

# The Old Guatemala Trotters: A Friendship Deepened through War

BY JANET SIMON

This is the story of two individuals drawn together through their work in Maya archaeology, who later developed a friendship that transcended their professional lives. From archival materials, we reconstructed their relationship at a critical period just after World War II. The story of Mary Butler and Franz Termer is one of unique kindness. Across the barriers of time, war, and distance, the friendship of the “old Guatemala trotters,” in Termer’s words, remained strong.



ABOVE, Dr. Mary Butler, shown unearthing ceramics in a communal burial plot, conducted excavations in the town of Nebaj, Quiché Dept., Guatemala, in 1941. UPM image #238643. LEFT, Franz Termer was Director of the Hamburg Museum für Völkerkunde (Museum of Ethnology) from 1935–1962 and a professor of ethnology and anthropology at the University of Hamburg. © Museum für Völkerkunde, Hamburg

Dr. Mary Butler (later Mary Butler Lewis) was one of a small group of women archaeologists who worked in the United States during the early 20th century and the first female archaeologist awarded a Ph.D. in Anthropology from the University of Pennsylvania (1936). Her dissertation dealt with the ceramics of Piedras Negras, Guatemala, where she had been part of the Penn Museum team headed by J. Alden Mason and Linton Satterthwaite. From 1939–1941, Butler directed three of her

own expeditions in the Guatemalan Highland regions of Alta Verapaz and Quiche.

Dr. Franz Termer was the Director of the Hamburg Museum für Völkerkunde (Museum of Ethnology) from 1935–1962 and a professor of ethnology and anthropology at the University of Hamburg. Active in the Maya sphere for four decades, Termer established contacts and friendships with a number of people affiliated with the Penn Museum, including Mason and Butler, begin-

ning during Termer’s research in Guatemala in the 1920s and 1930s.

Recent processing of the papers and correspondence of Mary Butler for the Penn Museum Archives has brought to light the considerable help which Penn Museum personnel, especially Mason and Butler, provided to Professor Termer and his family during the difficult period for German civilians following the end of World War II.

Termer was in charge of the Hamburg Museum during the Second



LEFT, Butler (center), shown here with student workers Martha Lee Getty and Richard May. Butler directed the Hudson Valley Archaeological Survey for Vassar College in 1939–1940. This photograph was taken by the famous photo-journalist Margaret Bourke-White. *UPM image #238641 Photo © Estate of Margaret Bourke-White/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY*

BELOW, TOP, Mary Butler and Guatemalan workers excavate at Torres, site B, Calvario at San Pedro Carchá, Alta Verapaz Dept., 1939. *UPM image #238642*. ВОТТОМ: Franz Termer (left) and S. Andres Osuna are photographed on horseback in Guatemala in July 1928. Termer's student, Wolfgang Haberland, remembers his professor as a tireless scientist and field researcher, who preferred to go on his field excursions on horseback, on a mule, or on foot. © *Museum für Völkerkunde, Hamburg*

World War. Although the building itself was only slightly damaged, the museum experienced serious losses of externally stored inventory. After World War II, Termer, who had never been a National Socialist party member, was seen as a clear opponent of the Nazi regime and was made head of the Denazification Committee of the German Department for Culture in 1945. The period of reconstruction after the war required a great effort in order to re-establish administration of the museum.

After reading Termer's first post-war letters to J. Alden Mason in 1946, Mary Butler wrote to Termer: "How glad I was to have news of you and to know that you and your family had weathered the storm." She listed boxes which she and Mason had sent containing heavy shoes, warm underwear, sewing items, a dress, women's trousers, socks and

stockings, and "a Christmas gift for each of you."

Termer replied in February, 1947 that he and his wife had received her "kind lines full of . . . friendly feeling [with] great pleasure and wonderful joy. Your gifts and those of Dr. Mason and Dr. [Alfred] Kidder have helped us out of many difficulties. . . invaluable for us in the present strong winter cold. Never we had thought in former times that we had once to suffer such want of the simplest things as needles, thread, shoes, stockings etc. One who does not live here nor has seen the situation in our zone can imagine the change of our life."

The gifts included a box of food from Mason, Hershey chocolate bars from Butler, and necklaces which delighted the Termer daughters, Anja and Marietta. Termer wrote that his young son Holger "is running about our home with his magic pencil and



chocolate affirming to everybody that schoolboys in USA have not to learn by heart the multiplication tables.” Termer, his wife Nora, and eldest daughter Anja sent Butler individual thank you notes in English, and the two younger children sent theirs in German.

