

## **A CASE STUDY IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP:**

### **THE HANSEATIC MERCHANT JOHANNES CRASEMANN IN MÉXICO**

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At the end of 1857 the then 18 year-old Johannes Carl Heinrich Crasemann disembarked in Veracruz, Mexico. He was only one of the many descendants of well-situated merchant families from the Hanseatic cities that aimed to acquire foreign experience overseas and to become independent entrepreneurs.

This type of immigrants are presented in the academic literature as prosperous merchants with powerful international connections who isolated themselves in an ethnic enclave, and looked down on the Mexican people and their culture. Such proposals, however, are usually the result of macro analysis that recurred almost exclusively to notarial and consular records in Mexico's capital. What makes the case of Johannes Crasemann interesting is that departing from primary sources— meaning his correspondence with his family— and recurring to other data obtained through ethnohistorical methods, it is possible to approach the personal experience of an entrepreneur in the making, and to assess if the prevalent imagery holds up when tested at an individual level.

After briefly presenting the particulars of the case, I will proceed to analyze the migration experience of Johannes Crasemann in Mexico City, following him after that to his years in Mérida, capital of the state of Yucatán, where he founded an important business, the *Ferretería y Mercería Alemana, J. Crasemann, "El Candado"*. I will close with a reflection about Crasemann's interactions with the society that received him, and the forms in which his activities contributed to creating connections between Hamburg y México.

#### **Framing the migration case**

Unfortunately, it has not been possible yet to locate a picture of Johannes Carl Heinrich Crasemann; based on the description in his passport and on his own narratives, he looked so much like Maximilian von Habsburg that he was occasionally confused with him.

Johannes was born in Hamburg in 1839 as son of Claes Cristian Crasemann and Emma Pollitz, both also from Hamburg. An examination of his biography positions him as

descendent of an entrepreneur clan. His father had been involved in international businesses since 1815, and by 1834 joined the Hamburger company C. A. Crasemann, enterprise founded by his brother, Christoph Adolf, in 1827. The family of Johannes's mother had been doing businesses in Mexico City since 1839, among others under the firm Stürken & Pollitz, with offices in Veracruz and in Mexico City. Additionally, in 1857 Franz Heinrich Wilhelm Pollitz and Eduard Beatus Crasemann - both of them Johannes's uncles, joined August Bolten and Ernst Dreyer to create the Hamburg-Vera Cruz-Packetgesellschaft, one of the first shipping lines that connected those two international ports. It is, then, not a surprise that Johannes' older brother, Gustav, began to represent the clan's interests in Mexico since 1850. As Gustav returned to Hamburg for good in 1856, Johannes replaced him in Mexico; the timing suggests that this was a family decision.

It is possible to see in the nature, timing and development of the connections of the Crasemann Pollitz family how these relate to the historical conditions found in Hamburg and Mexico at that time. The search for new export markets for German commodities coincided with the opening of the Mexican market to foreign products. The Treaty of Commerce and Navigation between Mexico and Hamburg went into effect in 1841, and from that point on hanseatic merchants exported vast considerable amounts of textiles, chemicals and iron wares. Mostly using their own ships for transportation, they brought back exotic goods like coffee, *palo de tinte* —dyeing wood—, and vanilla.

Hanseatic businesses flourished in Mexico. In 1853, from 250 tradesmen registered as coming from the German states, 112 were from Hamburg, that is, almost 45%. Certainly, some high-ranking merchants went to Mexico as heads of wholesale companies, but the majority came as trainees or junior associates, just as Johannes Crasemann did. Their intention was usually to work in the country for about five to six years only, hoping to be able to amass sufficient money to start their own business, preferably back in Hamburg. There were, however, other places where apparently it was easier to accomplish this goal, such as China or East India... Why Mexico then?

According to the historian Brígida von Mentz, if on one side this Latin American country was perceived as problematic, that same condition was seen as auspicious by some of those foreigners. Political chaos, corruption, anarchy, and an inefficient judicial system meant insecurity and risk, but these circumstances also allowed for business owners to operate as they pleased and facilitated a rush accumulation of capital. The lack of infrastructure was uncomfortable, but without a doubt an area in which these industrialists found some business opportunities. Humboldt had already praised the richness of Mexico's natural resources: these were seen as up for grabs. Additionally, some Europeans perceived the Mexicans as "friendly but incompetent" people from whose labor, knowledge, and effort they could greatly profit.

Moreover, individuals from the German states found positive conditions of reception in México. Given that the country needed investors and people with know-how, it granted them generous business conditions and benefits. These foreigners were idealized by the part of the Mexican elites as friendly, pacifist and apolitical. Given the then prevailing racist ideology of whiteness as the paradigm of “civilization”, the Europeans enjoyed a not always deserved entry superior social status.

