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# HARALD LECHENBERG, PHOTOJOURNALIST

Jay Ruby



**Figure 1** Lechenberg at the start of his trip from India to Europe in a Model A Ford, 1930.

Harald Lechenberg was born in 1904 in Vienna, where he studied ethnology. In 1927 he borrowed a glass-plate camera and typewriter and went to the Sahara—beginning a life of travel supported through writing and picture taking. For the next twenty years he worked as a text-and-photo journalist in Africa, Arabia, and North America (Figure 1). His photo stories were published in leading picture magazines such as *Die Woche*, *Leipziger Illustrierte*, *Miroir du Monde* (Paris), *London Illustrated News*, and *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*. According to Tim Gidal, a colleague of Lechenberg's and a historian of the early days of photojournalism, Lechenberg was one of the first photojournalists to employ the "candid camera" style of reportage:

With unusual photographic technique he has caught the facial expression and gestures when these subjects were unaware that a European observer with a camera was anywhere near. [Gidal 1972]

At the age of 33, Lechenberg became the editor in chief of *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*, Germany's largest magazine. Between 1937 and the end of World War II, he raised the circulation to 1.7 million weekly and made a major contribution to the modernization of the magazine's style and presentation (ibid.). In 1949 he became editor in chief of *Quick* and *Weltbild*, two other German picture newspapers. Since World War II Lechenberg has devoted his energies to the production of more than twenty documentary films, broadcast on ARD and ZDF, two of Germany's television systems.

In August 1984 I interviewed Harald Lechenberg in his 350-year-old home, Sonngrubhof, near Kitzbuhel, Austria, about his 1935 trip to the United States. I asked Lechenberg to recall his journey of almost half a century earlier and to help select and caption a few of his many photographs. During World War II some original negatives, manuscripts, and prints from that journey were destroyed in a fire. Fortunately, the majority of the work remains intact. What follows is an edited version of our conversation, with some additional remarks Lechenberg wrote after our talk.

NOTE: Captions enclosed by quotation marks were written by Lechenberg.

## Recollections of an American Voyage

"From 1927 to 1934 I had spent about 30 months traveling through Asian and African countries. I then looked for a chance to 'go west.' At the beginning of 1935, my employer, Ullstein Verlag, Berlin (the most important publishing house in Germany and one of the largest in Europe), asked me to write a book on American sports. This journey would, of course, be combined with my usual work as one of the first photojournalists.

"I did not go directly to the U.S. because I knew people were shocked or overwhelmed by the New York skyline, and I didn't want that to be my first impression. Rather, I decided to enter your country like the Pilgrim fathers or the first pioneers—to see the continent as the early settlers had seen it.

"One did not fly then, so I took a boat from Liverpool to Halifax and St. John. My ship stopped for an evening at Halifax, Nova Scotia, and there, by chance, I had my introduction to a typically American sport, a kind of very wild ice hockey between two leading teams. Ice hockey was then quite unknown in Europe, although today it is everybody's sport. I was surprised how tough these sportsmen were and how ruthless. We in Europe (especially in my native Austria) looked at sports as a game; in the New World it was more or less always a fight. For example, European soccer is playing with the ball; in American football, the object is not the ball, but the man who carries the ball. Within an hour I found the title for my book: *Mann gegen Mann—Man against Man*.

"I then went to Montreal and crossed the border into Vermont. Entering the United States through the New England states, traveling for eleven months, I had a lot to learn.

BOSTON EVENING TRANSCRIPT, 1935

*'A Man With a Lucky Timetable' Comes to See the New Deal. Young Austrian Journalist Has Seen Wars Happen in Afghanistan, in Arabia and in Abyssinia and Now Arrives in America Just as the NRA Cracks Up.*

... Mr. Lechenperg's visit to America will include, he hopes, a visit to the ruler that the world is most interested in today—President Roosevelt. He wants to see everything from boondoggling to the TVA, and he started his inspection of this country not by way of the Statue of Liberty and the skyscrapers of Manhattan but over the Canadian border into Vermont and New Hampshire by automobile. Baron Rosenberg, whom he met in India and whose mother was born in Vermont, is his mentor during his American travels. Under his guidance he took a leisurely way down through the mountains and valleys of the New England hinterland, stopping at farmhouses and small hotels, spending several days in a CCC camp in Vermont.

