird. [...] It was a faint music, barely rising above the sound of a distant waterfall. They were propitiating their gods with music."

Here Frans ends his expedition diary. When Trudi has recovered from the malaria attack, her plan is to travel around the forest and back to Lake Naha, where she will greet Frans at the home of the missionary linguists, the Baer family. And thus the great expedition of 1948 is over.

Perhaps one senses a touch of condescension in Frans and Trudi's attitude toward their new friends, the Lacandon. At least this is quite noticeable in the report they submitted to Dr. Gamboa at the Ministry of Health after returning to Mexico City, where Frans and Trudi gave their recommendation to the government about what, in their view, had to be done for the Lacandon. In their opinion the existence of this forest people and their way of life was threatened from all sides, and accordingly, their proposal contained a number of quite drastic actions. First and foremost, all private trade with the Lacandon should be banned, so that the state could ensure that the Lacandon got the supplies they needed and were not at the mercy of traveling merchants. Moreover, Frans and Trudi proposed that the northern and the southern groups be placed together in a single location, so that it would be easier to protect them from the intrusive world. And last but not least, the problem of the dwindling population should be solved by the addition of Tzeltal Maya from the surrounding area.

All things considered these are a series of rather unfortunate proposals. Moving the Lacandon together in one place – to transfer them from one place to another – would in itself have constituted a serious interference with their culture. There is also a long history of distrust and hatred not only between the two groups of Lacandon, but also between the Lacandon and the Tzeltal. So the proposal to move the two groups together and even add Tzeltal people is also inappropriate – and impossible to implement without devastating indignities. Frans ought to have known better. The full report is so impractical and political that perhaps we can venture the guess that it is Trudi who has directed the wording. Perhaps Frans was relatively indifferent to this aspect of the matter. It is, however, a fact that Frans lends both his



Frans and Trudi in a bus station restaurant, July 1949.

name and reputation to the recommendations.

Gamboa received the report from his good friends with great pleasure, but fortunately none of the proposals were ever implemented. As Robert Brunhouse puts it: “[T]he Mexican government was not ready to institute a paternalistic economic policy for a few hundred Indians who had stubbornly resisted racial intermixture.”<sup>431</sup>

The year 1949 went by with the usual pursuits, writings, Summer School, money problems, and small excursions. And then during the year there were two notable deaths in Frans’s world. One dramatic and one more predictable. On May 3, Carlos Frey died in an accident on the Lacanja River right by Bonampak, where he had finally succeeded in establishing an official, Mexican expedition with a group of art experts and journalists from Mexico City. The fatal accident got the rumors started. Maybe Carlos was killed by a Lacandon – he had had several affairs with the Lacandon women and had even made one of them pregnant. Or maybe it was the banana giant United Fruit Company that got him out of the way, having had enough of Frey’s endless and vociferous accusations that they had stolen his great discovery, Bonampak. But all we know is that Frans’s inept assistant, Carlos Frey, died when his collapsible canoe went down in the tumbling waters of the Lacanja River. And this was, as we know, not the first time the American

had difficulties handling life in the jungle. So most probably his death was a tragic accident. With Carlos Frey’s death the last obstacle was removed for Giles Healey, who finally got all the fame and glory of the great discovery at Bonampak.

The second death was less surprising, but the most significant for Frans. On September 30, 1949, his father died. The two had not seen each other since Frans’s visit to Copenhagen in 1938. We do not know how Frans received the notice of his father’s death. It was Trudi who answered little sister Vera, with whom she had kept in touch since her visit to Denmark: “Frans loved his father a great deal and always spoke proudly of him. Since I [met] him I understood [Frans]. Father Alfred was such a great lovable man. [...] Frans is well, he only suffered a lot with the pulling of the rest of his teeth, but when it is fixed he will be a danger to womanhood looking so well.”<sup>432</sup>

The news of Alfred Blom’s death comes just at a time when Frans and Trudi are raising funds for their next big expedition to Zendales. At the same time they increasingly ponder the idea of moving away from the city and closer to their great, beloved forests. The only thing they lack is money to buy the house they have in mind. At the end of the year things suddenly start moving. Between Christmas and New Year Frans writes to a friend: “To my great surprise the family lawyer in Denmark wrote that he at last had managed to persuade the National Bank to release my inheritance from my mother [...]. With that money I buy a house in San Cristobal Las Casas, Chiapas. As there is no library of any value in the state I am therefore writing all over the place to get one together, for the use of students who come through. [...] Next step will be to organize a kind of anthropological summer school. Students can study indians and ruins with their material walking outside the door or only a short distance away.”<sup>433</sup>

At the beginning of the new year things go really fast. As the purchase of the house becomes a reality, the funding for the upcoming expedition also falls into place. On February 4 Frans receives a check for no less than \$5000. The stage is set for a real luxury expedition – and the money is only the first of three annual contributions. The generous donor is The Viking Foundation in New York. “Then we are off on the seventeenth of this month,” Frans writes to Vera. “We will have a large moving truck. Load all of our own affairs and all supplies for the expedition on it and place ourselves at the top. First stop is outside our new old house in San Cristobal Las Casas. There we leave our furniture and a good friend who will take care of the house and the changes we want to have done while we go on a picnic in the forest.”<sup>434</sup>

Before they leave, however, one more thing has to be taken care of. San Cristóbal de las Casas is a small, Catholic provincial town where two middle-aged people cannot go about as lovers. So while the small apartment at Los Alumnos is a chaos of boxes and suitcases, just two days before Frans and Trudi leave Mexico City, they are married on February 15, 1950. Judging by how little fuss they make of their wedding day, we must assume that it was an unpretentious ceremony at some public office in the capital. But at least Trudi now finally gets her wish fulfilled. According to Mexican custom Trudi, Frans’s second wife, is now officially Gertrude Duby de Blom. Mr. and Mrs. Blom are ready to move to the country, into their own house with a garden.



## Chapter 9

# Na Bolom –The House of the Jaguar (1950–1963)

*“Pancho Blom has become Balum in Lacandon. Balum means jaguar, and the jaguar is the most powerful of animal spirits. Not so bad.”*

(Frans Blom, 1948).<sup>435</sup>

A long, closed facade under a low, heavy tiled roof looks out onto a dirt road on the outskirts of San Cristóbal de las Casas. It is February 1950. In contrast to the city’s old colonial houses that have high windows with shutters and iron grilles, this building only has doors facing the road. Here there are no windows that let in the light and prying eyes from the outside. But as Frans and Trudi enter through the wooden gate, a large, bright patio opens up on all sides surrounded by the shaded colonnades of the massive building. Above, the sky is clear and blue, a high pine tree is swaying in the wind over the roof tiles which have collapsed here and there. White sunlight is scattered over the tiled courtyard where a lone geranium shines with its green leaves and purple flowers. The sharp mountain light makes the shadow dark, and behind the columns, the yellow plaster walls are broken by a series of low doors leading into one stuffy room after another. When one enters, the dust swirls up and dances in the beam of light from the doorway.

The house, which was built in 1891, was intended as a seminary, and now the small rooms appear like abandoned monastery cells. The owner of the house died while it was still under construction, and the only room that was finished was the chapel in the far corner of the patio – a beautiful, oblong hall with paintings in the vaulted ceiling, slender, fine pillars in neo-classical style along the whitewashed walls, and an abundance of light from one end wall, where a mighty niche surrounds an impressive window. A real chapel. But it was never consecrated and put to use, and the house never functioned as a seminary. On the outside of the large, four-winged building surrounding the central patio, there are a number of additional buildings and small patios, and beyond lies the vast garden, dominated by a small hill on the sloping valley side, completely overgrown with plants and trees that have not been touched in decades.

The place is known under the original owner’s name: the house of Manuel Penagos. But that will soon be changed.

In order for people to remember a new name one had to find a sign of some sort, and put this on the house. In Lacandon Maya I am called Balum, and in the Tzotzil language, another Maya language spoken by Indians around San Cristobal Las Casas the jaguar is called – bolom. This



Na Bolom, 1950.

was not so very different from Blom. Then I remembered a happy little jaguar who walks cheerfully on a frieze both in the ruins of Tula and in the Chichén Itzá ruins in Yucatan. I copied this, gave it colors and had a potter in Oaxaca make me colored tiles with the image of this jaguar. Now one of those happy little jaguars walks on each side of our entrance, and the people, both Mexicans and Indians now refer to our house as “the jaguar house” – Na-Bolom. That way our house got its name.<sup>436</sup>

Frans had first cast his loving glance at the big, empty house in 1941, when he visited Mexico with Webster McBryde in a desperate attempt to recover and overcome the humiliations in New Orleans. Since then he had come by to look at the house as often as the opportunity arose, he had shown it to Trudi with expectant pride, and together they had dreamed and made plans. Now the house was theirs.

In the mountains around San Cristóbal live the Tzotzil and Tzeltal Maya who come into town every day to sell their products at the city market. The hilltops that encircle the valley are dotted with small ruins, and below the mountains winds the newly established Pan American Highway, which runs through the city. It has become considerably easier to access the beautiful old town in the heart of the Chiapas highlands, and Frans prophesizes that the city will soon become a favorite among scholars and other travelers who want to visit the impoverished area that is so rich in nature and culture. And if it were up to him, these people would use Na Bolom as a basis for their studies – and contribute to the household expenses before their departure.

Money will certainly be needed. The inheritance from Frans’s mother



Enjoying a cigarette on the river, 1950.

more than covers the purchase of the house and even leaves a small sum to fix up the house. But more than a standard facelift is needed, if the house is to meet Frans and Trudi's expectations for the place where they want to spend the rest of their lives. Now the dream home has to be realized, and the money from Dora does not reach as far as half their dreams. First, the necessary has to be done, holes have to be made in the walls and windows be built, so the light can penetrate and the air can circulate in the "14 dark caves"<sup>437</sup> that surround the patio. Water has to be installed and a bathroom built, the roof must be fixed, and the large garden managed, so they can begin to grow their own food. The many rooms need decoration, and stables have to be made for mules and horses. The plan is that Na Bolom will evolve into something as unique as an expedition dispatch center where the animals and equipment are always ready to go.

When Frans and Trudi arrived with all their stuff from Los Alumnos in February 1950, they only had the time to unload and to decorate one of the large rooms, the one that would later become the dining room. Then they went on, down the hills to the jungle to look for ruins and visit the Lacandon. Before leaving the capital they delivered an extensive manuscript to President Alemán himself, who promised personally to take care of the publication of the work. The great work is about the expeditions in 1943 and 1948, and bears the title *La Selva Lacandona* [The Lacandon Jungle]. It is of course the Zendales forest, but now the name has been changed – with a purpose. The word Zendales is a corruption of the word Tzeltal, and the forest area was thus named after the Tzeltal Maya who live there. Now the forest of the Tzeltal becomes the forest of the Lacandon – named after the Lacandon, who also live there. The name change is an unmistakable political signal of the rightful ownership of the forest. Ever since his Tulane days Frans has toyed with the idea of renaming the forest, and after he met Trudi in 1943 his map of the area carries the new name. In his diaries he still refers to the Zendales until 1950, when the first major Viking Foundation Expedition goes off to the Selva Lacandona.

The purpose of the trip in 1950 is to solve a small mystery. As mentioned earlier, the last town of Chol-speaking Maya was conquered in the year 1695. According to the reports of the Spanish conquistadors the city was built on an island in the middle of a marshy lake, but the sources are unclear and had given rise to a discussion. Which island in which lake was involved? Could it be Lake Peten Itza in the Guatemalan jungle to the east? Or had the Spaniards who entered the jungle from the west already encountered resistance at Lake Miramar in Frans's Lacandon jungle? There were good reasons to believe the latter. The problem was that Lake Miramar was not on the maps – but for Frans that was obviously just another good reason to go out and solve the case. And Frans has heard rumors in the jungle, he knows where he can find the lake. Before long the lake is tracked down and Frans and Trudi, along with a small group of people, set out on the beautiful lake, on board a newly bought rescue dinghy with outboard motor, of the kind the U.S. aircrafts were equipped with during the war. "The ten days we spent on the big lake were some of the nicest days of my life. Stunning natural landscape, crystal clear waters, islands covered with ruins, caves full of skulls – hunting and fishing, and orchids on the table at every meal."<sup>438</sup> The mystery is solved, Frans says: Lake Miramar fits so perfectly with the descriptions made by the Spaniards

that there is no longer any reason to doubt that this is where the battle took place in 1695.

One day a small group of alligator hunters comes down the Jatate River with canoes full of hides.

With them came three Lacandon men. They were in a pitiful state, with swollen hunger bellies and a ravenous appetite when we gave them food. We soon learned what had happened. For three years in succession their crops had failed. When they set fire to the litter of wood in preparation for planting, the rains had extinguished the fires, and when some maize sprouted out of the ground, a blazing sun would wither the young plants. [...] To an Indian who has no tortillas to eat life is not worth living and stoically they told us that they were going to die.<sup>439</sup>

Luckily, the encounter takes place by the small airstrip at San Quintín, where Frans and Trudi are able to do something about the situation. "At once I sent a message out for aid – hoping that something would be done," Frans writes in a long letter from San Quintín to his old mentor from the Harvard days, the Lacandon expert Alfred Tozzer. The Lacandon at San Quintín are the most isolated group, and the old man has never had the opportunity to meet them. "And by gad something was done," Frans continues. "[Alfonso] Caso's Institute gave \$1000 pesos. Ministry of Health sent medicines, manta [rugs], blankets etc. and what was even more surprising, private sources sent 3½ tons of maize, frijoles [beans] and rice."<sup>440</sup>

In early July Frans and Trudi are back in San Cristóbal, and in that year's Christmas letter to his sisters in Denmark, Frans reports that work on the house is moving ahead quickly.

