

From Hungarian Major to Central American Entrepreneur? The Life of Louis Schlesinger in Exile

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A five-feet seven-inch-tall (1.83m) man with a high forehead and a round face, a Roman nose, grey-blue eyes, and brown hair that tended to turn grey: Louis Schlesinger, or Schlesinger Lajos, the protagonist and, at the same time, the subject of this paper. We know his physical appearance from his passport application (“Louis Schlesinger”), yet little is known about his life and activities. Sources are relatively abundant, but some of the available data are contradictory, while others complement each other, drawing the outlines of a complicated life history. Data can thus be confusing, a situation which he probably would not have minded, what is more, he might have contributed to it on purpose.

Early Years and Emigration to the United States

Louis Schlesinger was the son of Henrik Schlesinger and Sarolta Neumann (Erzberg), born in Nagykanizsa, Zala county, on 9 March 1825 (“Latin American Studies”). He joined the cause of the Hungarian War of Independence and was among the defenders of the fortress of Komárom, led by György Klapka. After they surrendered, Schlesinger emigrated overseas, traveling from Liverpool to New York in December 1849. In the US, he met the Venezuelan General, Narciso López (1797-1851), and joined his expedition, aimed at the liberation of Cuba from Spanish rule.¹ This part of Schlesinger’s life is very well known since he wrote and published his memoirs in the United States. The writing is vivid, with plenty of details about the happenings on the island and the failure of the expedition—all this, immediately after the events. His writing [Personal Narrative of Louis Schlesinger, of Adventures in Cuba and Ceuta] was published in three parts in the *Democratic Review* between September and December 1852. However, the last promised bits of the memoir never appeared. The newspaper indeed disappeared by the end of the 1850s.² Still, its publication would have been possible between 1853 and 1859. Thus, we do not know what happened to Schlesinger after he surrendered to the Spanish authorities in Cuba and was sent for imprisonment to North Africa. However, there is a letter sent by him from Ceuta on 17 February 1852, published in the *Mobile Advertiser*, in which he complains about the unbearable conditions and asks for help, possibly through US intermediation. He also mentions that, in any case, the guards could easily be bribed. How he managed to

escape and what happened to the other Hungarian prisoners is unknown.³ Schlesinger got back to the US, and he ran a short-lived tobacco and liquor business in New York. He obtained US citizenship in October 1855,⁴ but by that time we can find him in Central America, in the expedition of William Walker,⁵ which he probably joined due to financial problems.⁶

Central America

At that time, Central America was a place of extraordinary interest for the US, partly because the US-Mexican border had recently changed as a result of the US-Mexican War, after which the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848) ceded approximately two million square kilometers from Mexico to the United States. A few years later, in 1853, the frontier was further modified due to the selling of the Mesilla Valley by Mexico (roughly 80,000 km²), known as the Gadsden Purchase. Some people thought that the territorial expansion of the US would continue further south and could embrace the whole of Mexico and even Central America. At the same time, there was growing attention towards the Isthmus due to the increased inter-oceanic traffic fomented by the Gold Fever in California. There were four primary routes: one traveling around South America (a rather long, time-consuming and hazardous journey); another by land across Panama (at a time when there was no Panama Canal); a third across Tehuantepec, Mexico (the second narrowest point after Panama), and a fourth that used Nicaraguan territory.

In the 50s ocean steamers on the Atlantic side discharged their freight and passengers at San Juan del Norte, whence they were carried in small steamers up the San Juan river into Lake Nicaragua and across its often turbulent waters to La Virgen, the lake port from which ran the overland stage-coach line to San Juan del Sur, on the Pacific, a distance of twelve or fifteen miles; at San Juan del Sur steamers touched for all north and south Pacific ports. From 1852 until 1857 this traffic across Nicaragua was controlled by Commodore Vanderbilt's Accessory Transit Company, and was the main highway . . . to and from the gold fields of California. (Carson-Jemison 13)

Being able to get hold of this business promised a substantial financial reward and thus provided a strong motivation for Walker. The occasion arrived with the deterioration of the local situation and the beginning of civil strife.

