

E s c a p i n g

K A K A N I A

Eastern European Travels  
in Colonial Southeast Asia

Edited by JAN MRÁZEK



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**Central European University Press**  
Budapest-Vienna-New York

©2024 by Jan Mrázek

Published in 2024 by  
Central European University Press

Nádor utca 9, H-1051 Budapest, Hungary

Tel: +36-1-327-3138 or 327-3000

E-mail: [ceupress@press.ceu.edu](mailto:ceupress@press.ceu.edu)

Website: [www.ceupress.com](http://www.ceupress.com)



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On the cover: László Székely: *A young European, frantically searching his shabby clothes for money, surrounded by his creditors* (Collection of the Royal Institute of Linguistics, Land, and Ethnology (KITLV), Leiden.)

ISBN 978-963-386-665-8 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-963-386-666-5 (ebook)

#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Mrázek, Jan, editor.

Title: Escaping Kakania : Eastern European travels in colonial Southeast Asia / edited by Jan Mrázek.

Description: Budapest ; New York : CEU Press, Central European University Press, 2024. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023058660 (print) | LCCN 2023058661 (ebook) | ISBN 9789633866658 (hardback) | ISBN 9789633866665 (adobe pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Travelers' writings, East European--History and criticism. | East Europeans--Southeast Asia. | Southeast Asia--Description and travel. | BISAC: HISTORY / Europe / Eastern | TRAVEL / Europe / Eastern

Classification: LCC PN849.E92 2024 (print) | LCC PN849.E92 (ebook) | DDC 809.935914--dc23/eng/20240212

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023058660>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023058661>

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# Acknowledgements

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This book is a fruit of collective work. It is for the whole journey with all its encounters and conversations, not just for the souvenir that is this book, that I am grateful.

Above all, I am grateful for the chance to get to know and learn from my fellow authors. Thank you for your work on the chapters over the course of many revisions, and for your support, encouragement and thoughts! It was a real pleasure to work with you all, a rich learning and unlearning experience, and I hope this has been only the beginning of intellectual friendships and collaborations.

Thanks to the scholars who have generously shared their thoughts on the early drafts of the papers during a symposium in March 2021: Itty Abraham, Muhammad Arafat Bin Mohamad, Maitrii Aung-Thwin, Marieke Bloembergen, Donna Brunero, Preciosa de Joya, Miguel Escobar Varela, Zoltán Ginelli, Douglas Kammen, Miklós Kázmér, Georgiana Lolea, Hendrik Maier, JP Paul Santiago Manzanilla, Zoran Milutinović, Anthony Reid, Máté Rigó, Gerard Sasges, Sumarsam, and Maria Taroutina. Thanks to Said Effendy for his poetic contribution to organizing the symposium and the book, and to the staff at the Department of Southeast Asian Studies, National University of Singapore, for their invaluable support and help.

My work on the book and my chapters has been made possible by a research grant from the Singapore Ministry of Education number FY2019-FRC3-004.

Many thanks to Linda Kunos of the CEU Press for her support and all her work on the book, and for making the publication process such a pleasant experience, somehow echoing the mood of the tiny café in Budapest where we first met to talk about it. Thanks also to the anonymous readers for their con-



structive comments, and to John Puckett for his careful and sensitive copy-editing of the manuscript.

Beyond thanking: As always, my father has helped to grow and destruct my ideas in ways as sea-dark as the whiskey and as bittersweetly healing as the Becherovka we drink. My mother continues to be for me the most inspiring teacher of not just Czech history and literature. My wife has been a deliciously mind-tickling partner in unending conversations and shared silences, living with me the dislocation and “double-focus” that disorients this book.

*Jan Mrázek*

*Singapore, November 11, 2023*

# INTRODUCTORY (DIS)ORIENTATION

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## A Czech's View from Singapore

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Jan Mrázek\*



In Singapore, the word “Oriental” is everywhere: Oriental Plaza, Oriental Hair Solutions, Oriental Fresh & Frozen Food... A near-synonym of the similarly ubiquitous “(Far) Eastern,” “Oriental” here does not mean “east of my position,” but denotes countries to the north, primarily China. Historically, one could trace the word’s lineage to European perspectives, colonialism, and Orientalism. But “Oriental” is usually used without any negative connotation, and it would be misleading to understand it here with reference to colonial orientation only, to assume that in Singapore it means and feels the same as elsewhere, or that it can be understood well in terms of a generalized, theorized “Oriental.” Much the same is true about an archipelago of other interlinked words—“Western,” “Asian,” “Chinese,” “Malay”... What is superior or inferior, fetishized or scorned, the self or the other—these vary depending on who is speaking/hearing and when. Each term is understood and felt variously in coffee shop banter, critical discussions among students, and official state discourse, as people navigate toward or away from local racisms and other -isms. Regardless of which “race” one has on her identity card, she may enjoy, say, the popular “Muslim Indian” *mee goreng mutton* (*mee*, Anglicized Chinese: “noodles”; *goreng*, Malay: “fried”; *mutton*, English) in a *mamak* (Tamil: “uncle”) eatery, which typically also serves “Malay,” “Chinese,” “Indian,” “Thai,” and “Western” fare, all Singaporean, all cooked by our Tamil “uncles.” The categories of colonialism have been variously adapted in the independent state—from the official and widely

