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THE SUNCOAST VIEWED THROUGH GERMAN EYES

Introduction and Translation by Georg H. Kleine

In her travel book, Annie Francé-Harrar, a German woman, presented a description of boom and bust Florida. To Francé-Harrar Florida held not only the fascination of a uniquely enchanting tropical paradise but also contained the key to the salvation of Germanic man. The wife of a famous biologist, his companion on world travels, and the author of numerous fictional and non-fictional works, she found Florida superior to lands like Hawaii, California and Egypt. Typical of the educated European of her generation, she perceived a crisis of the white man in the twentieth century. Sensitive to the decline of Germany’s global significance in the wake of the First World War, she refused to renounce her “race’s” claim to supremacy. Francé-Harrar looked for bold alternatives to safeguard civilization as she cherished it. This emissary from a Germany deeply infected by various shades of racism found the “colored peoples” picturesque and charming, yet lacking in vitality, the sense of mission and destiny. According to her, the Latins and blacks in Florida, whom she perceived as wild, romantic children of the tropics, would have to make room for the pioneers of the white “Northern” race. She thought the future of the state would be neither Cuban nor African. As Spain had failed to keep pace with the modern, industrialized nations, its quaint culture was left to linger on as the exotic backdrop to the superior Anglo-American civilization. Slavery was condemned harshly by Francé-Harrar, but from her cultural bias she expected that blacks, with “their humble servility beaten into them for generations,” would continue to hold their place at the bottom of the economy.

Florida was to this daughter of a Siberian painter the symbol of the white race’s last chance to claim its inheritance in the warm climates. Settlement in the “eternally wintry foglands” of Northern Europe had been a fundamental mistake, because it fostered melancholy and suffering. In Florida, white Americans were proving that they could organize a tropical heaven, without the ugly side-effects of colonialism, and create an affordable, healthy, civilized garden of human fulfillment. This paternalistic view ignored the plight of the working class. Nevertheless, it is interesting to take notice of Francé-Harrar as another writer in the long row of those who thought they had discovered what in her case was a collective “Fountain of Youth.”

Francé-Harrar’s writing style is difficult to capture in translation. It frequently matches in its hyperbole the extravagance of the ideas. The imagery is bold and very personal, one reason to restrict the excerpt to certain descriptive parts and exclude much of the reflective comments.

Annie Francé-Haffar*

In Tarpon Springs, the sponge market and sponge fishing last three months at a time. This pretty little (small only according to American standards) Tarpon Springs owes its name to the tarpon, the famous sport fish of the South. To catch this lively, strong king of the herrings, often

* Florida. Das Land des Uberflusses, [The Land of Superabundance], Berlin-Schöneberg: Peter J. Oestergaard Verlag, 1931.
more than two meters long, takes literally a wrestling match between man and fish every time. The place has an enchanting, small, quiet and dreamlike bay, only a mile away from the banks of the Gulf. There you can see the yellow and red Latin sails move in and out, and the men wearing Spartan red caps and Greek garb, as if this Tarpon Springs was a piece of Greece, blown across the ocean. They are Greek by descent, and they have emigrated to Florida to continue their fathers’ age-old trade.

The sponges, said to be among the biggest in the world, if not the biggest anywhere, are growing tongue-like on the reefs, and are being brought up from depths of 150 feet. The transparent warm water facilitates diving, and they say that diving for sponges, if it is not “big business,” represents an income not to be sneezed at.

On deck, the sea creatures, filled with sand, are being carved up, rinsed and rinsed again, until they are clean and smooth and usable. The lagoon seems to be inexhaustible, and equally inexhaustible the Greek people which reproduces itself all around, probably much happier and more content than in the homeland. Because, on closer look, it appears that what is viable what is binding about the homeland they have brought with them. Their black-eyed women prepare for them the same onion dishes: the shape of their boats, the practice of their trade, their language, costumes, and daily customs, are derived from the homeland. So firmly rooted is this piece of Greece in America that its residents do not even dream of returning. And there is hardly a lovelier, a more sun-blest coast than the lagoon country of Tampa, Clearwater and Tarpon Springs. Sure, the Greek island mountains are missing, and so is the snowy, rosy shadow of Mount Olympus which, naked like a mountain of the moon, glances down on ravaged and forgotten antiquity. But down there on the Gulf of Mexico, they have, instead, the whole wealth of tropical fruits, and they do not have to eat tough goat meat, leek and salted olives all the time. Only a fool doesn’t think the exchange is for the better and longs to return back to the restless poverty of the homeland.