## Time for Study

"I could have come much faster," he said. "I could have been taken around a CCC camp in one afternoon under care of the officers. But I like to see what the life is doing to the men; see not so much what they are doing but how they do it. The same with the country villages. Not one in a hundred European visitors sees this part of America. I was pleased and surprised at what I found. Many families have fine old houses—150 or 200 years old—and beautiful things in them. They read intelligent magazines and newspapers. They are not peasant types at all. They have a tradition of culture that is very fine. I like also to sense the historical background of this country and much of it is in New England." Later he will see its development elsewhere.

He is going to travel by motor down the eastern seaboard, across the Southern States to New Orleans, follow the Mississippi Valley to the Lakes, thence southwestward to California and up the Pacific Coast. He would like to see Alaska and Mexico, but doubts if he can. In America as elsewhere, he feels that the best understanding of the building up of a nation and a culture can be obtained by following the main lines of communication—where we have been traveling and leaving our traces since the earliest days of pioneering. He says that America is the focus of world attention just now and his book will attempt to hold the spectroscope and the magnifying glass on us so that Europe may see.

"During my short stay in New England, I saw two-hundred-year-old farms and splendid libraries, and I met very well-educated people. From Burlington I went to Boston and from there to New York. I arrived in New York about midnight, so I missed the skyline.

"Only my work on the sports manuscript had a definite schedule—sporting events. Besides that, I was trying very hard to find stories for my photo-work—mostly for *BIZ*. There I was in New York and I was helpless. East of the Atlantic I had been 'Herr,' 'Herr Doktor,' 'Sahib,' or 'Bwana.' Now, I was 'just another guy.' Day and night I walked for hours through New York. I didn't find anything new worth reporting or unknown to European readers because all the beautiful sights had already been photographed and painted.

LETTER—THE NEW YORK TIMES

"All the News That's Fit to Print"

Telephone: LAckawana 4-1000

Times Square, New York

June 10, 1935

To whom it may concern:

Mr. Harald Lechenperg, the bearer, is a European journalist of international reputation connected with some of the largest publications on the continent of Europe. He is in America, seeing the United States at first hand, with an idea of studying the American people, their government, their business life, their sports and their social activities. His dependability and reliability are vouched for by

American journalists in Europe, well known to me, and by officials of Austria, of which country he is a citizen.

I am sure he will not abuse any opportunities given him in furtherance of his study of American life.

Very truly, (Signature) Charles M. Graves

EDITOR, SUNDAY PICTURE SECTION,  
THE NEW YORK TIMES.

"While I was still in Canada I got an idea that went well with my romantic little mind, a thought from boyhood, from my reading of James Fenimore Cooper and Zane Grey—Indians. 'Well,' I said, 'I'll do a story about Indians.' For the next two months the first and only Indian I saw was an Indian chief about 30 feet high standing in front of a gas station helping to sell Big Chief Indian Oil. And then no Indians at all, only a little boy wearing a hat and feathers selling newspapers in Times Square. For the time being I gave up my idea for a story about Indians.

"I continued looking around trying to find an interesting lead story. One day, while walking in the Bowery, I found, just beyond these million-dollar skyscrapers, the poorest people I'd seen, living in shacks while others lived the high style and good life (Figures 2 and 3). Bums of New York. They were just dropouts, you see, but not bad people after all, these drunks sleeping in doorways (Figure 4). I made acquaintance, even a friendship, with one of the fellows, a quite intelligent man (Figure 5). He was a tall fellow I had spotted while he went from garbage basket to garbage basket collecting newspapers. I asked him, 'Why are you doing this?' 'Well,' he said, 'to sleep with.' He explained that he'd go to some park and put the newspapers all around himself and he slept wonderfully. From this moment on we were quite friendly. I invited him to a restaurant where the meal was one dollar, or one and a half dollars, and whiskey was five cents. In return, he invited me to one of those bums' restaurants where you could eat for 25 cents (Figure 6). I took hundreds of pictures of my 'friends,' including one who lived in a broken-down old car he shared with a nice cat. The restaurant was my first story about the United States, 'The Mystery Behind the Skyscrapers' (Figure 7). My intention was not to be critical about what I saw; I just wanted to show something that had not been shown before: the back side of New York—the Bowery—just behind a billion-dollar center of business—an unknown and interesting description of the darker side of the city. The article was published in *BIZ*.