Most of our furniture is made here after my own drawings. We use Indian hats as lamp shades and jars as lamps. That way it is both cozy and funny. [...] In the main hall where the library is going to be, we had a large fireplace built, the first up here in the mountain valley where it was minus 3 degrees [Celsius, i.e., 26° F] last night. Frost all over the valley and Gertrude almost in tears over her frozen vegetables. People are curious to see the fireplace monster and now three families have started to build fireplaces. However the poor people sneak in to measure ours, without knowing how it is inside, so the smoke is horrible in theirs.<sup>441</sup>

Frans and Trudi's arrival in San Cristóbal has attracted more than ordinary attention. "White" Mexicans have prevailed from the founding of the city in 1528, and when Frans and Trudi moved in the Maya were still forbidden to walk on the sidewalks and risked being put in jail if they were observed in the city after sunset. Frans and Trudi were from a different world. And as time passed more and more people stopped by the big house with the Maya name, where rumor had it that everyone was welcome. Out on the dirt road in front of the house the passers-by casually slowed down and stole a peek in through the newly installed windows. Among the many curious locals was the little girl Beatriz Mijangos, daughter of the mayor's secretary, who lived with her grandparents nearby. Every day she went down to the entrance gate and pulled the bell cord with her heart caught in her throat. Not a sound. No door that opened into adventure. Every day the same small disappointment

and the same boring trip back to her grandparents. Finally one day she heard steps behind the closed door, the lock rattled, and Frans stuck out his blond head and said, "You have to knock, the bell does not work." With these words, the door was opened to a friendship that would last for the rest of Frans's life. Frans took the pretty little girl inside to see the patio, which was now in full bloom, large and small pots everywhere between the columns; trees, butterflies, and humming insects. Inside the house the fantastic library with books enough for a lifetime opened up, and soon Trudi's boxes with silver jewelry were also brought forward and displayed.

After the meeting at Na Bolom the twelve-year-old Bety had no time to care at all for Spanish and math, she skipped school and showed up at Frans and Trudi's place all the time. "What are you doing here?" Frans would say, with a twinkle in his eyes and a smile on his lips. And then he would let her in. One day her father came and furiously demanded that Bety come home. But she refused, she clung to Trudi's dress until a temporary solution had been found. After a few weeks, where Bety worked as a maid in the house, her father gave in, and she moved into a room by the stables with a view of the magnificent garden. From now on Bety was part of Na Bolom.

From Frans and Trudi's perspective the Viking Foundation Expedition in 1950 was a great success, but the American donor had probably hoped for more than the resolution of an incomprehensible mystery and the rescue of a handful of famined jungle people. And when Frans after a second expedition in 1951 returned home again without finding anything comparable in the least with the murals of



Bety Mijangos.



Bonampak, the Viking Foundation stopped the cooperation one year early.

The income from the two major expeditions had secured Frans and Trudi a sizeable group of mules and horses, money for furniture from Mexico City, and salaries for the many workmen who filled the house. Furthermore, the household now consisted of Bety, who had gradually taken over the kitchen from Trudi, and another girl, Juventina, who was in charge of the cleaning. But now that the generous employer had disappeared, Frans and Trudi were forced to scale back activities. Fortunately the house was starting to look good. And instead of large, spectacular expeditions Frans could concentrate on his surroundings. There were ruins enough, right nearby.

Most of the many small ruins in the mountains around San Cristóbal have been ravaged by looters long ago, but on the Moxviquil Mountain half an hour's ride outside of town there is a relatively pristine and pretty little ruin, nicely tucked away among the pine-clad hills. The Moxviquil ruin is exemplary in the sense that it looks like many of the other ruins in the area in terms of structure and size: an open plaza with a ball court from where broad stairs lead up to one plateau after another, and on the very top of the small mountain the main plaza where the central temples of the town once stood. In two excavation seasons, 1952 and 1953, the forest around the ruin is removed, and Frans and his crew find a number of graves and a bunch of tools, weapons, and pottery. The members of the elite of the ancient town were placed in large life-size urns after death, and Frans, more than a millennium later, finds the remains of their skeletons. With great difficulty, two of these burial urns are transported down the steep hillsides to Na Bolom, where Frans converts a room into an archaeological showroom.

In addition to a group of workers whom Frans has hired among the Tzotzil Maya in the area, he carries out the excavations in the company of the American chiropractor and university dean Dr. Clarence W. Weiant, who, in addition to his many other interests, is fascinated by Mexican archaeology and has worked with Frans's old colleagues Matthew Stirling and Alfonso Caso. When Blom and Weiant first met at a congress in Jalapa (the state capital of Veracruz) in the spring of 1952, the easy-going American scholar immediately liked the Dane and described him later with great warmth: "There was nothing stuffy about him, no trace of intellectual snobbery. He was rugged, intense, filled with enthusiasm, friendly, outgoing, happy to answer questions, ready to listen to others."<sup>442</sup> Weiant was captivated by Frans's interactions with the Maya, whom he did not just exploit as cheap labor:

He was particularly fond of the Indians of Chamula [the largest group of Tzotzil Maya near San Cristóbal] [...]. He knew many of them by name and took an interest in all their problems. On our way to the site each day we had to pass through one Indian village. If we met any of the people, there were always profuse salutations, and often brief friendly conversations. If somebody was ill, he always showed concern and several times insisted upon my being invited into their huts to render chiropractic service to the sufferer. I enjoyed such opportunities, and was usually quite successful in solving the problems.<sup>443</sup>

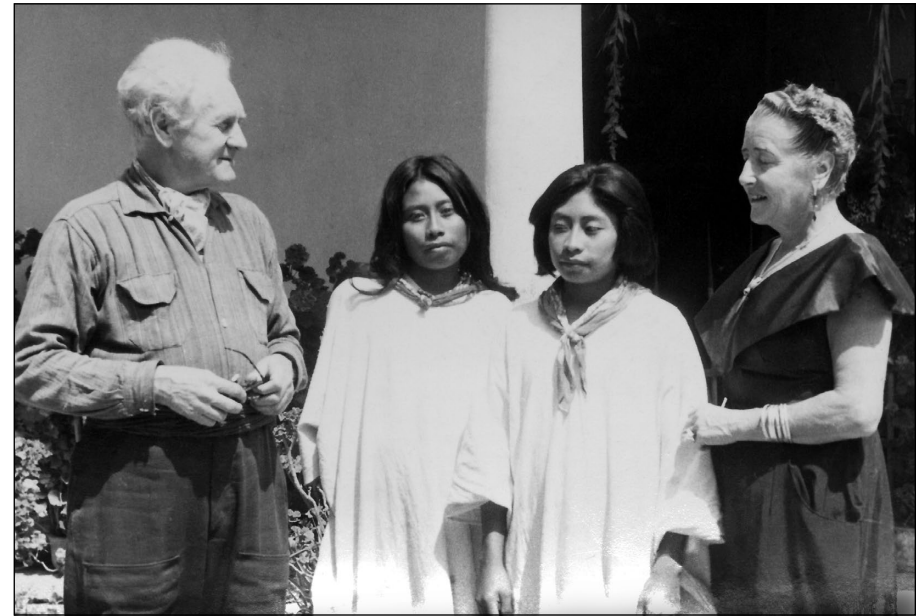
For the first part of the excavation Frans is drawing on his own, rapidly shrinking resources, but before long he manages to obtain money from a somewhat surprising quarter. The donor is American, the so-called Mayan

Clearing the way to Moxviquil.

Order. This somewhat suspect organization procures its income by selling horoscopes based on the old Maya calendar – which means that they are based on speculation, since our knowledge of the ancient Maya use of astrology is quite sparse. Afterwards Weiant comes along, paid by the Explorers Club in New York, which Frans had left indignantly in 1931. Now all contributions are welcome.

The summer school for American students, which Frans had imagined as a potential source of income, never comes off the ground. Frans is ahead of his time. Only in the mid-1960s, with more extensive tourism, American students begin to arrive in Chiapas. But Dr. Weiant is far from the only one who has found his way to the House of the Jaguar. Frans's dream of making Na Bolom a scientific center is coming true, although it takes place in a less structured – and less profitable – form than imagined. "Little by little we are putting together a library," he writes to his little sister Vera in August 1952. "Many gifts come in, and now loads of young scholars are beginning to visit us for information. We were told that we would be lonely here in the province, however, our house is becoming so famous that we now charge money in order to see it. 5 [Danish] kroner for a visit with real Chiapas coffee, and for 10 kroner you get house, coffee and a brief display of color slides of Indians and jungle." And it is not only scholars who come by. The tradition of an open house from Los Alumnos is back, and every Saturday or Sunday guests are swarming in from near and far. "[M]any interesting people whom we would not meet in a big city now come to our door. Painters, writers and ordinary people come in for coffee and Gertrude's fine cakes. [...] Well, sometimes there are almost too many visits."<sup>444</sup>

The Lacandon are also beginning to come from the jungle to the mountains to visit Na Bolom. Trudi has given the disease-ridden people an open invitation to come and get free medical care, shelter, and food as often as they need it. During 1951 a tragedy has hit the jungle. It concerns the Lacandon Vicente Bor and his family from the swampy area around San Quintín, whom Frans and Trudi have visited the previous two years. While he is out looking after his field, his family is attacked by a group of alligator hunters. Coming home, he has found his hut burned to the ground, and his eldest wife and four of the children have been abducted. Scorched hammocks and wooden tables, grinding stones, glass bottles, pots, and calabash bowls are spread out in bits and pieces over the still-smoldering settlement. His second wife is heavily pregnant. She gives birth and the child dies shortly after. And the following year she also dies. Bor is left alone with two small boys. Desperately he struggles up the river with the two children and arrives in a deplorable state at Frans and Trudi's friends at the finca El Real. In the fall of 1952 alarm bells are ringing at Na Bolom, and Trudi saddles up immediately and takes off to the jungle. Soon she returns with the small, frightened Lacandon family who must now try to recover from the shock in these very unfamiliar surroundings. In Na Bolom also the Lacandon must eat with knife and fork, and for Bor it will be an eight-month struggle with the civilized manners of city life. It is considerably easier for the boys to come to terms with the new circumstances, but their 50-year-old father soon misses his normal life. But he cannot easily return to the forest. The Lacandon have a sharp division of labor; as a man, Vicente Bor can grow maize, but he doesn't know how to make a tortilla. He needs a wife to take care of the household.



Visiting Lacandons in Na Bolom.

At one point he takes the bull by the horns, goes out in the streets of San Cristóbal, and asks the passing – and highly astonished – Tzotzil women to marry him and follow him back to the jungle. In vain.

When Trudi finally takes the Lacandon family back to the forest, they bring an ox and mules heavily loaded with maize, seeds, and tools to create a proper new home for them. Back home in Na Bolom Frans is relieved, not only that the whole story ended well, but also to finally have the house to themselves. Trudi's many lodgers have started to get on his nerves quite a bit. The Lacandon's stay is free for them, but certainly not for him. The money from the Moxviquil excavation is spent even before he gets it, and the costly resettlement of the Lacandon in the jungle has come about with borrowed money, at Na Bolom's expense.

But it is not only the Lacandon who create problems. Actually, the situation is even worse with two American lady friends who as paying guests of the house have helped pay the bills for months. One of them has, to Frans's deep regret, started drinking and behaves in an embarrassing manner when she is drunk. Frans may very well like her, but he will not accept her drinking. At the same time Frans is also drinking – but in secret. The second lady friend surely makes him long for a soothing schnapps. From the moment she walked through the door she showered Trudi with beautiful words and expensive gifts, "and at the same time – what you naturally did not see, she was rude and slighting to me," Frans writes to Trudi in November 1953 when the situation has reached a climax.

She wanted to create trouble between us and nothing would have suited her better than to have driven me out of the house. You have no idea what I sometimes suffered and how I was on the point of blowing up. But if I had done so you would not have believed it. Then at times she wanted





A cold day in highland San Cristóbal.

something out of me. Came rushing in to grab me, kiss me and rub her body against me. There were again times when it was pretty torturing. Next day she again gave me the rude cold treatment. In thousands of little ways she did small things to be nasty and hurt. We at last both fell for her blandishments, which was silly of us, and unfortunately it can't be undone.<sup>445</sup>

After a major argument Trudi has gone to Mexico City to get treatment for an arterial disease in her leg. "Come home, my darling to our Na-Bolom. Come home to your flowers, your dogs, the servants who love you, the

friends who love you and to me who goes around lost when you are not here and who loves you with a deep warmth that is all for you. Let us have peace in the house and try to forget this period of sordidness. Let us return to those sunny and happy days of before. Infinitely, I love you, Pancho."<sup>446</sup>

For a while, peace is restored in the "jaguar cage," as Frans calls the house in a letter to Vera in Denmark.<sup>447</sup> Vera is about to carry out her plans of coming to Mexico and visit her older brother, whom she has not seen since 1938, when Frans came to Denmark for the last time. But before she arrives Frans receives a visit from the young Danish writer Karl Eskelund and his Chinese wife. Eskelund intends to stay at Na Bolom for a few months to write a travel book in which Frans will be included. In the fall of 1954, Frans writes: "He pumps me every morning for an hour or two. Wonder what he gets out of it. I like the guy very much."<sup>448</sup>

In addition to the section on Frans in his book *Kærlighedens Kaktus* [The Cactus of Love],<sup>449</sup> Eskelund writes an article for the magazine *Hjemmet*: "The Danish friend of the Stone Age Indians, Frans Blom."<sup>450</sup> If the article is only a roughly correct representation of Frans's report, it is noticeable that the old man is now really beginning to dramatize the story of his life. Here we get the story of how he was sent away on a one-way ticket to Mexico when his debt was greater than his father's patience, and how just two days after his arrival he saw a man get shot. "Here he would not get bored." The years at Tulane University are not mentioned with a single word, and Frans's first meeting with the Lacandon is very reminiscent of a scene in a children's book about the Wild West – as out of the blue the wild Indian with bow and arrow suddenly appears on the path in front of the young Harvard archaeologist. "Frans raised his hand as a sign of peace. There is something about his broad Copenhagen smile that inspires confidence. Otherwise, the little man would have run off. Now he approached slowly and vigilantly." It goes without saying that these jolly savages are portrayed in the article as the true descendants of the great ancient Maya culture. Nevertheless, there is quite a bit of charm in Frans's little story about how the Lacandon one day succeed in making fun of Trudi. Frans and Trudi return from a hunting trip and hear noise and singing from Chan K'in's cabin.

