

Chapter 4: Corruption

Translated by Jesse Tomlinson

No One Deserves to Be So Charming

At the beginning of the 1980s, *Town & Country*, then queen of the society magazines in Mexico City, graced its pages with professor Carlos Hank González, their favorite personality. His reputation was that of a very successful man, a King Midas in both business and politics, who was tall, light-skinned, attractive, and had impeccable manners. In the captions under some of his published photographs appear phrases such as, “Titan of the steel and trucking industries” and “no one deserves to be so charming.”

For almost 70 years Carlos Hank González has been an ideal for many Mexicans in the political elite to emulate. He was admired by the leaders who shaped him, such as Isidro Fabela and Mariano López Mateos (the President’s brother) and by José Lopez Portillo and Carlos Salinas de Gortari. Today he continues to be an example for his heirs at Grupo Atlacomulco. It would be a mistake to consider him just one more politician in modern Mexican history: his biography still prevails as a source of inspiration and personal comparison for a legion of men in public service and a couple of women. It doesn’t matter that his career has been shaped under the safeguard of corruption: in low voices he’s excused because it’s assumed that in Mexico success in politics is no cake-walk for those who shun this vice. It is believed that whoever gets to the top, just as the professor did, are those who obtain power and wealth without staining their plumage, and in spite of having

engaged in conflicts of interest, the illicit triangulation of public and private business, allocation of public works for self-serving interests, government spending outside of established regulations, cronyism, illegal changes in land-use policy, exchanges of favors for votes with clients, and proximity to some criminals.

The remark that best identifies professor Hank González is, “A politician who is poor is a poor politician.” It’s been repeated so many times that it may have lost its gravity for some, but if you want to visit the moral map that justifies official corruption in the Mexican Mirreedom, it’s essential to explore the biography of this politician from the Mexico City. How can you explain his rise from his birth in Santiago Tianguistenco in a modest home to the day that *Forbes* magazine described his fortune as one of the most significant in the world? How did he manage to make his political position and his million dollar businesses compatible? Why is his personal story still so magnetic for so many people?

According to legends about this personal saga, professor Hank González endured poverty as a child. It was thanks to a government scholarship that he was able to attend Teachers’ College and while still a student became the General Secretary of the *Federación de Jóvenes Revolucionarios del Estado de México* (Federation of Youth Revolutionaries of the State of Mexico), an organization affiliated with the *Partido de la Revolución Mexicana* (Party of the Mexican Revolution), and a precedent to the PRI. It was the year 1946 and a political group led by Miguel

Alemán Valdés was about to arrive at the presidency of the Republic. From his early days in these political trenches, professor Hank was able to observe a regime that had put distance between Cárdenas and his supporters, as well as a number of social movements that inspired the revolutionary exploits.

In his novel *Battles in the Desert*, writer José Emilio Pacheco captures the atmosphere of the time. His voice is that of a man who remembers his childhood during that period, when he fell in love for the first time, with a woman whose lover was part of the coterie of Alemán:

[I came across] a number of [photos] of the Man with the president at ceremonies, at inaugurations, at the Tren Olivo, on the airplane El Mexicano ... the Bambino of the Revolution and his crew – the first academics to govern the country. They were experts, not politicians, untouchable, moral figures ... [he was an] extremely powerful, close friend and colleague of Miguel Alemán, earning millions and millions on each of the president's initiatives: contracts all over the place; properties in Acapulco; import and construction permits, authorization to establish branches of North American companies; laws to cover the roofs of houses with water tanks made of carcinogenic asbestos; the resale of milk made with stolen powder to free school breakfast programs; falsifying vaccinations and medicine; large-scale contraband in gold and silver; extensive tracts of land bought for cents per meter; elevating land values 10,000 times just weeks before announcing a highway or urbanization project; one billion pesos converted into US dollars and deposited in Switzerland the day before the peso was devalued.

Please contact me if you'd like to read the rest of the chapter.
jesse@tomlinsontranslations.com