The Gulf Stream is here, it too, the mediator of life, and Florida, the coast of which it embraces as tenderly as no other, showering gifts upon her. Florida is its favored child, and will be that even more once she becomes fully aware of it.

II

During the early 1920s, there was in the Port Tampa a very big shoal, a partly submerged sand island which didn’t serve any useful purpose, but was utterly hated by all skippers. A certain Mr. [D. P.] Davis . . . pumped a new island out of the water and wanted to create a paradise on it, a genuinely American paradise with fragrant gardens, swimming pools, fabulous lighting effects, gigantic hotels, with clubs, bungalows, music halls, and all kinds of super-luxury. (The hotels were all conceived of in a Moorish-bombastic style, similar to that of the Tampa Bay Hotel which extends a forest of conical spires further inland, at the mouth of the Hillsborough River.) Where a few pitiful mangroves were protecting ever new larvae of mosquitoes, there the most beautiful, enchanting, healthy, recreational beach of the United States was supposed to arise: something never before seen, marvelous golf courses, dance floors, colorfully gleaming, nightly fountains – a dream as probably only a billionaire can dream it. His friends tried to dissuade him.
The city of Tampa itself was hardly inclined to build a new, large state bridge that was supposed to establish a link between mainland and island.

But have you ever seen a stubborn Yankee give up voluntarily something he really wanted to do? Mr. Davis invited public subscription for Davis Island. In October 1924, his offices were taken by storm. People stood there literally for hours with money in their hands, the way we lined up during the war [World War I] for a quarter-pound of butter or an egg. Thirty hours after opening three million dollars was available. At that time not a finger was being lifted to drain Davis Island. Still the light green shelf water moved in and out with the tide, pulling and washing, and the small harbour steamers’ keels scratched sponges and lime algae off the bottom. Land and water had remained unchanged since the coast of Florida had risen from the warm surface of the Gulf of Mexico.

Eight months later there was a Davis Island, and on it dozens of winter villas, tennis courts, hotels and enchanting pavilions. A wide, paved street had been constructed through the new island. Gardens were already blossoming, birds arrived, cars rolled, the people had discovered a piece of new territory, and, unconsciously greedily, hurled themselves on it. A year after opening day, the last one thousand acres of the new island were released for public sale. People then saw in Davis Island an investment of such importance that within 24 hours checks totaling over twenty million dollars came in. Anybody who could possibly swing it tried to secure a little piece of land for himself. And since many more people did this than there was land to distribute, eight million dollars had to be returned to their disappointed and enraged senders. Not everyone could be accommodated even with the best of intentions.

When the big Florida boom began to ease up in 1925, and came to a standstill rather abruptly, the feverish activity on Davis Island stopped violently. The first wave of land seekers had been satisfied.

III

You should properly ask: which Tampa? The American or the Spanish, the port section or the Negro town? The Yankees, of course, prefer the American. To date, they don’t think too much of the port, a gigantic, widespread facility with its own big phosphate quay. It is left over from Spanish times, they say, and one would finally have to start modernizing it. For that, they have
proposed a mere twenty-five million dollars. However, it remains to be seen whether the world economic crisis will not delay the whole project a bit.

Some 2,874 steamers called port at Tampa in 1929. Again to be quite specific: the American Tampa. For it is a big commercial and industrial city only on the side, with its 120,000 inhabitants, spa, and winter resort. It’s as irregular as any city in the USA that grows up abruptly. Wide streets, the houses divided by “blocks,” quarter to quarter, jingling with the shrill ringing of the traffic lights. Rough telegraph poles carry the weight of countless wires and are placed recklessly in the middle of the sidewalk. The Bay Shore out there on the Gulf [sic] looks just as enticingly elegant and enchantingly comfortable as all villa streets along the Florida coast. The Hillsborough Hotel and the Floridan Hotel and a few others represent the same distinguished luxurious inns one has become used to in all of America. They are skyscrapers, sixteen, eighteen stories high. In each room there is, of course, a well-screened, giant window, open day and night, but covered with thin mosquito wire, the kind one finds at all openings of a house, frequently around complete large verandas and gardens. And it’s all well-cooled with ice water in special pipes. Eager black boys are everywhere at hand.

Esteemed reader, you know of copper-silver, once so famous chandeliers, sinks, plates made from this combination look at first – you could swear on it – like most real silver. But after some usage, a fiery glow comes through the white, gets redder and redder. For they have plated a thin layer of silver over a block of copper. And that’s what now comes to the surface in shining embarrassment.