They found Chan Kin and the other Lacandon lying in opposite hammocks. One was foolishly laughing, the other babbled. Several bottles were below them on the floor. Gertrude immediately realized what had happened. One of the bottles was still half-full. She took it and smashed it against the fireplace. At that moment a stifled laughter could be heard from the jungle. All the women stood behind the trees and watched the scene, and they were about to die of laughter. Chan Kin was also writhing of laughter. Frans began to get suspicious. He took one of the bottles and sniffed it. It was water. "Do not say a thing," he interrupted Gertrude, who was already in full swing giving a lightning talk. "They have made fun of us all – it is all a comedy." Gertrude is Swiss. They normally have a hard time laughing at themselves, but that day she laughed until she was about to get pains in her side.

The cheerful tale is concluded by a more serious observation. "Unfortunately," Eskelund writes, "there is not always water in the bottles." The endangered people are in fact – among many other threats – drinking to



excess.

Unfortunately the same can be said about Frans. For many years he has succeeded fairly well in keeping his drinking under control. His health is fine, and although his relationship with Trudi sparks periodically, their marital problems have not yet broken out into the open. The Swiss lady may not have a lot of self-irony, but she has enough backbone for two, and Frans is willing to go to great lengths in order not to lose her. But the past year has been no easy matter. The problems are piling up, their economy is under pressure, and the many guests, who have to be shown around and served food, have become a chore instead of a gift. The cork sits more loosely in the bottle, and the peace that came upon the jaguar cage after the jealousy drama, looks more like a temporary truce.

Towards the end of the year, however, a few very joyous events happen. Vera has bought her ticket to Mexico and is in the process of preparing for the big trip, when Frans receives the message that he has been selected to receive the prestigious cultural award El Premio Chiapas. In 1954, Frans's influential friends in Mexico City have sent their warm recommendations of the Dane, and the hint has not been lost on the jury. The committee's motivation for awarding Frans the great honor and the accompanying 5000 pesos is a solemn tribute to the Danish "Viking's" scientific discipline and great love for the Indians. And Frans's honorable independence from the enticing goods of the material world is stressed.

He has had to go through the heroic school of sacrificing everything that modern man holds dear, completely forgetting that in our century time is no longer measured by the watch, but in money [...] He is honored for his lifelong work for the people of Chiapas, and even though materially the honor is insignificant because the economic state of our people demands it, we are sure that his spirit will transform these pesos into centavos, into smaller parts, one for each inhabitant in this grateful province, as a symbol of sympathy equaling his own.<sup>451</sup>

"The money is most welcome," Frans writes to Vera a few weeks before the award ceremony. "We are in debt because we are still improving the house, and it will be a relief to pay off the debt. There will also be something left over for our Christmas party."<sup>452</sup> In Frans's acceptance speech, which he gives at the celebrations in Tuxtla Gutiérrez on November 2, the unpaid debt is obviously not the subject. Here Frans emphasizes that despite his distant birthplace he has now become a genuine "chiapaneco" and that he will continue to work for Chiapas "until the day I am buried in this blessed place and until my bones have turned into good archaeological objects from Chiapas."<sup>453</sup>

A few weeks after the ceremony, Vera arrives and moves into Na Bolom. Her arrival is eagerly awaited by both Frans and Trudi. Soon, she has her own favorite spots around the house, her own routines and chores. She soon takes over a large part of the household and enjoys being in the kitchen with Bety who has become an adolescent girl. During the day Vera's happy laughter resounds in the patios, where it is otherwise Trudi's commanding voice that dominates. And in the evening Vera rides out and exercises the dogs while the sun sets and sends a wealth of red light across the beautiful valley.

Frans and Trudi outside Na Bolom, December 1954.

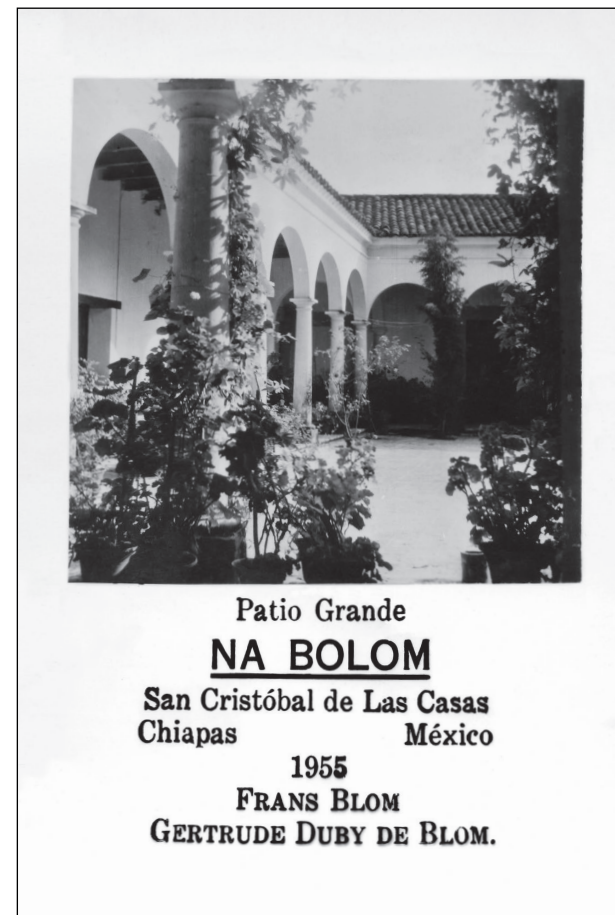
Afterwards she sits with Frans in the library in front of the open fire.

But the mood in the big house is tense. Frans and Trudi are now barely able to communicate. At the long table in the dining room Vera is in doubt about where to sit. Frans and Trudi are seated, very symbolically, at each end of the table and have to shout to hear each other. Trudi sits at the back of the room against the warmth of the fireplace, while Frans sits in the draft from the doors connecting the main patio with one of the patios behind. He has every reason to finish the meals as fast as possible and retire to a far corner of the house, perhaps along with a few of the guests who would like to hear the old archaeologist tell tall tales from the jungle. Meanwhile Trudi runs around and keeps the servants occupied, showing tourists around, chasing into town and back on always urgent and important errands and without indulging herself with a five-minute break and a moment of reflection. Minor problems develop into dramatic disasters, and if guests exceed what she perceives as general decorum, she lets her bile flow freely and makes the walls tremble in halls and living rooms with her multilingual cursing. In the spring of 1955 it all becomes too much. Trudi is on the verge of a nervous breakdown, and once more she goes to Mexico City to get treatment for her arterial disorders.

When Trudi returns three months later, Vera has, to the relief of all parties, taken total control of the house. But her mitigating presence can only dampen Frans and Trudi's problems. Apparently they now try to clear their differences by avoiding each other as much as possible. Trudi has hardly come back from the capital before Frans takes off to Palenque to see K'inich Janaab Pakal's famous tomb for the first time. The walk up the steep stairs of the Temple of the Inscriptions has not exactly become shorter since his younger days. But this time, after arriving at the top, the tour continues downwards inside the temple since in the meantime the stone slab with the strange holes, which Frans had noticed in 1923, has been examined. A narrow staircase has been discovered, leading all the way down below the temple to the burial chamber with the amazing stone sarcophagus. After a thorough look the trip goes back up to the top of the temple, where Frans can breathe fresh air while enjoying the unparalleled views. Frans is over sixty years old, but for his age, he is in good shape, especially when he is away from home.

In 1955 he makes two trips to Palenque, and another trip to Yaxchilan, and at the end of the year a two-week tour on horseback is planned in search of ancient insects that at the dawn of time have been caught in pine tree resin and are now encapsulated in the pieces of amber that can be found all over in the mountains of Chiapas. Frans has been approached by a group of entomologists from Berkeley, and this is not his first amber expedition. But this time he will not be able to join in. Shortly before the departure, he feels a vicious pressure on his chest. Trudi takes over the expedition, while Frans stays in bed and is treated for pneumonia, and Vera takes care of him and the house.

When Vera leaves Na Bolom and Mexico in the spring of 1956 after staying for eighteen months, Frans is back on his feet again. Vera brings with her a copy of the first volume of *La Selva Lacandona*, Frans and Trudi's great book on the forests, written many years earlier when they were still in love and breaking new boundaries together. For several years, the manuscript has been gathering dust in a forgotten corner of President Alemán's office.



Na Bolom postcard, 1955.

Now it has already been years since he resigned, and after new revisions and corrections the first volume of the book has finally been released in 1955. It is something as unique – and confusing – as a travelogue without chronology. The narrative jumps freely between the expeditions in 1943 and 1948; diary quotes about chicle extraction and the wood industry alternate with descriptions of fincas, ruins, and Tzeltal villages. But first and foremost, this first volume is about the Lacandon, in Trudi's text and photos.

Trudi follows Vera on the journey and drags her here and there on the trip through Mexico. Frans excuses his wife to his sister: "[S]he expects to be treated like a 'famous' lady. Unfortunately she cannot understand that people get tired of her very quickly. The Lord only knows how it will go without your calming influence here."<sup>454</sup> When Trudi returns from Mexico City, she is so angelic that Frans gets suspicious. On April 30, he writes to Vera: "Now she's in bed – knitting socks – I walk around and wonder how long this can last."<sup>455</sup> For a time peace is preserved, Vera's spirit still rests upon the house: "I have hung your picture in most of our rooms," Frans writes, "and when she explodes I point at it. It has an immediate effect."<sup>456</sup>

Whenever Frans moves around too much, the pain in his chest comes



Trudi and Frans.

back. But so far, he keeps it to himself. It is as if the whole year goes by with subdued pain but as long as he doesn't admit it, Frans has all the peace he needs to perfect the second volume of the old manuscript. 1956 really turns out to be a year of truce, a year without too much fuss. The second volume of *La Selva Lacandona* is Frans's work. In a somewhat more transparent form than the first volume it recounts his meeting with the many ruins of the Lacandon forest. Eventually, the manuscript is published in 1957, and with its publication Frans's old dream of the ultimate book on the great forests comes true.<sup>457</sup>

In the early summer of 1956, Miguel Alemán's successor, President Adolfo Ruiz Cortines, is in Chiapas. All personalities in San Cristóbal hurry off to Tuxtla Gutiérrez and stand on top of each other in the tropical heat to see the great man. But not Frans and Trudi. For years they have had private dealings with the country's leading politicians, and if there is anything the two cultured Europeans absolutely do not do, it is to stand in a crowd among thousands of people, sweating for hours, hoping to get a glimpse of a big man in a big car. But as it turns out, the big men need the Bloms. The government of Chiapas wants to borrow Na Bolom's museum premises to organize an exhibition in honor of the president. But Frans envisions how the entire corps of thick, clumsy suits will come ravishing through his beautiful patio and overturn all potted plants in their path. So he declines. "Firstly, we were going to pay for the honor, and secondly, I am quite confident that many things would be stolen. And when the President gets chased through an exhibition, one runs so fast that the poor man will not have the time to look at the objects."<sup>458</sup> The task is too extensive, the pace too high. What previously would have been a great opportunity is now but a great nuisance.

In Na Bolom Bety has gradually taken over Vera's role and now controls the household in her own quiet way. And there is plenty to do. At the end of 1956 Frans goes through the large guestbook, which is always placed by the main entrance, and counts that Na Bolom in the past year has had guests from no fewer than 29 different countries.

Mostly it is archaeologists, anthropologists, and linguists who visit San Cristóbal to study the Maya, but there are also other researchers with specific interests such as the history of tomatoes, the dryness of tobacco plants, and psychoactive mushrooms. In addition, a large number of artists, as well as a growing number of tourists arrive. Or "guests" as Frans and Trudi prefer to call them, so that no one confuses Na Bolom with the hotels in the guidebooks. The Danish travel writer Hakon Mielche quotes the succinct house rules which he found on the wall of the room he rented in Na Bolom: "You must understand that we are not running a hotel. This is our home. Therefore we do not respond to complaints."<sup>459</sup> The rooms are named after villages around San Cristóbal, and Trudi's powerful black and white photos adorn the walls of the small rooms and tell their own story of the different places.