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\* This introduction draws on the ideas of all the book’s authors. Thanks also to Miguel Escobar Varela, Tomasz Ewertowski, Zoltán Ginelli, Rudolf Mrázek and Thow Xin Wei for inspiring comments.

accepted racialization of its citizens and foreigners, to the fetishization or stigmatization of Wests, Easts, Chinas, Asias... But to begin to understand the complexity and fluidity with which words and images organize or entangle minds and relationships, one has to see how they mean, feel, taste, and smell locally, differently and changeably for each person—so much like *mee goreng mutton*.

Scholarship on “European” or “Western” representations of “Asia,” “East,” or “Orient” predominantly deals with the western European colonial powers and their politics, orientalisms, and racisms. It is on this limited perspective, defined by the empires, that generalizations about “Europe,” “the West,” and “Western” views of “the East” are usually based. This book complicates this picture by focusing on the experiences and writings of people who travelled to colonial southeast Asia from eastern Europe,<sup>1</sup> two disorientingly heterogeneous regions, variously (perceived/lived as) off-center, in-between, eastern—so much like *mee goreng mutton*.

The travelers came from what has been perceived, in countless variations, as borderlands between the “West” (or “Europe”) and the “East.” There—like and unlike in southeast Asia—world-divisions and hierarchies, including East-West, were variously suffered, mimicked, undermined, and/or ridiculed, and manifold identities were dreamed and acted in the margins or under the rule of empires, which aimed to divide the region among themselves, like western European colonial powers did in southeast Asia. The travelers came from (sometimes stateless) nations that did not have Asian colonies and were at times themselves “colonized” (in ways like and unlike European colonies in Asia), nations that were also themselves involved in various forms of cultural and/or political “colonialism” within their own territory or region—just like many groups in southeast Asia which variously migrated and (re)settled, and sometimes “colonized” others.<sup>2</sup> Eastern Europeans were sometimes orientalized by western Europeans, but were also actively involved—like southeast Asians—in adopting the distinctions and hierarchies of East and West in the play of their and others’ identities. The travelers were new in the overseas colonies, yet familiar with the world of empires and all manners of orientalizations/occidental-

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1 When referring to the two regions, I use “southeast” and “eastern” with lower-case initials, against the grain of common usage, to unsettle the sense of each region as a given. This follows the usage of “eastern Europe” in Wendy Bracewell and Alex Drace-Francis, ed., *Under Eastern Eyes: A Comparative Introduction to East European Travel Writing on Europe* (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2008), ix.

2 For an eastern European’s view of the destructive waves of Malay, Chinese, and European colonization of the Malay Peninsula, with a focus on the pre-Malay indigenous people, see Jan Mrázek, “Primeval Forest, Homeland, Catastrophe: Travels in Malaya and ‘Modern Ethnology’ with Pavel Šebesta / Paul Schebesta,” 2 parts, *Anthropos* 116 (2021), no. 1: 29–54; no. 2: 345–365.

izations, as they knew them from eastern Europe. On their travels in Asia, as they acted in the colonial world, their self-images and perceptions of Europe/West and Asia/East were crystalized or shattered in new ways. They saw colonial southeast Asia and their own societies as if mirroring each other. Similarly, this book shows both eastern Europe and southeast Asia in a new and unusual light, as if reflected in each other.

Postcolonial studies, a dominant voice in scholarship on travel writing, has forcefully illuminated how cultural representation was implicated in colonialism. Yet, colonial binaries and generalizations—“West,” “Europe,” “East”...—are often maintained in postcolonial studies, and so is something of an Enlightenment universalism. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said used British and French images of the Middle East to generalize about “Western” representations of the “Orient,” with a homogeneous West, a homogeneous East, and a fixed binary, unidirectional, and exploitative relationship. Encounters and travel experiences are seen, not as moments of confusion, transformation, and contact, but as the manifestations of an all-powerful orientalist episteme. There is a revelatory power in this—at the cost (ironically, considering Said’s agenda) of suppressing other voices and positions, at the cost of suppressing multiplicity, gradations, and changeability.