Tampa, well, that's another copper-silver, implying that the silver represents the 100% Yankee. I know that they don’t like investigations of this kind so much over there. Never mind, you have to form an idea how such a southernmost city, a kind of Spanish-American West Indies, is composed in terms of population. The Italians living in Tampa say they are a people of 25,000; the Spanish are even talking of 30,000. How big is the black city, located on the site of a former Indian, maybe even Aztec village? That you don't hear anything about, and there is no information available to the public. But there are 10,000 souls for sure, probably more. Add to that the Cubans, who strut along with striped pants, with hats adorned with bells and tassles like real caballeros, even though they are almost exclusively cigar workers. The rest which then remains, those, to be sure, are incontestable American descendants.

In forty-eight factories they manufacture the certified, genuine “Habana cigars” which even belonged among the private supply of the Spanish king. The tobacco comes from Cuba, the colored hands that roll it come from Cuba. But all over the country the advertiseements nevertheless scream: “Won’t you have a Tampa cigar?” And next to it you find, beside the Spanish names, those famous German ones: Regensburger, Schwab, Sommerfeld, Upmann as companies of good repute.

Tampa is hot, hot and humid. That’s why it is popular to go to Chicago during vacation time, or at least send wives and children there. Thirty-six degrees Celsius [96.8 degrees Fahrenheit] maximum temperature is no joke. To suffer through that year after year is not easy for the white skin. But the Romance and the mixed blood in colored town flourishes on it, just like the palm trees and the lianas in the gardens, and on the filthy refuse dumps, where castor oil plants pro-
literate, in trees tall as a man. Thirty thousand boxes of oranges are being shipped annually from here. They come from nearby Manatee County. But for 100,000 winter tourists accommodations are also available, cheap, expensive, very expensive, depending on the demand.

Yet the strangest, the most interesting of this “Spanish-India” is “East Broadway”, the gigantic commercial street that runs across the colored town, “Ybor City”, at all hours boundlessly over-crowded. What a colorful, screaming, shrill and turbulent world! Spanish and Cuban women and cats – both equally beautiful, equally exotic. One finds silken dresses, crudely brilliant, like Chinese lanterns, stores with bridal outfits, stared at by burning black eyes. On signs you can read that this smoking jacket, this white satin dress, this veil of lace, this pair of underpants, . . . and these incredibly baby-sized and high heeled taffeta shoes belong to some typical bridal pair, and that they intend to wear all these beautiful things (all the way down to the most intimate) on their future wedding day. A wedding in this “Madrid of America” means exactly as much as in the real European Spain, a significant part of a woman's life. Once there were bullfights, too, introduced by, as is reported, . . . [Martinez] Ybor who is said to be the city's founder. They have been abolished, however. In response to the thundering protests of the Anglo Americans, the bullfights were finally prohibited. The “Centro Asturiano” (it looks as genuine as if it had been transported by a spell from Habana across the sea) is frequented by the most distinguished Spanish-Cuban families.

A hundred, a thousand balconies are hanging like a back-cloth of stalactites into the street. There are donkey carts, cars (heavens, what cars!), high-heeled shoes, parasols, tinted skin in all shades, from the precious parchment-pale to tar-black. Smells of beef quarters, fish, fruits, tobacco, dust, children, onions, fruit juices, and gasoline, are crammed into a veritable narrow ghetto, rich with life's smells. What a care-free, hot fire of existence, what gaiety, what unconditional enjoyment of the day, what firm belief in man’s self-confidence, even if he’s only a poor devil, cutting tobacco, loading orange crates, rolling cigars day in, day out. Yes, that’s what has come of the Spanish conquerors of the world! But the spirit, the sacred conviction of being God's chosen people has stayed with them, today as then!

The midwinter celebration of the great pirate Gasparillo’s [sic] festival, is enjoyed all along the coast up to New Orleans. A private ship sails into the city which can’t defend itself against the
invasion and has to hand the keys to the disembarking pirates. There is a parade, commotion, then subjugation by the invader. A Gasparilla puppet is dangled off the pirate vessel’s highest mast, amidst roars, ridicule, and women’s jeers. These are part of the tradition immortalized in the colonial history of this fervent, exuberant Gulf of Mexico.

The admirable hospitals, the county courthouse, civilization are all over there on the Yankee side, and so is the country club which is designed in such a fashion that one can open the ceiling by pushing a spring, and eat and dance in the banquet halls under the enchantingly beautiful starry skies of the south.

