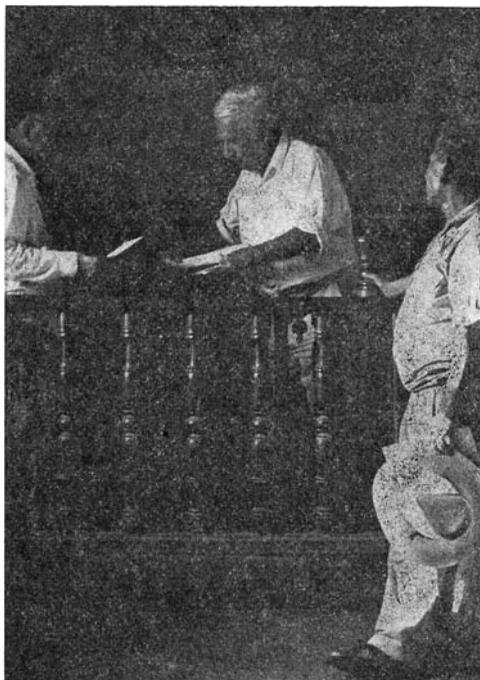


Obituary



ROBERT J. WEITLANER
1883–1968

ROBERT J. WEITLANER died in Mexico City on July 23, 1968. He was in his 86th year. For most United States anthropologists who have worked in Mexico during the past thirty years the intellectual stimulation, the professional aid, and above all the friendship of "Don Roberto" will be an indelible part of our anthropological lives. Some of us received our Mexican field baptism under the tutelage of "Papa Weitlaner," accompanying him on one or another of the scores of trips he made from Mexico City, methodically utilizing every short holiday to add to his knowledge of the languages and cultures of contemporary Mexican Indians. Others of us benefited by his wise counsel in Mexico City, often seated at

his table for eleven o'clock coffee at the old Sanborn's, in the Casa de los Azulejos on Calle Madero. The affection and respect felt by United States anthropologists for Robert J. Weitlaner were fully shared by Mexican anthropologists, as evidenced by the monumental Festschrift, *Suma Antropológica en Homenaje a Roberto J. Weitlaner*, edited and published by his colleagues and students in 1966.

Robert J. Weitlaner was born on April 28, 1883, in Steyr, Austria, the son of the civil engineer Julius Weitlaner and Therese Pillinger, a schoolteacher. He received his secondary education in Gratz and, following in the footsteps of his father, studied engineering at Leoben at the Montanistische Bergschule, from which he graduated in 1908 with the degree of metallurgical engineer. A year later, after twelve months' experience at the Böhler Stahlwerke at Kapfenberg, he immigrated to the United States, where he practiced his profession with major American steel companies in Pittsburgh (1909–1910), Buffalo (1910–1913), Philadelphia (1913–1916), Baltimore (1916–1919) and Cleveland (1919–1922). For most European immigrants of the time, the United States was the end of the rainbow. But for young Weitlaner it proved to be a mere way station on a hegira that he knew from an early age must take him to a country where he could experience at first hand the indigenous peoples and cultures of the New World. This country proved to be Mexico, to which he moved in 1922, accompanied by his wife, Olga Lipp, who had followed him to America, and his young daughters Irmgard and Olga. In Mexico City, he worked as a metallurgical engineer with La Consolidada, Mexico's largest steel company, until his retirement in 1939.

The events that led an Austrian professional engineer to Mexico by way of the

United States and to a postprofessional career of nearly thirty years resulting in almost a hundred published works read like fiction. As a boy Weitlaner, like many other German and Austrian youths of the time, was entranced by the novels of Karl May and James Fenimore Cooper. This interest was further heightened by the volumes dealing with America of the Abbot Antoine François Prévost's *Allgemeine Historie der Reisen zu Wasser und Lande*. While a secondary student in Gratz, young Weitlaner received permission to audit courses at the university on palaeontology and European prehistory. But it was his fascination with Indians—live Indians—Don Roberto once told me, that led him to take the decisive step of moving to the United States, where he hoped, as it were, to rub shoulders with Indians. In this he was largely disappointed, but his American stay was not without profit; it gave him the opportunity, especially during his three years in Buffalo, to make frequent visits to the Tuscarora and Seneca reservations, where he gathered data for his first paper, on Seneca tales and beliefs, published in 1915. Perhaps more important to his professional development were his years in Philadelphia, where he came to know well J. Alden Mason and Frank Speck, who encouraged the young engineer in his hobbies. Other friends of this period of whom he spoke fondly in subsequent years include Maurice Barbeau, Franz Boas, Alexander Goldenweiser, J. P. Harrington, Robert H. Lowie, and Edward Sapir.