Frans's fine library is in constant use, both during the day when many scholars search for information and in the evening when people gather to tell stories. "The room was more reminiscent of a big game hunter's living room than of a quiet library," the Danish painter and draftsman Per Ulrich wrote. "Jaguar hides on the chairs, on the wall hung a large puma hide and a snake skin measured the height of the library. One end wall was taken up by

a fireplace, in which large logs roared in a merry fire. Along the walls were shelves full of books in every possible language on Chiapas and the Maya people. On top of the shelves and on the mantelpiece stood rows of restored pots and vases, stone and clay figures from archaeological excavations. A glass door leads out to the flower-filled patio where the roses and the carnations hung their heads in the persistent rain."<sup>460</sup> Frans has named his library after the Dominican friar and advocate of the Indians Bartolomé de las Casas, who has also given his name to the city, and by now almost 4000 titles are crammed into the shelves – books and journals, maps and old manuscripts have arrived as gifts from around the world. Na Bolom is given the status of a public research center, and Frans and Trudi are therefore exempt from paying property tax. But there will never be enough money to hire a much-needed librarian.

Among Na Bolom's many guests who come over the years there are a number of people who listen very attentively, equipped with pens and notepads, maybe even microphones and tape recorders when Frans tells stories from his long unsettled life. It may be Americans who come to hear the story about his time as a recognized archaeologist in the United States, or Danes like Eskelund, Mielche, and Ulrich, who are trying to provide their Mexican travel accounts with a Danish angle. "Pancho tends to respond very briefly to any question," a Danish journalist writes, "but when he starts to narrate, he depicts things and conditions so that one experiences it all with him."<sup>461</sup> Frans is flattered by the interest and he is happy to recount – but he decides for himself what will come forth.

In February 1957 Frans's chest pains become so severe that he is no longer able to hide them from Trudi. An X-ray is sent to Mexico City, and soon the saddening verdict falls: Frans's heart has grown. The crushing pain is not caused, as originally assumed, by pneumonia, but by Frans's big heart. The message from the doctors is clear: no strenuous efforts for a year, no tours on foot through dense forests, up and down the mountains, temples, and pyramids. A long and boring year.

For Trudi the illness is a much-needed opportunity to show Frans that she really loves him. Trudi cares about his health and is happy when things seem to go the right way. Twice Frans undergoes an examination by the specialists in Mexico City, and twice he returns with good news. Yet it is as if his health is the only thing that improves. Frans is still suspicious of Trudi, his confidence in their marriage is gone. He no longer dreams of retrieving the happy sunny days of the past. Although his heart recovers so well that a third planned visit to the capital becomes unnecessary, the inevitable has happened by the time the dreary year is over. Frans has fallen into a downward spiral that is to end with his death.

"Frans dear," Trudi writes in June 1958. "People have forgotten that you passed through a pretty bad period in your life, but they will fast remember if they see you just once in [a] bad state, and that, believe me will ruin what you built up. [...] I go away with a sad feeling, which very likely does bother you very little."<sup>462</sup>

Frans has always been drinking behind Trudi's back. When she was out of the house, the bottles came out in Na Bolom. And when he was traveling, the drinking was a regular habit. He came home with ruddy cheeks and



Receiving guests at Na Bolom.

surrounded by strange allusions from his travel companions. Even on the large and successful expeditions in 1945 and 1948, he drank every time she was out of sight. Now his illness and the long standstill have made his restless blood boil over. The Tulane devil is out again, inhibitions are gone, and Frans has started talking gibberish to the tourists. Trudi imposes a ban on alcohol on Na Bolom's premises, but it is too late. Countless secret smuggling channels have been in use for a long time and Trudi is apparently woefully right that Frans could not care less about her and her continuous dramatic projects.

In response to the problems Trudi has started going back and forth between the Lacandon jungle and San Cristóbal. Soon the house abounds with Lacandon. "Trudi is showing them off," Frans writes to Vera, "and some money she earned goes to buy our kind of garments for them. Not something



In the library at Na Bolom.

for the house. So the leading lady now has a new play. It is all somewhat hopeless. She only thinks of herself, talking only about herself and buying garments. But you must not scold her for that. Then things will just become worse for me."<sup>463</sup> To top these private issues, Trudi on her way back and forth from the forest manages to get herself accused of kidnapping. The accuser is a German archaeologist who has lived at Na Bolom some years earlier, and the abducted boy is K'ayum, Vicente Bor's youngest son, who lived with Frans and Trudi with his father, after the tragedy six years earlier. Trudi has eagerly welcomed anything that may distract her attention from the home front, and she explains at length to anyone who wants to listen about the injustices committed against her and obtains an official permit to take care of

K'ayum from Alfonso Caso's Institute of Indian Affairs. It is no trivial matter, it concerns a child's life, she says. The affair soon runs worldwide via the news agencies, and soon Frans's sisters can read about it in Danish newspapers and magazines: "Dane kidnaps Indian."<sup>464</sup> "Wants to save the rest of an ancient civilization."<sup>465</sup> "The truth about the lost Indian boy."<sup>466</sup> The articles are exotic and harmless. Trudi is acquitted across the board, and Frans's drinking is not mentioned. So far, no one in Denmark knows how bad things are at Na Bolom.

Trudi does what she can to get through to Frans and help him. Physically, he is in fine shape again, the task that still remains is to boost his morale. Frans needs encouragement. In early 1959 Trudi brings him on a luxury trip to Tikal in Guatemala and Copan in Honduras – two of the great Classic ruins that have meant so much in his life. The tour lasts for eight days. It is paid for by a dear, old guest at Na Bolom, an American lady named Winifred Pitkin. Seven days in Tikal, where several plazas and temples are now cleared and excavations are in full swing, plus one day in Copan. But it does not help. Back at Na Bolom the group of Lacandon has now grown to seven. Frans is outraged, the Lacandon are expensive, and there are no reserves to draw on. In a bold moment he dares to ask: "Is it really necessary? When I said that to Trudi, she exploded, and the day after she purchased a new horse on credit."<sup>467</sup> Trudi obviously has a different explanation for why they are so poor, namely that Frans drinks up the money and scares the guests away. But both of them have lost the desire or ability to see the situation from the other's perspective. Communication has broken down.

Nevertheless Trudi succeeds in getting Frans along on a small, comfortable ride to his beloved Yaxchilan and Palenque, as a guide for a group of guests. He is with them for a week, then he breaks off and goes home while the rest of the group goes into the jungle to the Lacandon with Trudi. Back at Na Bolom he sinks deeper and deeper into his armchair in front of the fireplace in the library, and gets outside less and less. To Vera, he writes: "There is now telephone here in the city, and from time to time I am summoned to receive a call. However, I have been a slave of telephones for so many years that now I do not want a telephone in the house and god damn it will not chase into town to receive a call. End of conversation."<sup>468</sup>

Trudi also exchanges letters with Vera. But she does not reveal the actual state of affairs until the end of 1959, when the situation has really gotten out of control and she needs all the help she can get. At Na Bolom everything is a secret, she has no one in San Cristóbal she can talk to. "Yesterday he was so drunk that he fell on the bench in the corridor, and this minute he sits drunk with the guests we have and makes a fool of himself."<sup>469</sup> The worst thing is that Frans apparently does not have the remotest desire to stop drinking. One bout of hangovers is washed down with another. Trudi is trying to lure him with the newest Danish invention, the Antabuse pill, but Frans ignores her advice. When he is drunk, he yells at her, and the next day he refuses to talk to her. "If it is true," Trudi writes to Vera, "that in vino veritas est, then I must say that Frans hates me."<sup>470</sup>

In early 1961 Frans sets off again on a short trip to beautiful Yaxchilan with a group of guests. It will be the last time he sees his favorite among the jungle's magnificent ruins. Later that year Frans and Trudi bring the beautiful young Bety on her first trip to Mexico City. While Trudi stays near

the university on the outskirts of the city, to arrange for the publication of a book of her photographs, Frans shows Bety around the center of the big city and they have some wonderful days. But as soon as they are back home in Na Bolom the situation becomes steadily worse. Frans begins to turn up among the guests at the breakfast table with bruises on his face. Late at night, half unconscious on his way from the library to his room, he has fallen in the dark house. Trudi is distraught.

Bety celebrates her tenth anniversary at Na Bolom. She began as a maid, but quickly became a foster daughter. In all the years she has experienced Frans drinking when Trudi was out of the house. Frans and she have had a pact together against Trudi. Bety said nothing when Frans drank, and he said nothing when she skipped her duties and instead lounged about under one of the fruit trees in the garden. She has always felt safe with Frans. When Trudi was gone, and Frans and Bety had the bottles and the fruit trees for themselves, there was peace in the big house. Now she is terrified that it will all end badly. Frans is not himself anymore, now he scolds Trudi in public and one time he has even taken his drunken rage out on Bety.

For Bety's sake Frans takes Antabuse for a while, and late in 1961 he takes a break from drinking. Trudi sincerely wishes it will last forever. But in early 1962, after four sober months, the dream is over. Trudi sends Frans on a two-week trip to Palenque, hoping that the jungle and his old ruins can get him back on track and give him strength to hold on.

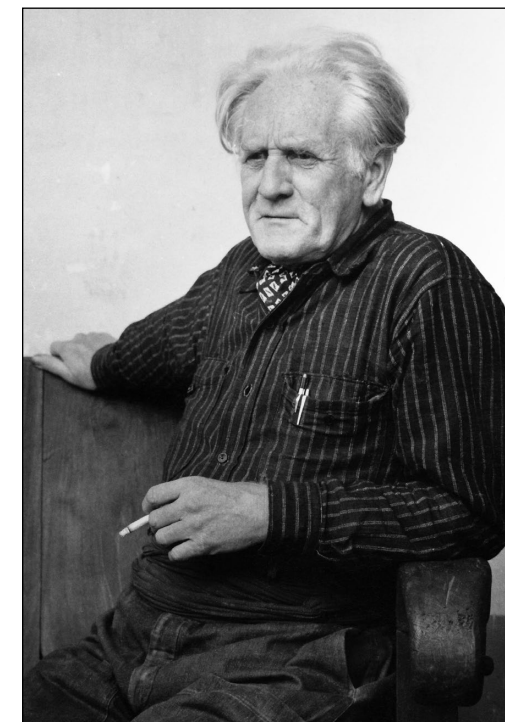
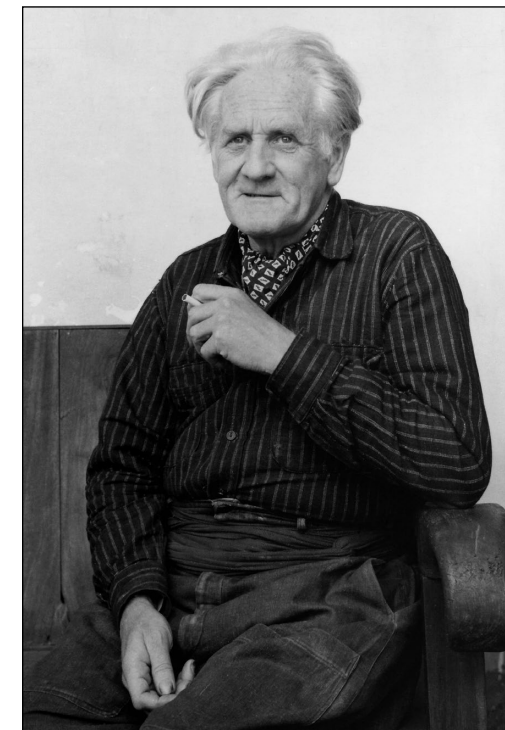
This is the last time that Frans is in Palenque. Forty years have passed since he rode through the jungle and got his first glimpse of the ruins. "The Temple of the Cross glows white against the forest-clad mountains," he wrote back then. Before him lay a long life with the Maya and their ruins. Now life is running out. Frans has begun to drink himself to death; not even this journey back to where it all began can stop him. He sits bent over on the temple stairs, turns around laboriously and pulls a bottle out of his bag. Then he takes a good swig to soothe his hangover, puts the bottle on the stone, and looks over the lowland jungle that opens below the mountains to the north. It is perhaps the most beautiful view in the whole of the Maya area. His face is red and swollen under the yellow-white hair. He is unshaven, and his clothes are in disarray. Frans descends slowly down the temple and leaves the ruins of Palenque for the last time.

"This house is so beautiful," Trudi writes to Vera the day before her birthday in July 1962, "the library so splendid, it is like a monument for Frans and now he is destroying it all and I am completely helpless."<sup>471</sup> Meanwhile Frans is sitting in the library and is barely able to get out of the armchair by himself. His voice is heavy and his jokes are embarrassing. The next morning there is happy marimba music in Trudi's honor. But Frans's head is already hammering. He flees back to his bed and stays there for the rest of the day. Frans turns 69 years on August 9, and six days later it is his and Trudi's copper wedding anniversary. There is nothing to suggest that any of these occasions were celebrated.