Figure 2 "Central Park, New York."



**Figure 3** "Polo on Governor's Island against the famous skyline."



**Figure 4** "Drunk and Homeless on the Bowery."



**Figure 5** "A New York 'bum,' my friend and guide through the darker side of a splendid city."

"BIZ paid extremely well; I used to get 1500 gold marks for a double page. To give you an idea of the value of 1500 gold marks, the smallest Mercedes car cost about 5500, three-and-a-half times more than I earned for these pages. It means that I was well paid.

"When this story was finished I went to Washington. I had received an invitation from the people at National Geographic magazine who had seen some of my work. In Washington I did two stories for them. I had spent three summers in the tropics and now I thought I would enjoy a really nice summer, but Washington, D.C., in June was like Hell. It was hot without the palm trees and the roaring tigers. I had time to spare and was roaming through the Senate building, where congressmen have their offices. I enjoyed being there because it was air-conditioned. I took pictures—portraits—of all the important politicians of the time and got written statements about their views of the current situation. These written and signed statements were burned in Berlin, but I still have the pictures, among them the famous Huey Long. He was quite a strange fellow, but I got along with him. Another is a former Vice President of the United States who claimed himself to be an Indian, or his father was an Indian, showing this Calumet to me. I've got about ten portraits of the more important senators and political figures.



**Figure 6** "A restaurant patronized by N.Y. bums. Here you can eat for 25 cents. I have been most candidly invited by these men."



**Figure 7** "Typical downtown N.Y. in 1935—expensive buildings and poor quarters side by side."



"One day I came upon a door marked 'Senator So-and-So, Indian Committee.' I thought, 'This is Big Chief Oil Man. Maybe I'll ask where I can find some Indians.' The senator wasn't in, but his secretary was. I told her, 'I've been in the United States almost three months and I haven't seen an Indian.' She turned around and said, 'Why, I'm Indian myself.' 'What, are you?' 'Yes.' She showed me a picture of her mother, a squaw with a tent. A real Indian, then. So I had come back to my original idea, a story about Indians.

Armed with some letters of introduction I went to Oklahoma. That was a very strange situation. The poor Indians had been driven from one land to the other. Finally they were given a very wide piece of prairie nobody thought anything about until oil was found there. The land could not be taken away from them, and several of the Indians who had been very poor made quite a lot of money. Their only interests became cars and whiskey, a situation created by the sudden riches of these formerly very poor people. I did another story about oil and Indians who did quite well. The families lived in nice cottages and didn't go in for cars and booze. One man became a doctor; another, a farmer, became quite successful breeding horses. The shadow over all this landscape was the oil. The oil that destroyed even Oklahoma City with the crowding of the town and the derricks.

"Now I had the story about the misery beyond the wealth of Wall Street, and the Osage Indian story. I went to Chicago to cover some sports events with the hope of finishing the book. My most exciting days, or better, nights, were in Chicago while riding in the squad cars of the Chicago police; fingerprinting; seeing the 'lineups' the next day, the 'mug' galleries, pictures of prisons, and a showcase for John Dillinger. Surprising was the help I got as a foreign journalist (Figures 8, 9, and 10).

"We Austrians used to make fun of the Prussians' love for uniforms. To my surprise, I found that the Americans loved uniforms as well—not just the special, military kind. I took endless pictures of parades—Elks, Moose, Shriners, Daughters of the American Revolution, and so on: uniforms, flags, and bands in many variations. This became the picture story 'America in Uniform.'

[Editor's Note: During his visit Lechenperg did picture stories on a Civilian Conservation Corps Camp—a New Deal work project; the tennis championships at Forest Hills; the John Powers modeling agency (something unheard of in Europe at that time); the New York Public Library; MIT's research on the first computers; and the United States Army maneuvers.]

"Some things, like the story about the army, are the same all over. But things like the city bums or the Indians were new stories so far as pictures are concerned. I took endless pictures about New York, day and night, many only for myself. 'New York, Day and Night' is what I have seen in the streets of New York. I never published the pictures. I made them just for myself. [Editor's Note: Figures 11 through 18 were selected from these unpublished photographs of 'New York, Day and Night.']