## **México City**

In 1858 Johannes Crasemann began to work as an employee in Stürken and Pollitz, in Mexico City’s downtown. Starting as one of several accountants, in three years he became responsible for that department. Stürken and Pollitz was a wholesale business with nation wide distribution; it imported, among others, food, minerals and textiles.

According to Crasemann’s letters to his family in Hamburg, his life while in Mexico City was pleasantly organized –when we look at those descriptions, we realize that his routine followed the quotidian structure of that of the local upper classes. In the morning he rode his horse, and afterwards had breakfast. Six days a week he worked about 9 hours daily. Finishing at 8 PM, he would enjoy the rest of the evening with social activities. If during a good part of the day he was in contact with both Mexicans and foreigners, Johannes preferred to spend his free time with other co-nationals in the German Club institution that was then an elitist ethnic enclave where business contacts were nurtured. In some of his letters he occasionally expressed supremacist assertions, putting down the Mexicans in general; these were usually found in passages when the country’s political upheavals took a toll on the living conditions of residents. These practices and discourses appear to correspond to the ones usually ascribed in the literature as typical for the *Auslandsdeutsche*, a life that rejects the receiving culture.

In another aspects, however, Crasemann does not comply with the cliché. In his correspondence, he shows an interest in the Mexican culture and describes how he adopted certain cultural practices finding pleasure in them, such as the Mexican horse riding style, wearing certain vernacular *accessories*, and regularly enjoying specific local pastimes—like playing music in open spaces and visiting close by *paseos populares*, for instance. He did not only attend European opera, theater and concerts offered in the Mexican capital, but also enjoyed greatly the bullfights and the carnival. He also wrote about the elegance and beauty of some Mexican women, and paid attention to the work done by poor Mexicans.

It is also thanks to Johannes’ first-hand testimonies that we can assure that he noticed the stratification of his host society, and how peoples’ lives were affected by the unpredictable

economic and political ups-and-downs, which were many. He not only lived through several uprisings, but also experienced the establishment of The French Intervention in Mexico, and saw the rise and fall of Maximilian's Second Mexican Empire. On the other hand, we find some passages where he sees himself as part of a group who is supposed to bring "law and order" to México. It should also be noted that although he was sometimes homesick, during all this period he does not appear to have visited his family in Hamburg. These apparent contradictions provide proof of how the migration experience can be ambivalent, and why it is important to work with case studies that follow a person through a long time. At the end of Crasemann's stay in México City, the sentiments that appear as predominant are those of him not regretting having left Hamburg, feeling happy in México.

Analyzing the young Hamburger's career path, this turned out to be not so straightforward and fast as expected. It wasn't until 1864, that is after almost eight years of work, that he was able to start the firm Moritz & Crasemann, a small company selling textiles in Mexico's capital, which due to the French competition in this branch had to be liquidated already in 1868. Ironically, this failed enterprise led Crasemann into a new adventure, which offered him the appropriate conditions to reach his dream of becoming a successful entrepreneur.

## **Yucatán**

The original idea of opening an *almacén* in Mérida, actually came from the partners of the Mexico City and Veracruz based company Leffmann & Gutheil, who thought Yucatán did not have a good warehouse that could serve the whole peninsula. Additionally, these businessmen saw the export potential of the henequen plant earlier as other regional and national actors, and wanted to create an import/export company that could profit from it.

With a temporary contract in his pocket, the 28 year-old Crasemann arrived to Yucatan's capital in January 1868 to explore whether that plan had potential. Accompanying him was Hermann Ravensburg, also from Hamburg, who had been designated by Leffmann & Gutheil as a working associate for Crasemann, given that the latter did not have enough experience with the line of business they intended to go into: notions and iron goods. For unclear reasons, in a matter of a few weeks the partners in Mexico City backed out. Crasemann decided to move forward alone, modifying the original business plan to fit the market's conditions.

Merida had then 35,000 inhabitants, and was very provincial. Notwithstanding the lack of comfort and differences in weather conditions, the young entrepreneur found the city pleasing and polished, also noticing the cultural mix of the peoples he encountered; specially about the Maya he wrote that they were extremely honest, very clean and beautiful. Thank to his brother Rudolph's contacts —who had founded the company

Crasemann & Stavenhagen in Hamburg in 1861— Johannes had access to some of the most influent local families, who helped him to get installed, to find a good location for the business, and began to introduce him into Merida's society and its customs.