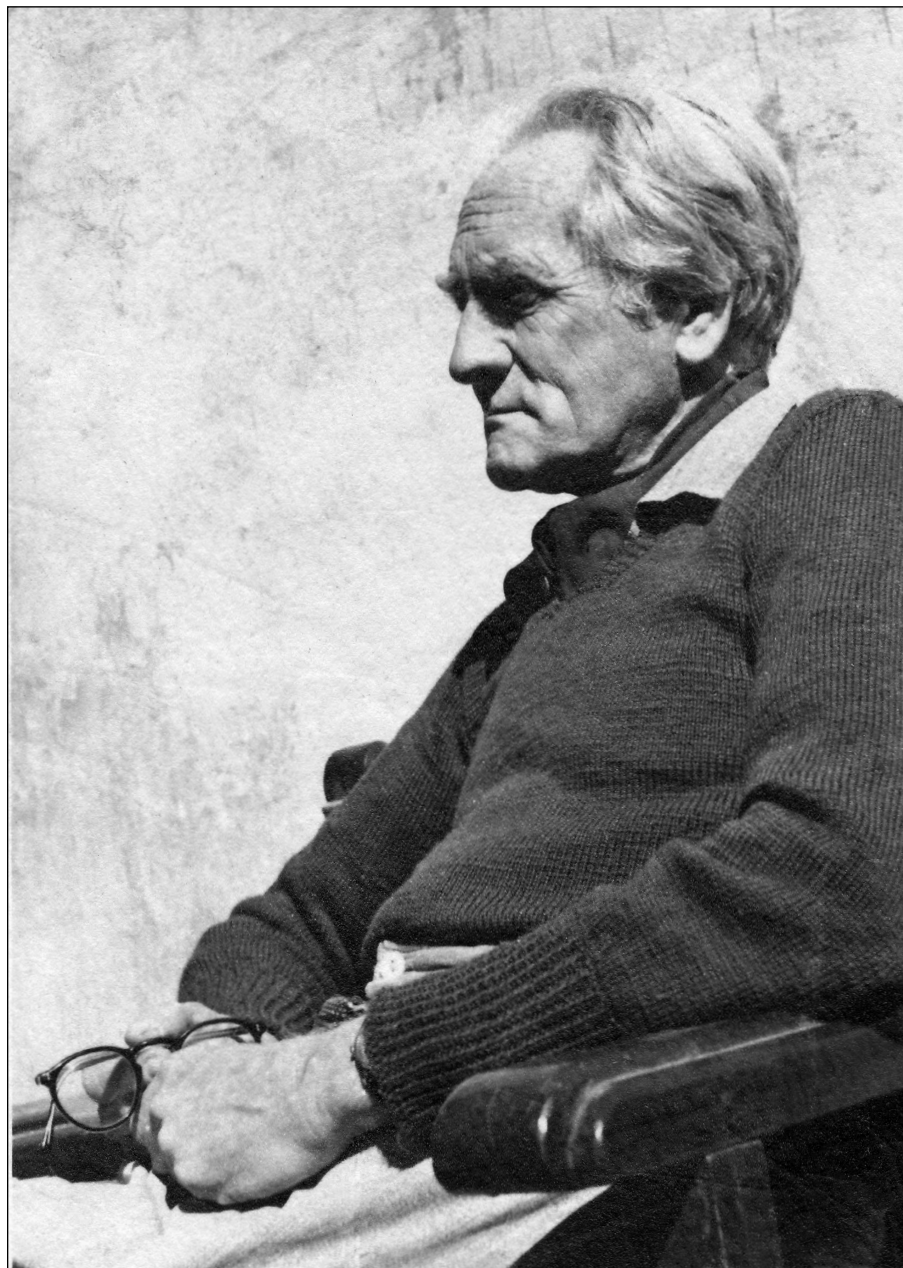
In August 1962 Frans Blom appears in public for the last time. Over the years in Na Bolom Frans has written various scholarly articles, about caves, about the ruins of Moxviquil, and the religion of the Highland Maya. He has also attended a number of conferences, but his activity has declined, and in the last four years, it has stalled completely. Now Frans leaves for the last

time, to the 35<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Americanists which takes place in Mexico City, and the way things are it is a bit of a feat even getting out of the door in San Cristóbal. 1500 scholars from around the world are gathered, and the many presentations are distributed between no less than eight auditoriums. "Even a flea jumping on a hot brick could not keep up," Frans writes.<sup>472</sup> At the receptions each evening after the sessions, Frans is one of the old lions who tells jungle stories from a bygone era, surrounded by admirers and others who are just curious. To begin with, he is charming and affable, and takes loving care of the impressed female congress participants. But each time the tray with glasses comes within range, he refuels and boosts his confidence. Late in the evening, he is pretty drunk. The young scholars who have the courage to approach the rugged veteran must lend an ear to long didactic moral sermons about the days of grandeur and the inept softness of youth. And as Frans becomes more and more drunk, the audience becomes smaller and smaller.

At the beginning of 1963, Frans leaves San Cristóbal to take off on his very last jungle trip. The goal is Bonampak with the wonderful murals, and Frans is accompanied by Matthew Stirling, who, since Frans Blom and Oliver La Farge uncovered the first giant head at La Venta in 1925, has become the famous ex-



Frans in the patio of Na Bolom.



Frans holding his reading glasses.

plorer of Mexico's oldest civilization, the Olmec culture. Frans has not visited Bonampak for years. All the many intrigues that were linked to the place, and which he was getting himself into because he so ardently wished that he had been the one to find the ruins, made him so annoyed and bitter that he eventually stopped visiting Bonampak and refused to talk to anyone about the whole affair. But now is the last call. One last time, Frans can pat the old

walls and let his thoughts wander, through the millennia and decades. On the other side of the Lacanja River lies the old chicle camp San Juan. This is where he lost his glasses and fell in love with Trudi when the intervals between malaria bouts allowed it. Back then Bonampak was still hidden somewhere in the great forest. Now it is San Juan that has been engulfed by the wilderness.

Many liters of alcohol have run through Frans's liver since he was a regular guest in the Palm Court at Hotel d'Angleterre. Now the organ collapses. Shortly after Frans returns from Bonampak, he becomes ill. Trudi heads off on a planned trip, and while she is away his condition worsens. It is March 1963. When Trudi returns at the end of the month Frans has not been out of bed for several days. He sleeps all the time and when he very occasionally rises to the surface, he has difficulties speaking. Trudi calls in a team of doctors and nurses and forces him to take medicine. Soon there is an improvement, and on April 8, Frans is well enough to venture out into the beautiful, blooming garden. It is a short walk. But he returns to his bed with a determination that he will not go to hospital. He wants to die in his home, and if he cannot get out into the garden, the garden will have to come to him. From then on, he has five vases with fresh flowers in his little room. Day by day the pains increase, his circulation begins to fail. He gets bed sores, his stomach bulges, he enters hepatic coma. A needle is inserted into his arm and a drip is set up. He receives blood transfusions, serum, plasma, everything that can compensate for the fact that his body is disintegrating.

On June 13, in the midst of his agony, Frans receives the promise that he will be a Mexican citizen. The situation is magical. When Frans arrived in Mexico in the summer of 1943, he had just renounced his Danish citizenship and had become an American. One of the first things he did after meeting Trudi was to apply for Mexican citizenship. In all these years, his application had changed places from desk to desk, from office to office, on its way through changing administrations. Several times during the late 1940s when Frans had dealings with half the government, he was told that he would receive citizenship by presidential decree. But it never happened. Now Trudi has put one of their high-ranking friends to work, and as Frans's condition worsens, one administrative barrier after the other disappears. And on June 13 it is reported from Mexico City that the president has given his approval: never mind the paperwork, it is now a matter of a few days, then Frans will become a Mexican.<sup>473</sup>

For Frans, the news is a joy in the midst of all the pain. He has an oxygen mask, drip in both arms, and drainage tubes in his swollen abdomen. He is watched over day and night. Trudi and Bety take turns to be with him, and five nurses come and go. Even a dying man has a need for stimulants; the doctor says no to cigarettes but yes to a little alcohol, but Trudi objects. Frans allies himself with his beloved foster daughter Bety. He asks her to get him a shirt with a large pocket where he can have a pack of cigarettes without Trudi noticing. Bety promises to do it, but she never dares. The risk of Trudi showing up while Frans is smoking a cigarette with the oxygen mask on his forehead is too great. Instead she gives him a teaspoon of tequila once in a while. It is easier to hide and soothes him just as well.

On June 21 Frans throws up blood. Trudi wants him in the hospital, whether he wants it or not, and the next day, Frans is out of bed for the first time in two and a half months. When he comes out in the patio, he wants



to visit the garden once again. In the garden, he stands for a moment and balances while looking one last time at the trees and the beautiful, orderly flowerbeds. Then he falls, among peonies from Denmark and orchids from the jungle. Frans wants to die at home in the Jaguar House; there is no reason to bully around his old body. So he never leaves for hospital. During the night Bety stays with him. And his dog. At one point he has a glass of milk and a piece of cake. A mouse runs across the floor.

On June 23, while the sun rises over the northern temple of the E-Group in Uaxactun and midsummer bonfires are lit back home in Denmark, Frans Blom dies. Bety and Trudi are by his side when he draws his last breath. Quietly the swollen face calms down, the red color disappears, and Frans regains some of his old expression. After being washed and dressed, he is placed in a coffin and carried over into the old chapel, which is full of flowers from the garden. In his hands he holds a rose, and under the shirt collar is a small packet of cigarettes, which Bety, unseen, has smuggled in. "Rich and poor, Indians and Ladinos came to mourn him. The house was filled with people day and night until he was carried away from the home he loved so much."<sup>474</sup>

On June 25, at ten o'clock, a great procession moves through the streets of San Cristóbal. Highland Maya in their colorful clothes, Lacandon in their light tunics, town people in black suits and long dresses, a few foreign friends and acquaintances. In front of the town hall the mayor delivers a speech. Then the procession continues to the small cemetery, located on a hilltop overlooking the city and the mountains. A few more nice words for the deceased. Then the soil is shoveled on the coffin, a marimba orchestra sets in and plays while the sun moves across the sky and people come and go. Towards the evening the last guests go home. After sunset, the cemetery is quiet.

It is the silence that is so beautiful.



## Epilogue

### The Cross from Palenque

For twenty years Frans and Trudi were together, for thirty years she was his widow. The tough Swiss woman reached the grand old age of 92 before she died on December 23, 1993. Precisely half a century had passed since Frans and Trudi celebrated their first amorous Christmas in the glow of the campfire in the chicle camp of San Juan. After Frans came three decades of long, energetic, and sometimes bitter struggle for the Lacandon Maya and their jungle before the Queen of the Forest finally found peace and was buried next to the man who for a while had managed to soothe the beautiful woman "in tailor-made gray flannel and turban."<sup>475</sup>

Bety was the closest Frans and Trudi ever came to having a child together.

For years, Doña Bety has had her own small house in a quiet corner at the back of Na Bolom's large garden. The fairytale world that once opened up for the little girl when Frans flung open the gate and let her in is still accessible to tourists and travelers. Na Bolom has made its entry into the guidebooks as one of San Cristóbal's most exclusive and unique hotels. Outside the house the old dirt road has now been paved and there is a guard at the gate. But inside, the sun-filled patio still bids the visitor welcome with an abundance of flowers. The local Maya produce and sell their bags and rugs to the tourists, the Lacandon come and go. Inside the house Trudi's old jewelry box is on display, and in Frans's beautiful library the glow of the first fireplace built in San Cristóbal sends its flickering light over tables and bookcases.

"I do not understand that people will let themselves be locked inside a house to worship their god, when they have the greatest church ever built out in nature, under the canopy of heaven. If I go to a church, I immediately object, I protest, I am disgusted."<sup>476</sup> Thus Frans wrote in his youth, and he kept this conviction right until his death. The unconsecrated chapel remained unconsecrated, and Frans's funeral took place without any ecclesiastical participation. But just as Frans and Trudi could not settle in the staunchly catholic San Cristóbal without being formally married, Frans's bones were not allowed to gently change into archaeological objects in a grave without a cross.

Trudi solved the dilemma in the most beautiful way. At the time when the Christian faith moved into the Maya area, accompanied by a legion of contagious diseases and surrounded by the singing swords of the conquistadors, there was one thing that the Maya immediately adopted amidst all the horrors: the cross. From ancient times, the cross had been the Maya symbol of the World Tree, the tree in the axis of the world which sends its roots deep into the underworld and its crown high up into the skies. To this day, the Maya decorate their Christian crosses with pine branches, palm leaves, and flowers, and these crosses testify to a unique fusion of the World Tree and the Christian cross. Now Trudi employed the old Maya trick. One of the most beautiful representations of the World Tree is to be found in Frans's beloved Palenque, on a limestone panel in the temple bearing its name, the Temple of the Cross. It was this powerful symbol that Trudi chose to be carved on Frans's tombstone.

Germán Cueto, the sculptor, carried out the work, the same Cueto who had been one of the first Mexicans Frans got to know upon his arrival in 1919. It was Cueto whom Frans had visited in his studio and whose art he admired, when he himself was so painfully unable to express his "beauty-seeking artist's heart," and it was with Cueto he had drifted down the canals of Xochimilco surrounded by large poppies and clusters of white lilies. Below the World Tree from Palenque, Cueto carved the happy little jaguar from Na Bolom. Throughout the years it had been walking across the façade of the house, on burnt tiles and in bright colors. In time the jaguar had also been made into a rubber stamp which from then on was Na Bolom's bookplate and ran across Frans and Trudi's stationery. Now the jaguar stood carved in stone on its master's grave. And above it the World Tree and the text which did not become official reality until a few months after Frans's death, but which gave the old man a last comfort in his struggle with death: "Frans Blom – Arqueólogo Mexicano."



## Archival Sources

B.L. = Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

E.S. = Etnografisk Samling, the Ethnographic Collection of the National Museum in Copenhagen, Denmark.

I.A. = family of Blom's nephew Ib Andersen.

J.K. = archive of filmmaker Jaime Kibben, San Francisco, now at the National Museum in Copenhagen, Denmark.

K.B. = Det Kongelige Bibliotek, the Royal Library, Copenhagen, Denmark.

L.A. = Landsarkivet for Sjælland, Lolland-Falster og Bornholm, the former regional archives, now part of the Danish National Archives, Copenhagen, Denmark.

L.A.L. = Latin American Library, Tulane University, New Orleans.

M.A.R.I. = Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University, New Orleans.

N.B. = Na Bolom, San Cristóbal de las Casas.

N.K. = family of Blom's nephew Nils Kiær.

