

My Start to Oilgeological Fieldwork in Venezuela in 1945

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Thus, after a tropical day, I was sitting at the bank of Rio Cachirí in the jungle-covered foothills of the Perijá Mountains some 70 Km to the northwest of Maracaibo. It had been a very hot day and I had enjoyed my first river bath since arriving in Venezuela. A few days ago, I had been assigned at C.P.C.'s headoffice in Maracaibo to carry out a geological survey of the so-called Dibujo Synclinorium. Stratigraphically, I was to look at the potential source and reservoir rocks, particularly at those of the Cretaceous. Structurally, special attention should be paid to anticlinal or fault structures which could form traps for oil and gas accumulation.

Tired from a hard day of unaccustomed work I was looking into the clear river which obviously was carrying rather little water during this time of the year. One could have thought that, from the blue depth of the pool, I was looking for guidance for my future work: how to go about to carry out this survey to the satisfaction of the office and to find at least a few answers to some of the relevant problems. Although a senior geologist from the headoffice, H.P.SCH., had been kind enough to accompany me during a very few days, in order to introduce me to the type of work, to the ways how a geological survey is being done for our particular demands, further how I had to do the "book keeping". Still, many questions turned up after my colleague had returned to Maracaibo and it became clear to me, that the few days together had by far not been sufficient to learn and to understand all I should have known. After all, the country was still quiet strange to me with its alien climate, nature and surroundings. Then, during the day many minor problems remained unanswered as my Spanish was by far not yet up to the basics necessary for a more or less simple conversation.

I was still pondering over my difficulties and possible solutions when I was brutally awoke from my reveries by a fierce attack of thousands of tiny "mosquitoes" which I later learned to be sand-flies! This taught me the first lesson in the "bush": never to go bathing in the twilight. I dressed hurriedly, putting on my khakies, bought only a few days ago and which immediately marked me the perfect greenhorn. I ran back to the nearby camp, consisting of a few open, very simple tents made of heavy canvas, supported by poles, cut in the forest. Only my own tent was more or less closed on all sides and contained a camp-bed covered by a mosquito-net, while the workers slept in "hamacas". In front of this tent was added my office, composed of my desk (a folding table), a chair and the "rustica-stiled" but very useful bookshelf, on which all items for my work were deposited. This also was made of tree-branches. The most important item in this "office" was the illumination, namely a carefully guarded gasoline Coleman-lantern. Of course, there was no electricity and consequently no refrigerator, from which apart from stored food a cool beer or a coke would have been available after a hot day's work! Furthermore, we had no

radio, and wireless communication with the headoffice was not possible. Needless to say, we were never up to date on what was happening in the world.

After a frugal meal which often consisted of rice, corned beef and tin vegetables, I lit my pipe and sat down to start plotting the day's work. First, the topographical survey, a so-called compass traverse, measured with a steel-tape and a compass and daily done by the "caporal" and his crew, had to be mapped. This method of a compass traverse, used by oil geologists for some decades, was already practised during the early geological surveying of the country. Thus our own topographical measurements would serve as a base for my geological observations. Today, it may appear almost incredible, that we did not have any topographic maps whatsoever. As I learnt to know later, aerial mapping had been done in the country for some years, but these maps were, for one reason or another, not available to us. However, a few years later, aerial photographs could be used for photogeological studies.

Fortunately, adjacent to my area to be investigated, previous work had been carried out. There was a company report with a few maps giving reference points I could use to start my compass traverse. Later on, when a proper topographic survey could tie-in our measurements, these proved to be surprisingly correct; in any case, sufficiently accurate as a field map to serve as a geological base for further studies. After about two hours of work during which I continuously had to watch out not to spoil my original drawing by sweat dripping from my arms or chin, I felt rather exhausted and ready for my camp-bed.

However, sleep would not come easily! My thoughts flew back a couple of months, when I had left Switzerland to a country known to me by hearsay only: Venezuela. - Actually my departure from home, where I had been forced to stay during the whole war, coincided entirely by chance with V.E. Day (Victory-day Europe), the 8th of May 1945. Of course, preparations for my trip abroad had started a couple of months before, but it lasted awhile until all papers such as permits, visas, reservations, tickets and other traveling documents were ready. I had started my university studies in 1934 and began working on my doctorate before the outbreak of the war. It proved to be rather difficult to continue with my geological fieldwork during brief intervals from obligatory military service. But finally, everything was finished and ready. I too was prepared to start an interesting though somewhat hazy adventure of a geological assignment in a foreign country, in the tropics, leaving behind my wife, family, friends and home.