Despite the stresses of post-war Germany, Termer reminisced on their time in Guatemala. “I remember well our meeting in Guatemala City in the Carnegie office [1939], when you [Butler] told me of your planned trip to the Alta Verapaz... You will understand that my stay in Guatemala in that winter was a happy time for me, a time of freedom in a country which I like so very much, not hindered by all the dreadful terrorism that I had to undergo in my country... we had many hours of anxiety during these six terrible years,

A pot found by Mary Butler during her 1941 excavation at Nebaj, Quiché Dept., is depicted in this watercolor (with rollout) by Guatemalan artist Antonio Tejada Fonseca. UPM image #238640



when we had to flee three to four times in one night with the sleeping children into the cellar of our house.”

Termer described the situation in 1945–1946: “Besides the want of food and clothing, etc. there has arisen a very serious situation of fuel.” Modern central heating was stopped during that winter. With a small iron stove and a small quantity of turf wood fuel, the Termer family was able to heat one single room. “In this room unrolls the life of the whole family.”

Butler and Termer exchanged professional questions as well: information from Termer to Butler about his 1927 stay in Nebaj for geographical studies, and Butler’s paper on

the pottery of Alta Verapaz to Termer. Termer instructed that direct mailing of printed matter to private citizens, even to the Director of the Hamburg Museum, was not yet permitted. Mailings must be sent in care of the Education Officer of Military Government (British Zone).

The bitter winter cold meant that Termer had to sit at his typewriter preparing his lectures and other work in the single heated family room. “I long for the warmer season of spring to return into my study (now -5 degrees C) ... amidst my library.” Even single typewriter ribbons for his work had to be requested from and sent by Mason and Butler.

In June 1947, Termer wrote to Butler, expressing just how much her kindness helped him and his family. “When I came home from town yesterday afternoon... the children cried, ‘Papa, there has come a package!... I was compelled to unpack it instantly, and there was loud joy, as appeared the plenty of things so much wanting here. I had really to defend the sweetmeats against attacks of three pairs of hands.” He adds, “The typewriter-ribbon, the razor-blades, and the



Maya women wear *traje* (traditional clothing) in Chajul, Quiché Dept., Guatemala, 1941. Photograph by Mary Butler. UPM image #179947



This photograph of Maya in the marketplace of Cantel, Quetzaltenango Dept. was taken by Franz Termer in his beloved Guatemala in 1925. UPM image #238644

superb coffee have delighted me, and from the last I see that you understand what wants an old Guatemala-trotter especially. *Mil y mil gracias!*”

“Now that life has become so dark and full of need, one is thankful the more to those who help so unselfishly,” Nora Termer wrote to Butler. She spoke of her joy at receiving thread and needles so that she could sew for the children. Mrs. Termer was also glad to receive the fever thermometer she had requested to determine whether the children were ill or just wanted to remain home from school.

In 1947, Termer wrote to Butler that his primary wish was “to see one time again in my life old Guatemala with its lonely ‘Altos,’ one of the few spaces in our atomic world of trouble where one can be alone with oneself, nature, and its metaphysic mysteries.”

Conditions within Germany had improved by 1953, and Termer was able to fulfill his wish to return to Central America, where he spent six months in El Salvador doing study and archaeological excavation. He described his work in a letter to Butler and added, “Please give my greetings to the museum.” After an extended

stay in Mexico in 1958, Termer visited Butler in Philadelphia in late March.

In view of their long personal friendship and shared professional interests, Butler was happy to be invited to contribute to the “Festschrift” volume on Central and Mesoamerican archaeology and ethnology assembled by the Hamburg Museum in honor of Termer’s 65th birthday in July 1959. Butler’s submission, “Spanish Contact at Chipal,” dealt with a unique pottery vessel from a late Chipal (Dept. of Quiche, Guatemala) Highland Maya tomb, and its position in local prehistory.

Termer wrote to thank her: “you underlined our old friendship by a splendid contribution to the publication in honour of me... I like your article very much and am delighted to see that you stand in the arena as vigorous as ever before.” He added that although he thought she selected the subject unintentionally, he himself connected it with their first meeting in Guatemala City on January 16, 1939, in the office of CIW (Carnegie), where Termer had been introduced to Butler “in the store-room amongst sherds... Then you told me of your planned trip to Nebaj

and Alta Verapaz.” Termer stated his hope that “we still have many years before us in friendship and interchange of ideas.”

#### EPILOGUE

Termer suffered a heart attack after his return to Hamburg from Guatemala in 1961 and was forced to retire. He maintained his Penn Museum friendships for the rest of his life. His findings from his last archaeological dig at Palo Gordo in 1960–1961 were published just after his death in Hamburg in 1968.

Butler never returned to Guatemala for further archaeological fieldwork after 1941. She placed family life first while raising two children but maintained active interest and participation as a Research Associate in the American Section of the Penn Museum for 30 years, from 1940–1970. At the time of her death from cancer in 1970, she was the historian-archaeologist engaged in the restoration of the 18th-century Morton Mortonson House in Norwood, Delaware County, Pennsylvania. ●

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*Tikal Digitization Project and in the Archives, processing the papers of Dr. Mary Butler and M. Louise Baker.*