R.A. = Rigsarkivet, the former state archives, now part of the Danish National Archives, Copenhagen, Denmark.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup>In her description of the reburial and its background Karen Catchpole states that both Frans and Trudi had wished to be buried in the jungle among the Lacandon Maya (Catchpole 2011), but we have not been able to confirm this. There is nothing in his letters and diaries that indicate that Frans ever expressed such a wish. In many ways, he seems to have been much more attached to the highland Maya in the villages surrounding San Cristóbal de las Casas.

<sup>2</sup>Wauchope 1965; Brunhouse 1975; Willey 1988; Black 1990; Houston 1990; Sabloff 1990; Baudez and Picasso 1992.

<sup>3</sup>Brunhouse 1971; Solomon 2002; McVicker 2005; Pasztory 2011.

<sup>4</sup>Coe 2006; Robertson 2006; Graham 2010.

<sup>5</sup>Undated diary entry, ca. 1910. (N.K.) "Frants" is the original spelling of Blom's first name.

<sup>6</sup>*B.T.* (newspaper), September 12, 1923.

<sup>7</sup>*Des memoire[s]*. Undated typescript apparently written in the jungle, possibly in the late 1940s. (J.K.)

<sup>8</sup>*Nationaltidende* (newspaper), November 23, 1924.

<sup>9</sup>*Nationaltidende* (newspaper), November 23, 1924.

<sup>10</sup>Mentze 1965:92.

<sup>11</sup>Quoted from Wedell-Wedellsborg 2000:128.

<sup>12</sup>Letter from Dora Blom to her daughter-in-law Mary, December 1, 1932. (J.K.)

<sup>13</sup>Diary memo addressed to Blom's nephews and niece, February 25, 1923. (B.L.)

<sup>14</sup>Quoted from Wedell-Wedellsborg 2000:84.

<sup>15</sup>This and the following quotes are from Frants's diary, 1907–08. (N.K.)

<sup>16</sup>Ricard 1905:45. Italics original.

<sup>17</sup>Ricard 1905:48. Italics original.

<sup>18</sup>Letter from Dora Blom to her daughter-in-law Mary, December 1, 1932. (J.K.)

<sup>19</sup>Letter from Dora Blom to her daughter-in-law Mary, December 15, 1932. (J.K.)

<sup>20</sup>Notes for a lecture, transcribed by Ian Graham. (J.K.)

<sup>21</sup>*B.T.* (newspaper), September 12, 1923.

<sup>22</sup>Personal communication (2001) from the son of this alleged illegitimate son, thus from Frans Blom's alleged grandson.

<sup>23</sup>Recollections on the occasion of Baden-Powell's death in 1941. (B.L.)

<sup>24</sup>The archives of The Danish Guide and Scout Association. (R.A.)

<sup>25</sup>Quoted from Ranvig 1988:8.

<sup>26</sup>Undated diary entry, ca. 1910. (N.K.)

<sup>27</sup>Lembcke 1910:7.

<sup>28</sup>Undated diary entry, ca. 1910. (N.K.)

<sup>29</sup>Recollections on the occasion of Baden-Powell's death in 1941. (B.L.)

<sup>30</sup>Hartvig Møller and Lembcke 1913.

<sup>31</sup>Recollection sketch, ca. 1940–43. (B.L.)

<sup>32</sup>Letter in the archives of The Danish Guide and Scout Association. (R.A.)

<sup>33</sup>Danish Navy archives. (R.A.)

<sup>34</sup>Blom's declaration of intention (1941) and petition for naturalization (1943). (U.S. National Archives)

<sup>35</sup>Danish Navy archives. (R.A.)

<sup>36</sup>*Biography, Frans Blom*, resumé written at Tulane, revised June 22, 1937. (J.K.)

<sup>37</sup>Examination protocol of Copenhagen University, 1916. (R.A.)

<sup>38</sup>*Studenterne 1911*.

<sup>39</sup>See resumé written in Mexico City, ca. 1944–45. (J.K.)

<sup>40</sup>*Datos biograficos de Frans Blom*, Na Bolom, July 1963. (J.K.)

<sup>41</sup>Notes for a lecture, transcribed by Ian Graham. (J.K.)

<sup>42</sup>Bast 1955:65.

<sup>43</sup>*B.T.* (newspaper), September 12, 1923.

<sup>44</sup>Quoted from Wedell-Wedellsborg 2000:79.

<sup>45</sup>Rung 1942:17.

<sup>46</sup>See Brunhouse 1976:20.

<sup>47</sup>Letter to his mother, July 10, 1919. (B.L.)

<sup>48</sup>*Assigned to Stockholm*, recollection written ca. 1940–43. (B.L.)

<sup>49</sup>See Morse 1983:1.

<sup>50</sup>Morse 1983:1.

<sup>51</sup>Personal communication from Jaime Kibben, 2001.

<sup>52</sup>Letter to his father (in English), August 8, 1919. (B.L.)

<sup>53</sup>Diary, September 1, 1921. (L.A.L.)

<sup>54</sup>Haslund-Christensen 1945:10.

<sup>55</sup>*B.T.* (newspaper), September 12, 1923.

<sup>56</sup>Letter to his father (in English), August 8, 1919. (B.L.) The quotation is excerpted; the whole context can be read on pp. 51–52.

<sup>57</sup>The quotations in this chapter are, unless otherwise stated, from Frans's letters (in Danish) to his family in the Bancroft Library (B.L.); see also the first half of *I de store Skove* [In the Great Forests] (Blom 1923a:11–20, 32–113).

<sup>58</sup>Radio talk taped in Blom's home Na Bolom in 1959, broadcast by the Danish Broadcasting Corporation in September 1959 (Danish Broadcasting Corporation sound archives).

<sup>59</sup>Recollection, written ca. 1940–43. (J.K.)

<sup>60</sup>Quoted from Kandell 1988:355.

<sup>61</sup>Quoted from Covarrubias 1967:232.

<sup>62</sup>Quoted from Hamnett 1999:212.

<sup>63</sup>Brunhouse 1976:22.

<sup>64</sup>Radio talk, 1959 (Danish Broadcasting Corporation sound archives). The book Blom mentions is probably *Mexican Archaeology* by T. A. Joyce.

<sup>65</sup>This and the following quotes are from the manuscript, June 1919, for the article *Blandt mexikanske Røvere* [Among Mexican Robbers]. (B.L.); see Blom 1919 and Blom 1923a:20–32.

<sup>66</sup>*A Lesson in Spanish*, typescript ca. 1940–43. (B.L.)

<sup>67</sup>Manuscript, June 1919, for the article *Blandt mexikanske Røvere*. (B.L.)

<sup>68</sup>Letter to his father (in English), August 8, 1919. Frans's own punctuation and spelling. (B.L.)

<sup>69</sup>This and the following quotes are from "Las Chinampas," manuscript, spring 1919. (B.L.)

<sup>70</sup>Letter to his mother, June 14, 1920. (B.L.)

<sup>71</sup>The quotations in this chapter are, unless otherwise stated, from Frans's letters to his family in the Bancroft Library (B.L.); see also the first half of *I de store Skove* [In the Great Forests] (Blom 1923a:11–20, 32–113).

<sup>72</sup>See Brown 1993:321.

<sup>73</sup>Letter to his mother, June 14, 1920. (B.L.)

<sup>74</sup>Diary memo addressed to Blom's nephews and niece, February 25, 1923. (B.L.)

<sup>75</sup>*Martyr*, typescript ca. 1940–43. (J.K.)

<sup>76</sup>Letter to his mother, June 14, 1920. (B.L.)

<sup>77</sup>*Martyr*, typescript ca. 1940–43. (J.K.)

<sup>78</sup>Diary, March 28, 1921. (B.L.)

- <sup>79</sup> Diary, January 24, 1922. (L.A.L.)
- <sup>80</sup> See *B.T.* (newspaper), September 12, 1923.
- <sup>81</sup> Notebooks, August–September 1921. (L.A.L.)
- <sup>82</sup> Diary, August 29, 1921. (L.A.L.)
- <sup>83</sup> Diary, August 29, 1921. (L.A.L.)
- <sup>84</sup> Diary, February 2, 1922. (L.A.L.)
- <sup>85</sup> Diary, September 1, 1921. (L.A.L.)
- <sup>86</sup> Letter to his family, January 6, 1922. (B.L.)
- <sup>87</sup> Diary, March 28, 1921. (B.L.)
- <sup>88</sup> Letter to his father (in English), August 8, 1919. (B.L.)
- <sup>89</sup> Diary, December 14, 1922. (B.L.)
- <sup>90</sup> *A German Toast of 1923*, typescript sent to *Liberty Magazine*, March 10, 1941. (J.K.) Note that Frans Blom by a lapse of memory dates the events to 1923, although his stay with the Kortüm family took place in June 1922.
- <sup>91</sup> *A German Toast of 1923*. (J.K.)
- <sup>92</sup> Diary memo addressed to Blom's nephews and niece, February 25, 1923. (B.L.)
- <sup>93</sup> This and the last quotes in this chapter are from Frans's letters to his family in the Bancroft Library. (B.L.)
- <sup>94</sup> Letter to the director of the Ethnographical Collection of the Danish National Museum, Thomas Thomsen, May 17, 1923. (E.S.)
- <sup>95</sup> Joyce 1914:199.
- <sup>96</sup> For an excellent biography of Maudslay, see Graham 2002.
- <sup>97</sup> Quoted from Davis 1981:28.
- <sup>98</sup> Quoted from Baudez and Picasso 1992:93.
- <sup>99</sup> Blom and La Farge 1926-27:205.
- <sup>100</sup> See for instance Tozzer 1907, 1911, 1912; Spinden [1913]1975; Morley [1915]1975, 1920.
- <sup>101</sup> See Tompkins 1976:206-211.
- <sup>102</sup> Letter to his parents, August 9, 1922. (B.L.)
- <sup>103</sup> Blom 1922.
- <sup>104</sup> Quoted from Brunhouse 1976:27.
- <sup>105</sup> Thompson 1963a:15.
- <sup>106</sup> Brunhouse 1975:61.
- <sup>107</sup> Krarup Nielsen [1937]1950:13.
- <sup>108</sup> Birket-Smith 1968:45.
- <sup>109</sup> Letter to Thomas Thomsen, May 17, 1923. (E.S.)
- <sup>110</sup> Blom and La Farge 1926-27:169.
- <sup>111</sup> Notes from Palenque, ca. 1923 (B.L.); see Nielsen and Leifer 2004a-d for a complete translation of Blom's diary from Palenque 1922–23.
- <sup>112</sup> Barnhart et al. 1999.
- <sup>113</sup> Blom and La Farge 1926-27:177-178.
- <sup>114</sup> Blom and La Farge 1926-27:178.
- <sup>115</sup> Notes from Palenque, ca. 1923. (B.L.)
- <sup>116</sup> Ulrich 1956:183.
- <sup>117</sup> Stuart and Stuart 2008:87.
- <sup>118</sup> Blom [1923c]1982.
- <sup>119</sup> See Wicks and Harrison 1999.
- <sup>120</sup> See Churchward 1931; Wauchope 1962:28-49.
- <sup>121</sup> Quoted from Brunhouse 1976:32.
- <sup>122</sup> See Morley 1940.
- <sup>123</sup> See Coe 1992.
- <sup>124</sup> Letter to his mother, November 11, 1923. (B.L.)
- <sup>125</sup> Blom 1923a:10.
- <sup>126</sup> *Politiken* (newspaper), December 14, 1923.
- <sup>127</sup> Letter to his parents, October 1, 1923. (B.L.)
- <sup>128</sup> Willey 1988:277.
- <sup>129</sup> Willey 1988:283.
- <sup>130</sup> See Willey 1988:304; see also Woodbury 1973.
- <sup>131</sup> Quoted from Brunhouse 1976:33.
- <sup>132</sup> Letter to his mother November 3, 1923. (B.L.)
- <sup>133</sup> Letter to his mother January 15, 1924. (B.L.)
- <sup>134</sup> See Brunhouse 1975:137-139; Black 1990:260.
- <sup>135</sup> Quoted from Brunhouse 1976:36.
- <sup>136</sup> See Thompson 1963a:237.
- <sup>137</sup> Letter to his mother April 9, 1924. (B.L.)
- <sup>138</sup> Full quotation in Brunhouse 1976:37.
- <sup>139</sup> Blom 1924a.
- <sup>140</sup> Blom 1936a:195-196.
- <sup>141</sup> See for instance Morley 1931, 1946; Smith 1950. More recently, archaeologists have debated the validity of Blom's conclusions (e.g., Hansen 1998:63-66), but the association between E-Group complexes and solar observations continues to appear in general introductions to the ancient Maya (Coe 2011:80; Sharer and Traxler 2006:320-321).
- <sup>142</sup> See Black 1990:260.
- <sup>143</sup> Letter to Thomas Thomsen, March 15, 1924. (E.S.)
- <sup>144</sup> Letter to Thomas Thomsen, March 24, 1924. (E.S.)
- <sup>145</sup> Brunhouse 1976:12.
- <sup>146</sup> Houston 1990:248.
- <sup>147</sup> Houston 1990:250.
- <sup>148</sup> Coe 1990:255.
- <sup>149</sup> Diary, February 2, 1922. (L.A.L.)
- <sup>150</sup> Blom 1928a.