Thus, early in the morning of May 8th, I was waiting near the custom-house at the Swiss/French border outside Geneva. A trip of about 900 Km by car along the Rhone-valley to Barcelona had been organized. I did not expect that our progress would be very fast. The highways in those days were still ordinary black-top roads and, as we soon would find out, often proved to be heavily damaged by the war. From Barcelona, I was to continue my travel entirely by air via Madrid-Lisboa-Dakar-Monrovia-Natal-Belém-Guayana-Port of Spain-Caracas-Maracaibo. Thus, I was looking forward to a

fascinating but continuous trip of a few days. The flight, however, turned out to be a highly cumbersome pilgrimage of about six weeks! While I was waiting rather impatiently to pass the customs, I heard a faint ringing of the first church bells from across the frontier, celebrating the end of the long and terrible war in Europe.

After a couple of hours cooling our heels we finally could enter France. On this car trip through this harshly treated land, along the River Rhone to the Mediterranean, I almost continuously saw very heavy destructions caused by the previous fighting after the allied troops had landed in August 1944 at the coast of the French Provence. An almost endless sequence of destroyed houses, demolished trains, trucks, tanks and other military equipment soon became a scenery which accompanied us during the whole day. Midnight had passed, when we finally arrived at Nîmes at the only partially repaired Hotel Imperator. Behind boarded-up windows I quickly fell asleep in spite of the very strong impressions of the day which I had experienced traveling across war-worn France. What I had seen to-day remained engraved in my brains for a very long time to come. Early next morning, breakfast consisted of a freshly baked "baguette" and hot water only, which, fortunately, I could enrich with Nescafe and tin milk, I had - in anticipation of the food shortage - brought along from home. Continuing our journey to Barcelona, we soon had to cross the French/Spanish border at La Junquera. This undertaking lasted more than six hours caused by controlling pedantically our papers and luggage. This time-consuming procedure unfortunately could not be expedited even by our generous offers of cigarettes and Swiss chocolate. After a rather belated start, as a sort of compensation, we soon stopped at a restaurant which supplied us with a very opulent meal - I had not enjoyed for a long time during the years of war, when at home our food and many other items had been rationed quite severely. Due to the belated departure at the Spanish frontier, we again were rather late arriving at Barcelona after a long tiresome car trip. Finally, after four o'clock in the morning, I was glad to be able to go to bed in the Hotel Oriente.

From Barcelona on, my entire journey to Maracaibo was to be by plane for which I had the necessary tickets, but not all the seat reservations, the so-called priorities! This proved to be crucial later for the continuation of my trip, a fact that had not been known to us before leaving Europe. After a few days of delay in Barcelona and then in Lisboa indispensable for the acquisition of additional visas and other traveling documents I left Portugal by "Clipper", a 4-motor water-plane, for the first 12-hour night flight to Dakar in West-Africa. The next leg to Bolama, in Portuguese Guayana, proved to be a rather bumpy flight, to which most of the passengers' stomachs did not agree entirely. After this unhappy experience, the next trip to Monrovia proved to be even worse, the flight being full of air pockets. I realized that all of the sixty travelers were only too glad when finally, after another 17 hours in the turbulent air, we watered at Fisherman's Lake, near the border to Sierra Leone. Here, I spent my first tropical night on a camp bed under a mosquito-net. Due to the uneasy hours of

flight over alien countries, over bone-dry landscapes and deserts, over savannas and jungle I had never seen before, I was too upset to fall asleep immediately. Unfortunately, already at two o'clock in the early morning we had to get up for the last leg by "Clipper", namely the long transatlantic flight to Natal in Brazil.

There, about half the distance to Venezuela would be accomplished, and I thought that, within a few days, I then would arrive at the destination of my long trip. However, this assumption proved to be entirely wrong, as I was to find out after further weeks of delays, interruptions and all kind of unhappy experiences flying on the northward route over South America to Venezuela, to Caracas and to Maracaibo.

Only a few days later, I found myself alone in the unknown jungle with a number of workers and a few mules. But with all the happenings of the very eventful trip of about 17'500 Km from Switzerland to Maracaibo, there was not much left, that could have surprised me - at least that was what I thought at this moment!

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22nd October 1915, from Basel and Rünenberg BL

Dr.phil. geologist

University of Basel 1934-43, Natural sciences, Math, Geology

Doctor dissertation: On a region in the Jura Mts. (Strat. & tect.)

1945-73: Oilgeologist with Shell - Venezuela, Holland, Trinidad (B.W.I.); from 1956: Research and regional geologist for Europe, at the Hague, Netherlands.

1973-78: Cantonal geologist for Basel

1978- : pensioner, fieldwork for official geology maps, publications.

Fieldwork in Venezuela:

Perijá Mts., Sierra Indio Negro, Montes de Oca, (Cachirí, Socuy, Guasare Rivers), Casigua (Rio Tarra), El Mene de Mauroa, Hombre Pintado, Inciarte, Quiroz-El Consejo,

Field trips to: Toas Islands, Goajira, Rio Cogollo, Rio Negro, Mene Grande, Trujillo, Merida, Barinas, Barquisimeto, Paraguana etc.



Río Socuy. Perijá. 1945

Loading the mules. Perijá. 1945





Camp in Perijá. 1945

Getting stuck on the way to the campsite. 1945





Caracas, June 1945

Natal, Brazil. May 1945