Nicaragua

Central America achieved its independence from Spain in 1821 without fighting, briefly forming part of Mexico and was known as the Federal Republic of Central America between 1823-1838. After that, the five states started their individual development,⁷ although a confident hope was entertained about a possible reunification in the future,

an idea very much weakened by the feebleness of the Central American identity, internal divisions, and personal ambitions. A civil war broke out in Nicaragua after the promulgation of the constitution of April 1854, which declared the country a sovereign state, headed by a president—not a director of State, as before—and elected for four years, instead of two. This new legal framework made the dreams of reuniting the Isthmus ever more distant as well as the hopes of the opposition to come to power soon, as they would have had to wait four years instead of two (Mayes 8). An armed revolt was initiated by Dr. Máximo Jerez, who defeated President Fruto Chamorro in the battle at the Hacienda de “El Pozo.”

Chamorro fled to Granada, one of the most important cities, handed over the political power to José María Estrada, and took the leadership of the Legitimist Army. Máximo Jerez besieged the city but to no avail. During the prolonged fighting, leaders opposed to Chamorro in the rival city of León decided to form their own provisional government, headed by Francisco Castellón. Following the unsuccessful attempt to take Granada, events took a hundred and eighty-degree turn, and the Granadese began to attack. Therefore, the newly elected Castellón faced a critical situation. He quickly replaced Máximo Jerez—blaming him for the military failures—with General Trinidad Muñoz as head of the Democratic forces and also looked for outside help, signing a contract in December 1854, with Byron Cole, a US citizen, for foreign mercenaries. The first group, of around five dozen adventurers, led by the thirty-one-year-old William Walker, arrived in July 1855, into a country that had been torn in two between the Legitimists based in Granada and the Democrats centered in León.

The first action of the American Phalanx was a failure. They suffered their first defeat at the city of Rivas, where Walker expected the help of Trinidad Muñoz in vain and could retreat only at the cost of severe losses. The General considered Walker as an unwanted rival and a potential threat from the very beginning, but his untimely death—suffered when fighting against the Honduran forces of General José Santos Guardiola—meant that no power struggle followed between the two men. Although their leader died on the battlefield, the forces of Muñoz defeated Santos Guardiola in August 1855, which paved the way for Walker’s victory over the Honduran forces approximately two weeks later. With heavy losses of life both in armed conflicts and due to cholera epidemics, the death of both the Granadese and the Leonese leaders, Chamorro and Castellón, as well as Walker’s ability to play on the personal ambitions of Nicaraguan leaders, all contributed to a settlement orchestrated by the leader of the filibusters,⁸ making Patricio Rivas president of Nicaragua⁹ and himself head of the armed forces.

Walker’s prominent role alarmed, rallied, and knitted various ex-Legitimists and ex-Democrats together, who asked for help from other Central American countries against the filibusters. It would have been essential for Walker to secure first the position of the Rivas government before engaging in conflict with the other Central American states, though his long-term goal included the conquest of the whole Isthmus, as shown by the American phalanx’s flag, that bore the inscription: Five or None. Since the position of Costa Rica was the most menacing, Walker sent a commission to smoothe over matters. That included Louis Schlesinger, already around thirty years of age.

As one of the leaders of the delegation, he spoke five or six languages, including Spanish, which proved not only his tactfulness but also his superior level of education to filibusters in general. The mission turned out to be a complete failure and war followed between Nicaragua and Costa Rica. Walker put Schlesinger in charge of four companies—one made up of French and another of Germans—numbering about 240 men and sent him against the approaching Costa Ricans. “Schlesinger’s familiarity with the languages of these companies, no less than his acquaintance with Spanish and with the Department of Guanacaste,¹⁰ was the cause of his selection for the service on which he was about to be sent,” wrote Walker in his memoirs (181-82). Nevertheless, when the Battle of Santa Rosa took place, the filibusters lost it.