- <sup>151</sup> Blom 1924a.
- <sup>152</sup> Only a preliminary brief report was published (Blom 1924d).
- <sup>153</sup> Letter to Thomas Thomsen, undated, July 1924. (E.S.)
- <sup>154</sup> Brunhouse 1971:203.
- <sup>155</sup> Letter to his mother March 23, 1924. (B.L.)
- <sup>156</sup> Letter to Thomas Thomsen, July 10, 1924. (E.S.)
- <sup>157</sup> Letter to Thomas Thomsen, July 10, 1924. (E.S.)
- <sup>158</sup> Blom and Ricketson 1925.
- <sup>159</sup> Letter to Thomas Thomsen, November 14, 1924. (E.S.)
- <sup>160</sup> See Brunhouse 1975:141-142.
- <sup>161</sup> See Brunhouse 1975:132-133.
- <sup>162</sup> Quoted from Dyer 1966:200.
- <sup>163</sup> Quoted from Dyer 1966:200.
- <sup>164</sup> See Brunhouse 1975:143-148.
- <sup>165</sup> Brunhouse 1975:147.
- <sup>166</sup> Quoted from Brunhouse 1976:43-44.
- <sup>167</sup> Letter to Thomas Thomsen, July 17, 1925, describing the first Tulane Expedition's trip through the Lacandon jungle in Chiapas. (E.S.)
- <sup>168</sup> Tejedo et al. 1988:26.
- <sup>169</sup> Wauchope 1965:1.
- <sup>170</sup> Letter to Thomas Thomsen, April 11, 1926. (E.S.)
- <sup>171</sup> Letter from Alfred V. Kidder to Blom, November 23, 1928. (M.A.R.I.)
- <sup>172</sup> Dedication in Blom and La Farge 1926–27.
- <sup>173</sup> Blom and La Farge 1926-27:7.
- <sup>174</sup> Blom and La Farge 1926-27:35-36.
- <sup>175</sup> Expedition diary March 31, 1925. (L.A.L.)
- <sup>176</sup> Blom and La Farge 1926-27:85.
- <sup>177</sup> Blom and La Farge 1926-27:90.
- <sup>178</sup> Fisker 1987; see also Grove 2014:5-16.
- <sup>179</sup> Blom and La Farge 1926-27:101.
- <sup>180</sup> Blom and La Farge 1926-27:115.
- <sup>181</sup> For a recent, complete treatment of the epigraphic record of Tortuguero, see Gronemeyer 2006.
- <sup>182</sup> Blom and La Farge 1926-27:140.
- <sup>183</sup> Blom and La Farge 1926-27:159.
- <sup>184</sup> Blom and La Farge 1926-27:166.
- <sup>185</sup> Blom and La Farge 1926-27:195.
- <sup>186</sup> Blom and La Farge 1926-27:196.
- <sup>187</sup> Letter to Thomas Thomsen, July 17, 1925. (E.S.)
- <sup>188</sup> Healey 1950:85.
- <sup>189</sup> Blom and La Farge 1926-27:206.
- <sup>190</sup> Quoted from McNickle 1971:40.
- <sup>191</sup> See Byers 1966b; McNickle 1971.
- <sup>192</sup> Quoted from Brunhouse 1976:80.
- <sup>193</sup> Expedition diary May 20, 1925. (L.A.L.)
- <sup>194</sup> Blom and La Farge 1926-27:211.
- <sup>195</sup> Blom and La Farge 1926-27:222.
- <sup>196</sup> *Scared Heroes*, recollection ca. 1940-43. (B.L.)
- <sup>197</sup> Blom and La Farge 1926-27:235.
- <sup>198</sup> Blom and La Farge 1926-27:235-236.
- <sup>199</sup> Blom and La Farge 1926-27:251.
- <sup>200</sup> Blom and La Farge 1926-27:254.
- <sup>201</sup> Expedition diary June 25, 1925. (L.A.L.)
- <sup>202</sup> Blom and La Farge 1926-27:319.
- <sup>203</sup> Blom and La Farge 1926-27:400.
- <sup>204</sup> Blom and La Farge 1926-27:405.
- <sup>205</sup> Letter to Thomas Thomsen, July 17, 1925. (E.S.)
- <sup>206</sup> Blom and La Farge 1926-27:420.
- <sup>207</sup> Blom and La Farge 1926-27:428.
- <sup>208</sup> La Farge and Byers 1931.
- <sup>209</sup> Blom and La Farge 1926-27:447.
- <sup>210</sup> Blom and La Farge 1926-27:447.
- <sup>211</sup> Letter to Thomas Thomsen, August 9, 1925. (E.S.)
- <sup>212</sup> Spratling and Faulkner [1926]1966:12.
- <sup>213</sup> Brunhouse 1976:11.
- <sup>214</sup> Cover letter for the expedition diary from 1925. (L.A.L.)
- <sup>215</sup> Dyer 1966:201.
- <sup>216</sup> Gates 1926.
- <sup>217</sup> Letter to Thomas Thomsen, April 11, 1926. (E.S.)
- <sup>218</sup> Brunhouse 1976:66-67.
- <sup>219</sup> Shook 1998:236.
- <sup>220</sup> Gates 1926:46.
- <sup>221</sup> Brunhouse 1976:67.
- <sup>222</sup> Letter to Thomas Thomsen, April 11, 1926. (E.S.)
- <sup>223</sup> Quoted from Berman 1995:36.
- <sup>224</sup> Letter to Thomas Thomsen, April 28, 1928. (E.S.)
- <sup>225</sup> Blom 1929:3.
- <sup>226</sup> Thompson 1963b:309.
- <sup>227</sup> Blom 1929.
- <sup>228</sup> Expedition diary, March 15, 1928. (M.A.R.I.)
- <sup>229</sup> Letter to Oliver La Farge, May 5, 1928. (M.A.R.I.)
- <sup>230</sup> Expedition diary, February 7, 1928. (M.A.R.I.)
- <sup>231</sup> Expedition diary, February 11, 1928. (M.A.R.I.)
- <sup>232</sup> Blom 1929:8.
- <sup>233</sup> Blom 1929:8.
- <sup>234</sup> Expedition diary, March 19, 1928. (M.A.R.I.)
- <sup>235</sup> Recollection, ca. 1940–43. (B.L.)
- <sup>236</sup> See Nielsen 2012.

- <sup>237</sup> Letter to Thomas Thomsen, April 28, 1928. (E. S.)
- <sup>238</sup> Expedition diary, May 18–21, 1928. (M.A.R.I.)
- <sup>239</sup> Expedition diary, June 13, 1928. (M.A.R.I.)
- <sup>240</sup> Expedition diary, July 10, 1928. (M.A.R.I.)
- <sup>241</sup> See Reed 1964.
- <sup>242</sup> Expedition diary, August 5, 1928. (M.A.R.I.)
- <sup>243</sup> Blom 1930b.
- <sup>244</sup> Blom 1932a.
- <sup>245</sup> Letter to Thomas Thomsen, November 14, 1924. (E. S.)
- <sup>246</sup> See Berman 1995:25-26.
- <sup>247</sup> Letter to the Explorers Club, June 17, 1931. (M.A.R.I.)
- <sup>248</sup> Webster McBryde quoted from Brunhouse 1976:6.
- <sup>249</sup> Preface to Weyerstall 1932.
- <sup>250</sup> See Thompson 1959.
- <sup>251</sup> See Houston et al. 2001:156.
- <sup>252</sup> See McNickle 1971:52-53.
- <sup>253</sup> See Niehaus 1978.
- <sup>254</sup> See Blom 1932c; Hinderliter 1972.
- <sup>255</sup> Plaster reconstructions of selected parts of Maya structures (the Governor's Palace and the Nunnery from Uxmal and the Arch from Labna) had previously been on exhibit at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. In charge of the organization of the Maya exhibit was then director of the Peabody Museum, Frederick Putnam, while the job of producing the plaster casts was placed in the hands of archaeologist Edward Thompson (see Evans 2004:153-162). Thus, Blom's project in fact had a precedent.
- <sup>256</sup> See Blom 1930a:57.
- <sup>257</sup> *Times-Picayune*, May 11, 1930.
- <sup>258</sup> Letter to Nat Burwash, August 6, 1931. (J.K.)
- <sup>259</sup> Letter to Mrs. H. V. M. Hall, December 22, 1938. (M.A.R.I.)
- <sup>260</sup> *Times Picayune*, March 27, 1932. Quoted from Brunhouse 1975:190.
- <sup>261</sup> Jaime Kibben's interview with Mary Sefton Thomas, November 1989. (J.K.)
- <sup>262</sup> Mary Sefton Thomas's own biographical notes. (J.K.)
- <sup>263</sup> Alfred Blom letter to Mary, April 20, 1932. (J.K.)
- <sup>264</sup> Dora Blom letter to Mary, April 25, 1932. (J.K.)
- <sup>265</sup> *Item-Tribune*, May 8, 1932.
- <sup>266</sup> Telegram from the staff at the Department of Middle American Research to Frans, June 15, 1932. (M.A.R.I.)
- <sup>267</sup> *States*, June 15, 1932.
- <sup>268</sup> Mary Sefton Thomas's own biographical notes. (J.K.)
- <sup>269</sup> Yde 1946.
- <sup>270</sup> Niehaus 1978.
- <sup>271</sup> See Brunhouse 1975:192.
- <sup>272</sup> Letter to Mary, September 16, 1933. (J.K.)
- <sup>273</sup> Letter to Mary, undated, ca. 1933–34. (J.K.)
- <sup>274</sup> Letter to Mary, October 21, 1933. (J.K.)
- <sup>275</sup> Letter to Mary, undated, ca. 1933. (J.K.)
- <sup>276</sup> Mary Sefton Thomas's own biographical notes. (J.K.)
- <sup>277</sup> Mary Sefton Thomas's own biographical notes. (J.K.)
- <sup>278</sup> See Brunhouse 1975:192.
- <sup>279</sup> Mary Sefton Thomas's own biographical notes. (J.K.)
- <sup>280</sup> Mary Sefton Thomas's own biographical notes. (J.K.)
- <sup>281</sup> Niehaus 1978.
- <sup>282</sup> Nielsen 1931:7.
- <sup>283</sup> Letter to Mary, May 16, 1934. (J.K.)
- <sup>284</sup> *States*, February 8, 1935.
- <sup>285</sup> Yde 1938.
- <sup>286</sup> Yde 1938:19.
- <sup>287</sup> Expedition diary, March 17, 1935. (L.A.L.)
- <sup>288</sup> Expedition diary, March 18, 1935. (L.A.L.)
- <sup>289</sup> Yde 1938:28.
- <sup>290</sup> Yde 1938:48.
- <sup>291</sup> Expedition diary, March 14, 1935. (L.A.L.)
- <sup>292</sup> Yde 1938:62.
- <sup>293</sup> Blom 1935f.
- <sup>294</sup> See *Item-Tribune*, August 30, 1936.
- <sup>295</sup> Gates 1935.
- <sup>296</sup> Blom 1935d.
- <sup>297</sup> Blom 1935d:247.
- <sup>298</sup> Quoted in letter from Morley to Blom, July 22, 1936. (M.A.R.I.)
- <sup>299</sup> Letter to Morley, July 27, 1936. (M.A.R.I.)
- <sup>300</sup> See Blom 1936d; Smith and Parmenter 1991.
- <sup>301</sup> *Berlingske Tidende* (newspaper), August 24, 1935.
- <sup>302</sup> *Berlingske Tidende* (newspaper), August 24, 1935.
- <sup>303</sup> Blom 1936a:131.
- <sup>304</sup> Blom 1936a:v (preface).

