

OSKAR LENZ, AFRICAN EXPLORER AND UNIVERSITY
PROFESSOR IN PRAGUE

Karl Ad. Sedlmeyer

Oskar Lenz was one of those explorers whose scientific activity fell into oblivion as a result of the political disorders at the beginning of this century. Of humble origin, he worked his way up to a distinguished career. He was born in Leipzig on 13 April 1848 — in an age of world-wide interest in the exploration of the interior of Africa. His father was a master shoemaker. Among Lenz's teachers were a number of renowned personalities: at the Gymnasium, the famous zoologist Brehm; at the University in Leipzig, the noted geologist Wilhelm Credner, the zoologist Pöppig, and the geographer Delitsch. After getting his doctorate, he received by chance a position in a private school near Vienna. Here he came into contact with the Imperial Geological Institute in Vienna (*k. u. k. geologische Reichsanstalt*) and with Ferdinand von Hochstetter, Professor of Geology at the Technische Hochschule in Vienna. Hochstetter later recommended him to the African Society in Berlin for an expedition to West Africa to explore the Ogowe River

area. Lenz spent the years 1874—1877 in the murderous climate of this region. The French colonial regime laid claim to every village Lenz set foot in. The scientific results of his sojourn were of no little importance, throwing light, as they did, not only on the geological but also on the ethnographic conditions of this area. Lenz discovered the Abongo pygmies in this wooded region. In 1879 the African Society in Berlin assigned him, following a suggestion by the noted geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen, to lead a new African expedition, this time to the western Sahara, to the holy city of Timbuktu. He travelled from there to Senegal, and left for home from St. Louis in 1881. He recorded his results in the two-volume work „Timbuktu“, which aroused great interest, especially in France and was translated into French. The geographical societies of this country lavished honours on Lenz.

In the meantime he was offered the vacant chair for geography at the German University in Czernowitz. However, he was not able to take up this professorship immediately, for the Austrian Geographical Society invited him to take charge of an Austrian Congo expedition. In 1885 he set out on this expedition, during the course of which Africa was traversed for the ninth time from west to east. The route led from mouth of the Congo to Zambezi, and, via Zanzibar and Aden, back to Vienna, where he returned after a two-year absence. On 7 June 1887, Emperor Francis Joseph named him professor in ordinary for geography at the German University in Prague. Lenz taught there for 42 semesters. In 1891 he became dean of the Faculty of Philosophy, and in 1902, rector of the University. After becoming professor emeritus in 1910, he moved to Soos in Lower Austria, where he died on 2 March 1925. During his lifetime, Lenz enjoyed the highest recognition in the scientific world. This was shown by the Austrian, French, Prussian, Italian, Portuguese, Belgian and Saxon awards he received and by his honorary membership of 15 domestic and foreign geographical societies.