"Then I found myself near the deadline for my book. I could make it in time only by living like a hermit. I took a room at the Waldorf Astoria for a special rate for journalists of \$8.00 a day and started to write. It was quite a strange way of life because I was under pressure to finish this book. I didn't know anybody in New York. For three weeks I did not speak to anyone except the many porters in the hall, to ask for my room key or order some food at a restaurant at three in the afternoon or three, four, or five in the morning—a strange, almost ghostly experience. I didn't see the chambermaids because they were there when I was out, and I was out at strange times because I was tired of writing this book. At one o'clock in the morning I'd go for strolls along Broadway—much alive at this time—or I'd finish at three o'clock in the afternoon and go to sleep. It was a life in which day and night were mixed because the deadline was very near and I had to finish the book—it was under contract.

"The end of my year in the United States was not so different. I boarded the Italian liner *Rex*—flagship between New York and Geneva. Italy had just started the Ethiopian war; would other nations join in? People were afraid. The luxury first class of *Rex* was meant to accommodate 500 passengers, but had only 26 guests, among them, a couple of celebrities like boxing champion Primo Carnera and some royalty. There were enough conversations, but the background was an empty ship."



**Figure 8** "I had the opportunity to ride at night-time with police squad cars. The detective had a Thompson submachine gun—a weapon also used by Chicago mobsters."



**Figure 9** "Present at the lineup; plainclothes policemen, victims, and curious spectators."



**Figure 10** "Lineup at Chicago police headquarters—the police officer (left) telling what is known about the suspected criminals."



**Figure 11** "Gambling Boys, Brooklyn."



**Figure 12** "Germantown, a waiter at the entrance of an imitation 'Brauhaus.'"

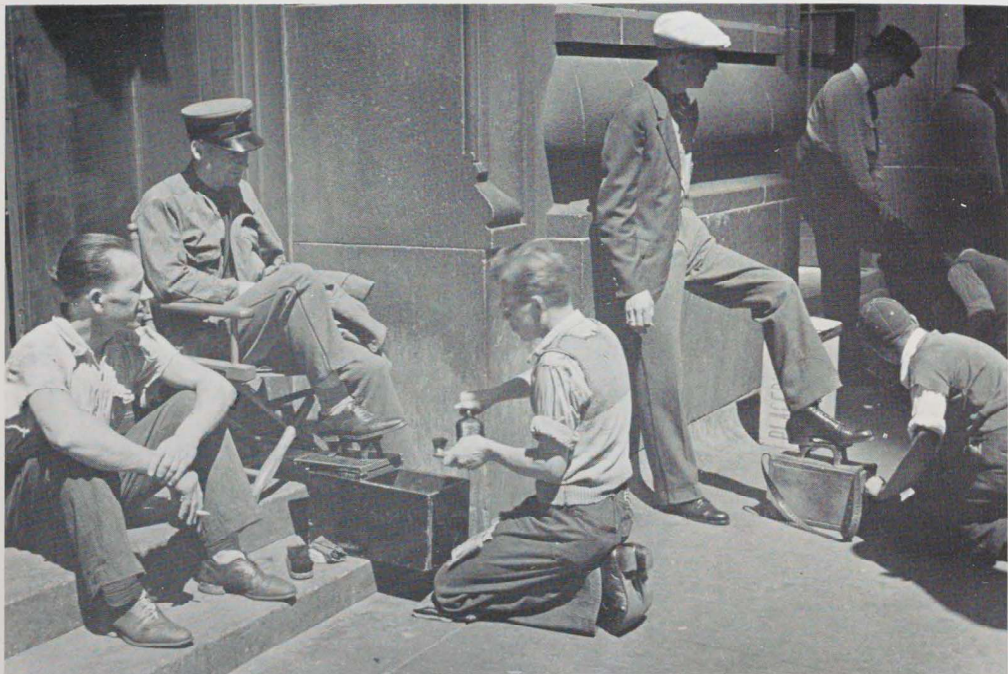


**Figure 13** "Sunday in Manhattan."



Figure 14 "New York Subway."