In April of that same year, the *Mercería y Ferretería J. Crasemann* was open to the public. From this small but central rented location the business served the whole peninsula. Via Hamburg-Veracruz-Mérida, it imported food items, construction materials, machinery, musical instruments, arms, home appliances, furniture, etc. As exports, it concentrated on dyeing-wood and henequen. The company also offered its services as insurance agent and shipping specialist, and functioned as an informal bank –it was partly thanks to those lending money activities that the firm was able to accumulate capital swiftly and to acquire valuable real estate in default. By 1875 the firm's name would included "El Candado", that is "The Padlock", name with which it is recalled until the present.

While preparing to open his store in Mérida, Johannes Crasemann wrote in a letter to his father that he hoped "*den Grundstein zu einem soliden und prosperierenden Geschäft gelegt zu haben*". And that he did. By 1878, that is, a decade after its foundation, the business J. Crasemann, El Candado was doing so well that it moved into what became its permanent location, that is the corner of Calle 60 with Calle 65. Hanging from its entrance, a large padlock unified visually the corporate identity of the company. Almost at the same time, Crasemann moved to a beautiful villa —known as *La casa de los alemanes*—, where the first of Merida's windmills started to pump water in 1880. In a matter of a few years, Yucatan's capital would be known as the "City of Windmills".

Contradicting the stereotypes, Crasemann appears to have been well anchored in the Yucatecan society: he participated in social events and kept close personal relationships with Yucatecans, Mexicans, and North Americans - here, you have as example, the record of one of the times he served as godfather by the baptism of local children. Additionally, he committed to regional projects: for instance, he was one of the founders of the much needed railway line connecting Merida and the Port of Progreso, and reinvested a good part of his profits in Mexico instead of sending them to Germany. In addition, he attempted to improve international relationships in his role as first Honorary Consul of Germany in Yucatan, appointment he obtained in 1879.

How to explain the favorable outcome of Crasemann's business endeavors? Some of the reasons match those that have been already used to explain the economic success of other German traders in México: a starting capital, wealthy and powerful networks, having the right business instinct, being willing to take risks, and the advantages of coming from a society that was technologically more advanced. Nevertheless, we also have to consider that Crasemann, as many other newcomers, profited from the Mexican upper classes' cultural xenophilia and that there were other until now anonymous contributors, like his working partner Hermann Ravensburg, several young German trainees, and a large

number of local employees, who received modest wages for their up to seven days a week long working shifts.

Prosperous and apparently satisfied, Johannes Crasemann decided to return to his family in Hamburg at the beginning of 1883, after having worked in México a quarter of a century. The then 43 year-old transferred his firm to Otto Rosenkranz, another businessman from Hamburg. Although from that point on the partner constellation of the company would change many times J. Crasemann y Sucesores, El Candado, existed for another eight decades.

Instead of enjoying a life of rest and leisure, once back in in Hamburg, Johannes Crasemann worked as an insurance broker another 13 years long. After his passing away in Copenhagen in September of 1900 at the age of 61, he was buried in the family's mausoleum in the Sankt Jacobikirchhof in Hamburg. He never married, and he left no direct descendants.

## **Interactions and Connections**

The impact of the company J. Crasemann, El Candado in the social memory of Mérida can be seen until our days. If you ask a *meridano* which was the first and most important *ferretería* in Merida, he would most likely say: El Candado. This is understandable when we ponder that most of the literature and popular narratives emphasize the firms' contributions to the modernization and urbanization of Mérida, which is true. However, we should not overlook the fact that the establishment of this first large business, set up and managed after western standards, also contributed to the development of a local consumer culture, increasing historically anchored social inequalities.

Instead of the presumed self-segregation and social indifference adjudicated to this type of migrants, the information until now evaluated revealed a person who created and cultivated networks with multiple ethnic communities, and who even took a liking for the receiving culture, adopting certain local practices. Crasemann was neither a bird of passage nor a temporary investor, but someone who committed to the development of the country in which he resided for a quarter of a century. As this examination shows, not all the prototypes created around independent wealthy migrants in general withstand an analysis at individual level.

I hope that this case study also contributes to our understanding of how different forces and opportunities played a role in the development of business relationships between Hamburg and Mexico. Those connections, in this concrete instance, did not end up with Johannes Crasemann's departure from Yucatán, but continued during many decades,

channeled through the firm Crasemann y Stavenhagen. In this informal imperialist trade Mexico was a provider of cheap raw materials that received counter flows of expensive manufactured items from Europe. These role distribution that highlighted Mexico's dependency remained as such in the following decades, as the road towards a global consumer culture was opened.

Thank you very much for your attention.

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