The battle has been often described as the cradle of Costa Rican sovereignty. It has become part of the Nicaraguan, Costa Rican, and Centro-American identity in general, which had lacked the uniting force of an armed struggle at the time of independence and found it in the 1850s against Walker. The Federal Republic of Central America, dissolved in 1838, was never re-established, nor were the states of Central America reunited in any other form. However, the longing for unity made ever more glorious the times when people from Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua joined together in a common cause and fought together. Therefore, the events of the 1850s might appear blurred by the nationalist zeal that followed. Because of these circumstances, it is challenging to clarify the role of Schlesinger, if not impossible.¹¹

One thing is sure: Schlesinger lost both the battle and his reputation. Nevertheless, it would also be interesting to know how? Why? What happened? Was Schlesinger so overconfident and careless that he was surprised by the enemy? Was he let down by other officers envious of his rapid rise in the ranks? Was he defeated by the lack of discipline and experience of his troops, as he alleged? Could Schlesinger have been deceived by the red ribbon worn by the Costa Ricans—a symbol of the Democrats in Nicaragua—thinking that some reinforcement had arrived? Had Schlesinger previously agreed with the Costa Ricans that he would lose on purpose?

We know that Schlesinger returned to inform Walker, who initiated a court-martial against him. The charges, according to the memoirs of James Carson Jamison, one of the filibusters, were the following: neglect of duty, ignorance of the duties of a commanding officer, and cowardice in the presence of the enemy (Carson-Jemison 72-73). While on parole, Schlesinger fled. He broke his word but saved his life (he was sentenced to death, in absentia), and, curiously enough, he even retained his military rank. He issued a proclamation against Walker, in August 1856, from Matagalpa, Nicaragua.¹² The proclamation, published in *The New York Herald* on 29 September 1856, begins with: “Soldiers! The time has come for you to be avenged for all the hardships and dangers you have undergone by the deceiving promises made to you by the faithless traitor. Yeah, I call him—Wm. Walker—a faithless traitor.” Then the proclamation goes on complaining about the personal ambitions of Walker, his mishandling of money and men, warns about the approaching troops of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador and ends offering full guarantees for those who change sides (qtd. in Bolaños-Geyer 98). For some filibusters, the proclamation might have

been attractive, whereas others felt frustrated upon hearing the news about the brand-new Nicaraguan Coronel, considered him a traitor, and tended to blame him for their misfortunes, thus building up a kind of black legend. Walker himself wrote in his memoirs that he had chosen Schlesinger because

he was one of the few among those attached to the American force possessed of any knowledge of Spanish; *nor were his previous career and character as well known as afterward*. . . . Schlesinger had been left in Granada on parole. He had the opportunity to regain, to a certain extent, his lost character, by volunteering to march with the Americans against the enemy. But he did not take advantage of the occasion; on the contrary, he remained to acquire, if possible, new infamy, by adding desertion to his former crimes. . . . He afterward joined a body of Legitimists acting against the Americans, and in such society he sank *He is now fallen so far* that it would be an unworthy act to execute on him¹³ the sentence of an honorable court. (Walker 65, 205-06, italics added)

Another view on his abilities came from James Carson Jamison, who offered the following assessment:

Schlesinger was *wholly unfit to command*, but his incompetency was not revealed until it was too late to give place to another. His whole line of march from San Juan was marked by the greatest *incompetency*; no pickets were kept out, nor patrols sent in advance to watch the movements of the enemy, which was known to be advancing in heavy force. . . . Next morning he suffered himself disgracefully to be surprised and defeated by the enemy, Schlessinger himself being *among the first to flee for safety*. (71, italics added)

Perhaps the most astonishing characterization was drawn by a Central American politician, Lorenzo Montúfar y Rivera, foreign minister of Costa Rica in 1856-57. He pointed out that “it calls the attention that such an experienced man as Walker would *know so little about the Hungarian heart*” (Lorenzo 26, italics in the original).

Schlesinger as an entrepreneur: his life after the War of the Filibusters

Walker and Schlesinger had very different destinies. Walker proclaimed himself president of Nicaragua in July 1856 but was soon forced to leave and, in an unsuccessful attempt to return, was captured, handed over to the Honduran authorities, and finally executed (1860). Schlesinger, on the other hand, was able to settle down in El Salvador and “obtained from the government of Salvador the exclusive right to extract India rubber for one year from the trees on the government lands. It has also conceded him the right to collect a tax of two dollars per quintal on the India rubber extracted by private parties from trees on their own lands,”¹⁴ in exchange for teaching and disseminating a new process for extracting rubber (1860). The “rubber boom” was typical of the Amazonian region, thus mainly affecting Brazil, Bolivia, and Peru,

and chronologically we can place it between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. The business of Schlesinger was in Central America and preceded the significant expansion, yet we have to assume that he got a good income from the rubber and could rebuild his image. He needed all this (money and reputation) in order to be able to marry Virginia Guzmán y Martorell, daughter of General Joaquín Eufracio Guzmán (1797/1801-1875), president of El Salvador between 1845-46 and also in 1859.