Figure 15 "The brisk business of the shoeshine boys. Amazing for a European—rare in Europe but everywhere in North Africa, and the Levant."



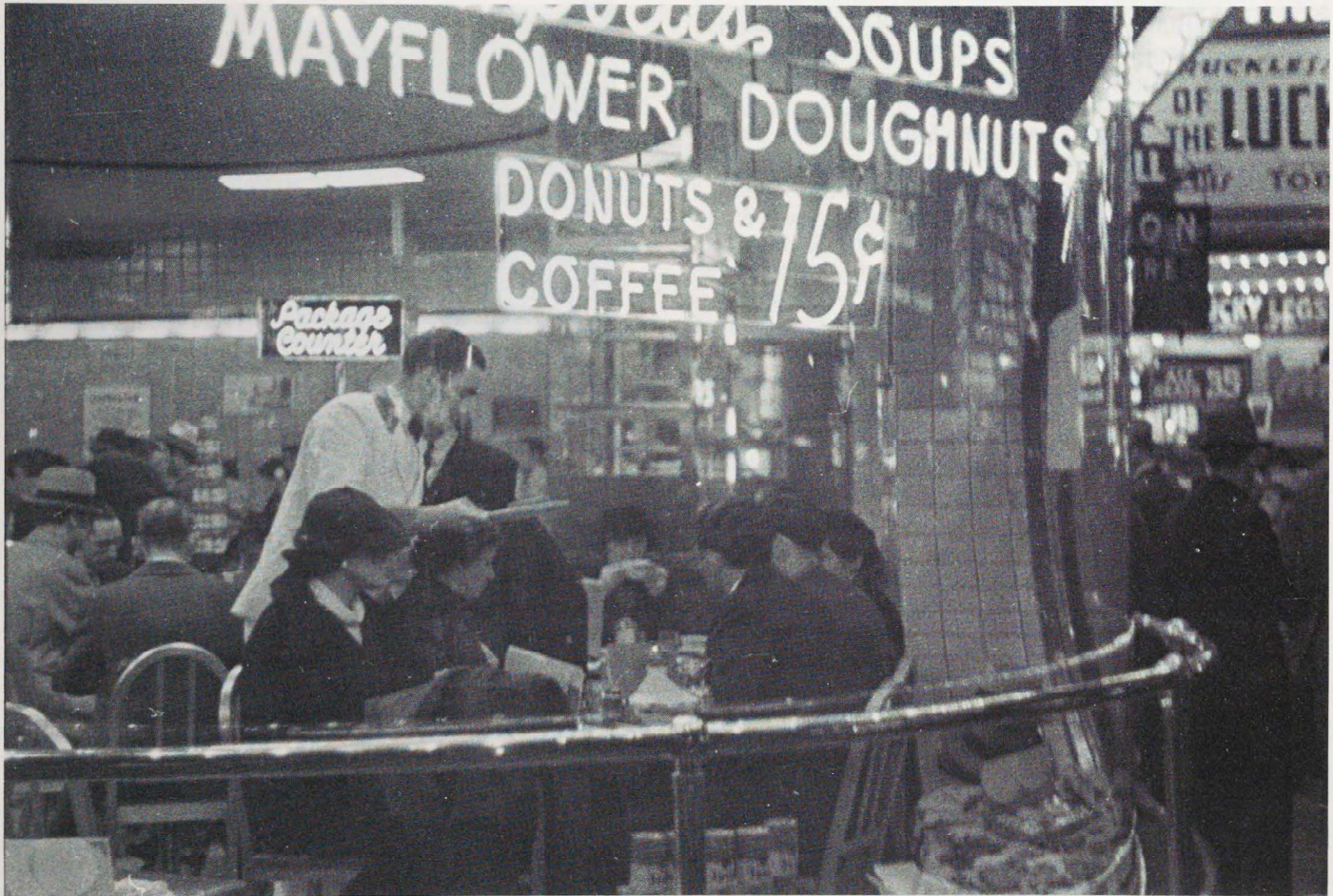


**Figure 16** "Greenwich Village, a painter and model." ▶





**Figures 17 and 18** (opposite and below) "A City that never sleeps, upper Manhattan at 3 A.M. Amazing for the European tourist—the great number of 'Allnite' stores, bars, and restaurants."



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