- <sup>305</sup> Blom 1936a:113.
- <sup>306</sup> E.g., Coe 1992.
- <sup>307</sup> Letter to Alfred Kidder, December 1, 1928. (M.A.R.I.)
- <sup>308</sup> Blom 1933:413.
- <sup>309</sup> See Nielsen 2003 for a more detailed examination of Blom's involvement in the deciphering process.
- <sup>310</sup> Blom 1936a:212.
- <sup>311</sup> See Berman 1995.
- <sup>312</sup> Frans's calendar for the year 1938. (B.L.)
- <sup>313</sup> See Brunhouse 1975:192.
- <sup>314</sup> Jaime Kibben, personal communication, 2001.
- <sup>315</sup> See Brunhouse 1976:9.
- <sup>316</sup> Jaime Kibben, personal communication, 2001.
- <sup>317</sup> Letter from William Spratling to Blom, December 19, 1938. (M.A.R.I.)
- <sup>318</sup> Letter to Mr. O. M. Burgess, July 8, 1939. (M.A.R.I.)
- <sup>319</sup> Letter to Veva Miller, March 2, 1946. (J.K.)
- <sup>320</sup> Letter to his father, October 15, 1947. (J.K.)
- <sup>321</sup> Congrès International des Sciences 1939.
- <sup>322</sup> *Berlingske Aftenavis* (newspaper), August 3, 1938.
- <sup>323</sup> *Berlingske Tidende* (newspaper), August 4, 1938.
- <sup>324</sup> *Berlingske Aftenavis* (newspaper), August 3, 1938.
- <sup>325</sup> *Berlingske Tidende* (newspaper), August 4, 1938.
- <sup>326</sup> *States Item*, June 27, 1936.
- <sup>327</sup> *Item-Tribune*, August 30, 1936.
- <sup>328</sup> Letter to Philip Roosevelt, September 2, 1942. (J.K.)
- <sup>329</sup> Letter to Tulane's president Rufus C. Harris, January 7, 1939. (M.A.R.I.)
- <sup>330</sup> *Celebrity*, undated typescript ca. 1940–43. (B.L.)
- <sup>331</sup> See Brunhouse 1976:139.
- <sup>332</sup> Niehaus 1978.
- <sup>333</sup> Mrs. Della Andreassen's notes *Reminiscences of Frans Blom*, March 1986. (M.A.R.I.)
- <sup>334</sup> Dyer 1966: 201.
- <sup>335</sup> Transcript of a phone conversation between Maurice Ries and Bill Miles (of Tamblin and Tamblin, N.Y.), January 3, 1940. (M.A.R.I.)
- <sup>336</sup> Transcript of a phone conversation between Maurice Ries and Bill Miles (of Tamblin and Tamblin, N.Y.), January 3, 1940. (M.A.R.I.)
- <sup>337</sup> Hay et al. 1940.
- <sup>338</sup> Blom [1940]1983.
- <sup>339</sup> Letter from Rufus C. Harris to Arthur E. Gropp and Maurice Ries, December 7, 1940. (M.A.R.I.)
- <sup>340</sup> Letter from Maurice Ries to W.S. Holland, editor at LIFE Magazine, April 29, 1941. (M.A.R.I.)
- <sup>341</sup> Memorandum from Maurice Ries to Rufus C. Harris, November 18, 1941. (M.A.R.I.)
- <sup>342</sup> Ulrich 1956:184.
- <sup>343</sup> Mielche 1967:174.
- <sup>344</sup> See Gropp 1959.
- <sup>345</sup> Letter to Philip Roosevelt, September 2, 1942. (J.K.)
- <sup>346</sup> Letter from Maurice Ries to Rufus C. Harris, March 21, 1942. (M.A.R.I.)
- <sup>347</sup> Letter from Maurice Ries to Rufus C. Harris, July 24, 1942. (M.A.R.I.)
- <sup>348</sup> Thompson's manuscript in English (J.K.), published in Spanish as Thompson 1963b.
- <sup>349</sup> Letter to Alfred V. Kidder, February 21, 1949. (J.K.)
- <sup>350</sup> Undated note from Frans to Della and John Andreassen. (M.A.R.I.)
- <sup>351</sup> Mary S. Thomas letter to Jørgen Kiær, August 17, 1945. (J.K.)
- <sup>352</sup> Mrs. Della Andreassen's notes *Reminiscences of Frans Blom*, March 1986. (M.A.R.I.)
- <sup>353</sup> Letter to Miss Dorothy Durham, August 31, 1942. (J.K.)
- <sup>354</sup> Expedition Diary, October 8, 1943. (N.B.)
- <sup>355</sup> *The Lady of the Lacandon*, undated manuscript. (J.K.)
- <sup>356</sup> *Monteador*, manuscript, December 1961. (J.K.)
- <sup>357</sup> This and the following quotes are from Frans's Expedition Diary, September 1943–January 1944. (N.B.)
- <sup>358</sup> Frans to Trudi, April 1–2, 1946. (J.K.)
- <sup>359</sup> Quoted from Duby 1984: 9.
- <sup>360</sup> Quoted from Duby 1984: 8.
- <sup>361</sup> Quoted from Duby 1984: 8.
- <sup>362</sup> Undated note from Frans to Trudi, January 1944. (J.K.)
- <sup>363</sup> From The Heine Club's Farewell Book, 1946, quoted by Kruyer 1990.
- <sup>364</sup> Trudi to Frans, August 23, 1944. (J.K.)
- <sup>365</sup> Blom 1945b.
- <sup>366</sup> Blom 1944.
- <sup>367</sup> Manuscript for the article in *Natural History* (J.K.), see Blom and Duby 1946.

- <sup>368</sup> Manuscript for the article in *Natural History* (J.K.), see Blom and DUBY 1946.
- <sup>369</sup> Letter to Manuel Gamio, quoted by Brunhouse 1976: 168-169.
- <sup>370</sup> Blom 1945f.
- <sup>371</sup> Blom 1945f.
- <sup>372</sup> Yannakakis 2011.
- <sup>373</sup> Esther Kiær to Mary S. Thomas, December 6, 1940. (J.K.)
- <sup>374</sup> *Nationaltidende* (newspaper), August 6, 1943.
- <sup>375</sup> Esther Kiær to Mary S. Thomas, July 12, 1945. (J.K.)
- <sup>376</sup> Alfred Blom to Mary S. Thomas, August 2, 1945. (J.K.)
- <sup>377</sup> Transcript of letter from Frans to Webster McBryde, October 27–November 29, 1944. (J.K.)
- <sup>378</sup> Esther Kiær to Mary S. Thomas, August 12, 1945. (J.K.)
- <sup>379</sup> Mary S. Thomas to Jørgen Kiær, August 17, 1945. (J.K.)
- <sup>380</sup> Mary S. Thomas to Jørgen Kiær, August 17, 1945. (J.K.)
- <sup>381</sup> Mary S. Thomas to Jørgen Kiær, August 17, 1945. (J.K.)
- <sup>382</sup> Esther Kiær to Mary S. Thomas, August 27, 1945. (J.K.)
- <sup>383</sup> Mary S. Thomas to Esther Kiær, September 4, 1945. (J.K.)
- <sup>384</sup> Mary S. Thomas to Matilda Gray, September 4, 1945. (J.K.)
- <sup>385</sup> Alfred Blom to Frans, September 29, 1945. (J.K.)
- <sup>386</sup> Frans to Trudi, March 12, 1947. (J.K.)
- <sup>387</sup> Frans to Trudi, June 23, 1947. (J.K.)
- <sup>388</sup> Blom's FBI files (J.K.)
- <sup>389</sup> Frans to Trudi, April 1–2, 1946. (J.K.)
- <sup>390</sup> Frans to Trudi, March 21, 1946. (J.K.)
- <sup>391</sup> Frans to Trudi, undated [March 26, 1946]. (J.K.)
- <sup>392</sup> Frans to Trudi, March 27, 1946. (J.K.)
- <sup>393</sup> Frans to Trudi, April 1, 1946. (J.K.)
- <sup>394</sup> Letter to his father, November 30, 1945. (J.K.)
- <sup>395</sup> Letter to his father, November 30, 1945. (J.K.)
- <sup>396</sup> Letter to his father, November 30, 1945. (J.K.)
- <sup>397</sup> Alfred Blom to Frans, October 28, 1945. (J.K.)
- <sup>398</sup> Letter to his father, February 10, 1946. (J.K.)
- <sup>399</sup> Frans to Trudi, March 1, 1947. (J.K.)
- <sup>400</sup> Frans to Trudi, March 5, 1947. (J.K.)
- <sup>401</sup> Frans to Trudi, March 12, 1947. (J.K.)

- <sup>402</sup> Frans to Trudi, March 27, 1946. (J.K.)
- <sup>403</sup> Frans to Trudi, April 2, 1946. (J.K.)
- <sup>404</sup> Frans to Trudi, March 22, 1947. (J.K.)
- <sup>405</sup> Expedition Diary, September 6, 1948. (N.B.)
- <sup>406</sup> Frans to Trudi, May 10, 1947. (J.K.)
- <sup>407</sup> Frans to Trudi, June 23, 1947. (J.K.)
- <sup>408</sup> Trudi to Frans, April 19, 1947. (J.K.)
- <sup>409</sup> Trudi to Frans, April 28, 1947. (J.K.)
- <sup>410</sup> Frans to Trudi, May 14, 1947. (J.K.)
- <sup>411</sup> Frans to Trudi, June 25–30, 1947. (J.K.)
- <sup>412</sup> Trudi to Frans, July 5, 1947. (J.K.)
- <sup>413</sup> Frans to Trudi, June 25, 1947. (J.K.)
- <sup>414</sup> Trudi to Frans, July 19, 1947. (J.K.)
- <sup>415</sup> Trudi to Frans, August 9, 1947. (J.K.)
- <sup>416</sup> Frans to Trudi, August 26, 1947. (J.K.)
- <sup>417</sup> Frans to Trudi, August 12, 1947. (J.K.)
- <sup>418</sup> Frans to Trudi, August 26, 1947. (J.K.)
- <sup>419</sup> Frans to Trudi, July 21, 1947. (J.K.)
- <sup>420</sup> Trudi to Frans, October 4, 1947. (J.K.)
- <sup>421</sup> Frans to Trudi, November 5, 1947. (J.K.)
- <sup>422</sup> Trudi to Frans, January 7, 1948. (J.K.)
- <sup>423</sup> Trudi to Frans, January 9, 1948. (J.K.)
- <sup>424</sup> Trudi to Frans, January 11, 1948. (J.K.)
- <sup>425</sup> Trudi to Frans, January 7, 1948. (J.K.)
- <sup>426</sup> Trudi to Frans, January 11, 1948. (J.K.)
- <sup>427</sup> Trudi to Frans, January 21, 1948. (J.K.)
- <sup>428</sup> Trudi to Frans, January 21, 1948. (J.K.)
- <sup>429</sup> Expedition Diary, December 31, 1943. (N.B.)
- <sup>430</sup> This and the following quotes are from Frans's Expedition Diary, from May to November 1948. (N.B.)
- <sup>431</sup> Brunhouse 1976:177.
- <sup>432</sup> Trudi to Vera, October 7, 1949. (J.K.)
- <sup>433</sup> Transcript of letter from Frans to Linton Satterthwaite, December 27, 1949. (J.K.)
- <sup>434</sup> Frans to Vera, February 5, 1950. (I.A.)
- <sup>435</sup> Expedition Diary, August 30, 1948. (N.B.)
- <sup>434</sup> Album made for the family in Denmark, 1955. (I.A.)
- <sup>436</sup> Album made for the family in Denmark, 1955. (I.A.)
- <sup>437</sup> Frans to Vera, July 16, 1950. (I.A.)
- <sup>438</sup> Preliminary Report, *Selva Lacandona*, 1950–51. (N.B.)
- <sup>440</sup> Transcript of letter from Frans to Alfred Tozzer, May 3, 1950. (J.K.)
- <sup>441</sup> Frans to Esther and Vera, December 12, 1950. (I.A.)
- <sup>442</sup> Quoted from Brunhouse 1976:220.
- <sup>443</sup> Quoted from Brunhouse 1976:217.
- <sup>444</sup> Frans to Vera, August 5, 1952. (I.A.)
- <sup>445</sup> Frans to Trudi, November 24, 1953. (J.K.)

- <sup>446</sup> Frans to Trudi, November 24, 1953. (J.K.)
- <sup>447</sup> Frans to Vera, August 24, 1950. (I.A.)
- <sup>448</sup> Frans to Vera, September 18, 1954. (I.A.)
- <sup>449</sup> Eskelund 1955b.
- <sup>450</sup> Eskelund 1955a. (*Hjemmet* [magazine], October 25, 1955).
- <sup>451</sup> Speech by the Director of the Instituto de Ciencias y Artes de Chiapas, Sr. Prof. Froilan Esquinca E., at the awards ceremony on November 2, 1954. (J.K.)
- <sup>452</sup> Frans to Vera, October 17, 1954. (I.A.)
- <sup>453</sup> Frans's acceptance speech at the awards ceremony, November 2, 1954. (J.K.)
- <sup>454</sup> Frans to Vera, April 16, 1956. (I.A.)
- <sup>455</sup> Frans to Vera, April 30, 1956. (I.A.)
- <sup>456</sup> Frans to Vera, August 10, 1956. (I.A.)
- <sup>457</sup> Blom and DUBY 1955:57.
- <sup>458</sup> Frans to Vera, May 24, 1956. (I.A.)
- <sup>459</sup> Mielche 1967:184.
- <sup>460</sup> Ulrich 1956:183.
- <sup>461</sup> *Dagens Nyheder* (newspaper), March 15, 1959.
- <sup>462</sup> Trudi to Frans, June 1, 1958. (J.K.)
- <sup>463</sup> Frans to Vera, June 16, 1958. (I.A.)
- <sup>464</sup> *B.T.* (newspaper), April 29, 1959.
- <sup>465</sup> *B.T.* (newspaper), April 29, 1959.
- <sup>466</sup> *Søndags-B.T.* (magazine), July 3, 1959.
- <sup>467</sup> Frans to Vera, February 22, 1959. (I.A.)
- <sup>468</sup> Frans to Vera, May 12, 1959. (I.A.)
- <sup>469</sup> Trudi to Vera, December 2, 1959. (J.K.)
- <sup>470</sup> Trudi to Vera, December 2, 1959. (J.K.)
- <sup>471</sup> Trudi to Vera, July 6, 1962. (J.K.)
- <sup>472</sup> Quoted from Brunhouse 1976:230-231.
- <sup>473</sup> Letter from Prof. Demetrio Sodi M., Secretary General of the Instituto Indigenista Interamericano in Mexico City, to Trudi, June 13, 1963. (J.K.)
- <sup>474</sup> Trudi to her and Frans's friends, July 2, 1963. (J.K.)
- <sup>475</sup> Expedition Diary, September 29, 1943. (N.B.)
- <sup>476</sup> Letter to his mother, June 14, 1920. (B.L.)

## Illustration Credits

- Cover photos: Family archive of Frans Blom's late nephew Ib Andersen and his children Hans Niels Andersen and Benedicte Berg.
- Chapter headings: The little jaguar was Blom's and Na Bolom's emblem. Drawing by Frans Blom, family archive of Blom's late nephew Ib Andersen and his children Hans Niels Andersen and Benedicte Berg.
- Pages 2, 82, 109, 123, 127, 140, 141, 147, 151, 158, 161, 162, 175: Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University, New Orleans.
- Pages 4, 9, 26, 111, 137, 203, 204, 225, 226, 234, 235, 247, 249, 250, 251, 252, 263, 264, 267, 271, 274, 277, 281, 282, 286: Family archive of Frans Blom's late nephew Ib Andersen and his children Hans Niels Andersen and Benedicte Berg.
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