The United States, however, for all its intellectual stimulation did not offer Don Roberto the close contacts with the indigenous peoples of America he so badly wanted, and for this reason the Weitlaner family continued its trek to Mexico City, where Don Roberto spent the final forty-six years of his life. In Mexico he quickly came to know the anthropologists of the immediate postrevolutionary period: Manuel Gamio, Miguel O. de Mendizabal, Eduardo Noguera, Pablo González Casanova, Hermann Beyer, Rudolf Schuller, Zelia Nuttal, and the young Al-

fonso Caso. At first his interests turned to archeology, and subsequently he took courses in this branch of the discipline with Caso, Noguera, and George Vaillant, who in the 1930s was carrying out his important excavations in the Valley of Mexico. In addition to digging in the environs of Mexico City, in 1948 Weitlaner excavated in the Balsas River Basin with Sigvald Linné. His great interests, however, were linguistic and ethnographic. Early study with Pablo González Casanova both formalized his knowledge of the science of linguistics and sparked a life-long interest in the Otomian languages. Not surprisingly, his second published article—at the age of fifty—dealt with an Otomí dialect of Tlaxcala.

Long before retirement from the engineering profession in 1939 Weitlaner began his countless trips to the Otomí and, beginning in 1934, to the Chinantec. As a consequence of the experience and knowledge derived from these field studies, and from wide reading in Mexican linguistics and ethnology, he was sufficiently well grounded in anthropology when he left La Consolidada to pass the professional examination that led to a full-time appointment as Ethnologist in the National Institute of Anthropology and History, a post he had occupied on a part-time basis for several years prior to 1939. With the founding of the National School of Anthropology and History about the same time, he was appointed (in 1940) Professor of Indigenous American Languages, of Otomian Languages, and of Contemporary Ethnology of Mexico and Central America, teaching first in the old Museum of Anthropology on Calle Moneda, behind the National Palace; and after 1964 in the new Museum of Anthropology in Chapultepec Park. Thus, at the age of 56, when many men contemplate retirement, Weitlaner began full-time work in the field he so loved, continuing with his formal appointments until his death nearly thirty years later.

Robert Weitlaner was first and foremost a fieldworker who derived stimulation and physical renewal from village life, a man who was never so happy as when seated

with an informant eliciting data. Endowed with enormous charm and empathy, he communicated to village peoples his interest in their language and in their way of life, and perhaps even more important, he made them sense his admiration for and his approval of their customs. Taking advantage of the short vacations that dot the Mexican calendar, alone and with students and colleagues, he visited scores of communities in the states of México, Hidalgo, Tlaxcala, Puebla, Guerrero, Oaxaca, and Veracruz for periods of from two days to three months. From 1940 to 1946 alone he visited thirty-nine settlements in Guerrero and made additional trips as well to other parts of the Republic. Because of his ability to gain the confidence of informants quickly, Weitlaner worked effectively even on his shortest trips.

Weitlaner was an engaging teacher, and few students will forget the beginning of his ethnographic course each year when, as he put it in his first lecture, he "saddled his burro" and began his slow and methodical journey from the north to the south of Mexico, leading his listeners, explaining to them the principal features of each tribe as his figurative burro carried him along the trail. In addition to his continuing activities as researcher and teacher, he was a cofounder both of the Sociedad Mexicana de Antropología and of the Sociedad Alemana Mexicanista.

Although Weitlaner recorded vocabularies and analyzed the grammar of a great many languages and dialects, including Nahuatl, Chinantec, Cuicatec, Mazatec, and Cuitlatec, his major linguistic contributions were made in Otomian languages, initially (with Stanley Newman) in the reconstruction of Otomí and subsequently (with María Teresa Fernández de Miranda) in the reconstruction of Oto-Mangue. His ethnographic interests ranged widely, as his bibliography shows, but it undoubtedly is for his Chinantec work that he will best be remembered on this score. In innumerable trips, accompanied in the early days by Bernard Bevan, his daughter Irmgard, and his son-in-law, the late Jean B. Johnson, he mapped

out the limits of Chinantec culture and established his *patria chica*, an identification with the land and people that led his friends to observe that he was "the only Chinantec born in Austria." In his wider Oaxaca studies he made important contributions to the comparative study of indigenous ritual and agricultural calendars and to the study of age grades, working closely with Pedro Carrasco, Walter Miller, Searle Hoogshagen, and Irmgard Weitlaner Johnson.

Weitlaner's last major comparative research was occasioned by the building of the new National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City, when he was commissioned to draw up guidelines for the Zapotec, Mixtec, Trique, Cuicatec, Chinantec, Chontal, Popoloca-Chocho, and Ixcatec exhibitions. A further idea of the breadth of his ethnographic knowledge is indicated by his authorship or coauthorship of seven of the tribal sketches in Volume Seven of the *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, the largest number entrusted to a single author. This volume, which he did not live to see in print, is a fitting capstone to a distinguished anthropological career, a reminder to all of us of the importance of gathering field data while they are yet available. And it will be a continual reminder to all of us who have worked in Mexico, North Americans and Mexicans alike, of a great friend, a warm and human person who was never too busy to give his time and inspiration, a man whose memory will always evoke an appreciation of the fellowship and camaraderie that characterize the anthropological profession.

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