Schlesinger moved to Guatemala with his family¹⁵ in the 1870s in order to participate in railroad construction, representing a California company. His business partner was Guillermo Nanne Meyer, a Costa Rican national with German origins, an intimate friend of President Juan Rafael Mora, who had fought so sternly against Walker's filibusters. The fact that Nanne and Schlesinger could work and have a business together shows the level of acceptance Schlesinger enjoyed and might add to the suspicions that he and the Costa Rican leadership could have had a previous agreement about the Battle of Santa Rosa.

Nanne and Schlesinger undertook the construction of the very first railroad in Guatemala, leading from the port of San José to Escuintla, a distance of about thirty-three miles ("General Railway Notes" 5). It was inaugurated on 20 June 1880 in the presence of the presidents Rafael Zaldívar of El Salvador, Marco Aurelio Soto of Honduras, and naturally, Justo Rufino Barrios of Guatemala (Schlesinger, "El primer ferrocarril"). A new contract was signed, and thus the line reached the capital, Guatemala City, in 1884. By that time, Schlesinger was living in France, though he might have returned for the inauguration ceremony held on 19 July, the birthday of President Barrios, who once said: "the construction of railroads will make the happiness of the country" (Villalobos).

Wealthy, and probably with a growing longing for Europe in his old age, Schlesinger had moved to Paris with his family in 1882. In a passport application, he indicated the education of his son (who was studying in Germany) as the reason for the change. Health reasons might have played a part as well. Schlesinger made a prestigious donation of more than a hundred objects from Central America to the Hungarian National Museum in 1892, and later that year visited Hungary with his son (Főzy and Gyarmati 606). Still, he kept his residence in France and lived there for one and a half decades more. He might have seen the World Fairs of 1889 and 1900, he did outlive the fall of Spanish rule in Cuba, and finally died in Paris in April 1906.¹⁶ His descendants live in El Salvador and Guatemala.

Conclusion

Louis Schlesinger was seen as a traitor and a coward, a black sheep by filibusters, the leader of the invading troops in the Battle of Santa Rosa, and the embodiment of foreign intervention by the Central Americans. In contrast, for the Hungarians, who were not familiar with the details of the armed conflict on the isthmus, he was a respectable self-made man, an exile, who after many ordeals, settled and got rich overseas and who, by the way, did not forget about his roots. The news on his gift to

the National Museum was published in 1892 together with some details of his life in the daily *Budapesti Hírlap* and the most popular weekly of Hungary, *Vasárnapi Újság* (“Ajándék 70, “Az emigráns” 7).

Schlesinger’s life had some similar traits to that of various other Hungarian emigrants (first fighting, then settling down, marrying into the local elite and becoming a successful entrepreneur) like, for example, Stephen Zákány (see Szente-Varga, “General Zákány”). It is important to emphasize, though, that our knowledge of Hungarians living in Latin America in the nineteenth century is very limited, and memory tended to preserve the story of those who were somehow out of the ordinary, let it be positively or negatively. The life of the average emigrant could have been somewhat different from the careers that we, at present, know.¹⁷

Schlesinger had fought for the independence of Hungary, yet he did not envisage an independent Central America or independent states on the territory of the Isthmus. For him, the viable and desirable future of Central America was its annexation by the United States. This idea of the “natural” southward expansion of the US was shared by other Hungarian exiles of 1848-1849, such as John (János) Xántus and Károly László.¹⁸ Before traveling to Latin America, they had all lived in the United States, where they acquired most of their information and formed their opinions about Latin America. They tended to look down on Latin America and see it through US eyes, identifying potential progress with *Americanization*, the expression referring here strictly to the US. The following was probably written by Schlesinger:

It is true I abandoned Walker, but never did I part with the glorious principles of Freedom and Democracy. For these I fought and became an exile from Hungary in 1848; for the same principles I bled in Cuba and suffered in the dungeons of Ceuta; I shall prove that the standard of Walker in Nicaragua was one of personal ambition, based upon no principles of honor or justice; that Walker did not intend to Americanize that country, nor did he ever dream of annexation, that his whole aim was to become the founder of a military confederacy[.] (“Important from Nicaragua” 5)

Schlesinger was so much in favor of Americanization that at the beginning, he did not discard the use of arms and participated in the Walker expedition. However, its failure made him realize the necessity for peaceful and more gradual means. He probably played a more decisive role as a rubber entrepreneur in El Salvador and as a railroad constructor in Guatemala. With the passing of years—and also possibly due to his marriage into the Salvadorean elite that admired the old continent—Schlesinger showed increased attention towards Europe: he sent his son to study in Germany, he donated his Guatemalan collection to Hungary, revisited his native country, and finally settled down in France. However, I do not think that his basic ideas concerning Central America changed. He would still consider it a place to be civilized, either by the United States or by Europe.

Notes

1. On Hungarians fighting with López, see Ádám Anderle, “A 48-as magyar emigráció és Narciso López 1851-es kubai emigrációja.”
2. Also called *The United States Democratic Review*. The last volumes appeared in 1859.
3. According to an article published in the *New Orleans Picayune* on 13 Nov. 1852, three of them escaped together with Schlesinger.
4. Passport application to the Legation of the United States at Paris, 5 Jan. 1889, No. 1074.
5. On Walker, see Scott Martelle, *William Walker's Wars*; Alejandro Bolaños-Geyer, *William Walker. The Grey-Eyed Man of Destiny*. Books 1-5.; Frederic Rosengarten, *Freebooters must die! The Life and Death of William Walker, The Most Notorious Soldier of Fortune of the Nineteenth Century*.
6. It is interesting to note that in Central America he is referred to as Schlessinger. This extra letter *s* seems to appear in his name upon joining Walker.
7. For more on Central American history, see Vincent C. Peloso and Barbara Tenenbaum, *Liberals, Politics, and Power; State Formation in Nineteenth-Century Latin America*; Héctor Pérez Brignoli, Ricardo Sawrey, and Susana Stettri, *A Brief History of Central America*; Erick Rivera Orellana, ed., *El Salvador: historia mínima. 1811-2011* (17-59).
8. Mercenaries who fought in privately financed expeditions that started out from the United States, and whose goal was to seize control of a territory or country in Latin America and/or the Caribbean.
9. Rivas was first the head of the interim government and took office as president on 30 Oct. 1855.
10. Territory in Costa Rica, disputed by the Rivas Government in Nicaragua.
11. For more on the Battle of Santa Rosa, see Mónica Szenté-Varga, “Interpretaciones sobre el papel de Louis Schlesinger en los eventos centroamericanos de la segunda mitad del siglo XIX” (131-43).
12. It is interesting to note that after deserting Walker, Schlesinger fought together with Col. Manuel Gross, of Hungarian origins, resident in Nicaragua, and military governor of Matagalpa.
13. Walker was no longer able to carry out the sentence.
14. Published in *The Standard*, Clarksville, Texas, 4 August 1860. Similar news was published in *The Los Angeles Star* on 15 August, and *The New London Daily Chronicle* on 28 September 1860.
15. The couple had several children. There is information about José Guillermo Schlesinger Guzmán (b. 1865), Alphonse Schlesinger Guzmán (b. 1870), Luis Alfredo Schlesinger Guzmán (b. 1872) and María Guisela Schlesinger Guzmán (b. 1873). All of them were born in San Miguel, El Salvador (“Louis Schlesinger, Coronel”).
16. According to Herminio Portell Vira, Schlesinger died in 1907 in the French capital (764).

17. There are some writings in Spanish by Hungarian scholars on exiles of the 1848 War of Independence and, in general, nineteenth-century Hungarian emigrants in Latin America.
18. Katalin Jancsó, “Carlos Kossuth en Perú,” and “Húngaros en los trópicos”; Mónika Szente-Varga, “Gábor Naphegyi en las Américas” and “Apariencias y realidad.”
19. For more on John Xántus and László, see Venkovits, “Letters from a Revolutionary,” “Describing the Other,” and “Revisiting the Legacy.”

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