The future of Tampa? As long as there is world trade, there will be a need here for a commercial gateway. But one thing is unlikely, that it will always be so Spanish-Cuban, of such wild, unbroken romanticism as it is today. Already St. Petersburg, Sarasota, Clearwater, all the beautiful winter resorts around, are infinitely more American.

IV

In the turpentine forest, in the white sand, there begins a square of asphalt streets, a young coconut planting, a banana field with a few wooden shacks, a few Mexican houses, the customary water tank (a huge metal egg, several meters high up on its iron support), then a large garage and pump station, a tiny hotel. A sign: “Naples-sur-Golf will arise here.” For 10,000 people they have built a sewage system here, they offer lots and living space. They are not yet here, those ten-thousand. But nobody doubts that they will come, slowly, like percolating water, or roaring like a storm. For the time being, however, there are miles of mangrove swamp around the clearing for the city. For we are at the Gulf of Mexico, we have left Fort Myers this morning. Delightful beyond all comprehension, it has also once been one of these non-existent “Naples-sur-Golf,” while today it has already more than 4,000 permanent residents, not even counting Ford and Edison who reside on their properties big as duchies.

That’s how cities come into existence in Florida.

People don’t ponder much here. They think that this is a nice place. Why not build a city here? With a pumping station and a motel it usually begins. They are distributed over the whole highway system. But nothing is left to chance. From the first day, there is a veritable street map, according to which “blocks” are set up and on which houses will later be put. Sometimes such settlements don’t make it beyond the early stages. They are a wretchedly small, forgotten “Paris” or “Venice” through which one travels somewhere on the way [out] of Tampa. But sometimes they get big, they blossom, and snatch people like a mighty vacuum cleaner.

Other cities have a much more curious sponsorship. There is Sarasota, today one of the most beautiful and most-visited resorts on the Gulf coast. It was not at all in existence, it was simply “made” by the Barnum and Bailey Circus (duly gazed at in astonishment in Germany and
elsewhere), or to be specific, by its owners, the “Ringling Brothers.” The millions they derived from the thumping sensations of their enterprise they invested in real estate speculations in Florida which were obviously no less impressive than the colossal advertisements which enveloped their giant circus like an iridescent cloud. John Ringling built the one hundred miles of highway across a number of keys into Sarasota, created a harbour, and the bay on the Manatee River. Previously there had really been nothing but sand and swamp. His brother Charles set up shiny hotels, the foremost being the immensely expensive Ritz Carlton which is part of a whole chain of similar enterprises.

It’s a very special matter right from the beginning with these kinds of “Naples-sur-Golf.” It’s possible, especially with the present world economic crisis, that the establishment of these cities may here and there turn out to be premature and at first impractical. But once they are over their first growth problems, their course is no longer endangered. At first, they will develop into a Fort Myers, as Ocala, or any such 2,000-4,000 resident city which from the very beginning is geared towards much more expanded tourism. They do everything to please their guests. They put up big “welcome” signs by the highway, as I saw it near the tiny hamlet of Kissimmee near Orlando. And the residents display an amazing degree of self-sacrificing devotion when it comes to “beautifying” their town. All the public libraries, parks, music halls, churches are nearly always donations by an individual for the general public. One really doesn’t do justice to the Yankees when one denies their sense for a special type of romanticism. Otherwise, they wouldn’t put cities into the wilderness, and create true paradises from perilous swamps. True, American infatuation with numbers and bigness is not a salutary trait. But everything over there is so
marvelously widespread, possesses such a youthful vigor, even the making of money. Otherwise nobody would probably ever have the idea to build the many “Naples-sur-Golf.” The way things are today in Florida, that would definitely be a shame. For on the big scale of balance between nature and man, man still weighs in with too little.

V

Among other things, the southern states differ from northern ones in that the separation between the “black town” and the other parts is not sharply drawn. In Tampa, the Negro city proper simply spills over into Ybor City, the Spanish-Cuban part. No Americans live here, to be sure, but Spaniards, Italians, Cubans, and the mixed bloods that have mingled between these peoples, and that is without exception “colored” to the true Yankee. Also, there still live old colored people who, born as slaves, hold on to the former tradition. The women still walk around in the once prescribed costume: a long, wide-pleated cotton dress with a narrow waist, white stockings, cut-out flat shoes, a small, crudely colored scarf, and a little bonnet on the head. A whiff of old-fashioned respectability and modesty is still with them like a faded lavender scent. One could well imagine that the tragic idyll of bondage forced upon them begins once more this very hour, as they shuffle to the door of their “cabin” . . . .