Although these generalizations are most blatant in early postcolonial studies, they persist, alongside scholarship that challenges them, explicitly or not. Critical re-evaluations often emerge from studies of groups, such as women travelers, or regions that are marginalized in both imperial and postcolonial imagination. Elisabeth Oxfeldt writes:

working with literature produced on the European periphery allows us to nuance and deconstruct the monolithic paradigms upon which postcolonial theory tends to be based. The Scandinavian countries are often neglected by theorists who equate Europe with the great colonial powers, England and France.<sup>3</sup>

Such calls for nuance and a sense of “neglect” are heard also from both eastern Europe and southeast Asia (that mirroring again). Several scholars have questioned the “invisibility” of eastern Europe in postcolonial studies.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, a 2008 special issue of the journal *Postcolonial Studies* is paradoxically

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3 Elisabeth Oxfeldt, *Journeys from Scandinavia: Travelogues of Africa, Asia, and South America, 1840–2000* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 241.

4 See, for example, Marta Grzechnik, “The Missing Second World: On Poland and Postcolonial Studies,” *Interventions* 21, no. 7 (2019): 998–1014.

titled “Southeast Asia’s Absence in Postcolonial Studies.” The volume exemplifies grounded scholarship sensitive to the nuances and varieties of colonialism in the region, rather than applying universalist theories.<sup>5</sup>

Postcolonial studies has been only one among still-dominant geographies in which the two regions, and especially their diversity and particularity, disappear on mental maps dominated by great empires and civilizations, in scholarship as well as in wider discourse. This book hopes to show the potential of thinking from the “periphery”—like from a *mamak* shop—(not just) about dominant paradigms and concepts—like “East” and “West”—in which we are inevitably implicated.

As we have worked on and discussed this book, we have been keenly conscious that we are writing the history of problems—racism, ethnic and national chauvinism, and new incarnations of violent imperialism—that are today excruciatingly relevant and ongoing, not the least in our two regions. From unsettled borderlands, we problematize “Europe”—which today is yet again self-assuredly proclaimed a superior center, a universal destiny, in a sharp, white-and-black distinction to a “dark,” “Eastern” Otherness, with nothing in-between.

It is with a diversity of voices and stories rather than another single, forceful metanarrative, and by attending more to shadows and shades than with an overpowering light, that this book (dis)orients itself in the sea of scholarly narratives and primary sources. Its thinking is conditioned by two regions that were caught in-between great empires centered elsewhere, even as their relationship to empires was inextricable from local hierarchies, power struggles, and ideologies, which had existed since long before the era of high imperialism. In studies of colonial representations, the emphasis is typically on the East as the Other; in our case, othering is complicated by glimmers of recognition of a certain self-likeness, by an inbetweenness, and by a protean multiplicity of selves and others.

One might say that something of such complexity can be seen with other travelers and writers as well, including those from imperial nations and colonized countries. Indeed it is, *in many shades of difference*, and an aim of this book is to whet such sensitivity to unsettledness, ambiguity, multiplicity, and particularity. This does not mean that everything everywhere is the same. It is rather

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5 Other examples of such scholarship, which also critique “post-colonial theorizing,” include *Asian Crossings: Travel Writing on China, Japan and Southeast Asia*, ed. Steve Clark and Paul Smethurst (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008); and Susan Morgan, *Place Matters: Gendered Geography in Victorian Women’s Travel Books About Southeast Asia* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1996).

an argument—to invoke Susan Morgan’s important book on travel accounts of southeast Asia—that “place matters,” both geographical and social place; an argument for attention to the particular complexity of each empire, area, and place, as well as person. Morgan emphasizes that the “range of British imperialisms in southeast Asia” and the image of the region in British Victorian discourse were very different from British India; there was “no bare-bones British Victorian imperialism.”<sup>6</sup> Even when considering only British colonialism and travel writing, as Morgan does, looking at

Southeast Asia challenges to the point of destroying many of the working terms—long acknowledged to be inadequate but still in use—of postcolonial theory today. I am particularly concerned that insights about the colonial experience in British India not be taken up ... as global insights about imperialism.<sup>7</sup>

What matters is thus not just the place(s) of origin, but also the place(s) of travel. Southeast Asia confirmed or challenged travelers’ ideas about empires, colonialism, civilization, modernity, east and west, and about who is local or foreign. Think of Singapore, already then a cosmopolitan metropolis in some ways more modern than the travelers’ European homelands, with practically everyone a migrant, traveler, or settler, including the colonizing-colonized Chinese; or the battlefields of the colonial war in Aceh in the Dutch East Indies, with its “multinational” army, including various Europeans and, in the majority, various “natives,” who were however foreign intruders for the Acehnese; or Bali in the 1920s and 30s, which, a few years after it had been devastated by Dutch colonial armies, became the “paradise” for a very international colony of artists, anthropologists, and tourists. This introduction suggests that *both* southeast Asia and eastern Europe, because of their historical, social, and geographical particularities, shaped the thinking of the travelers we write about; and that now these regions condition our thinking and help us rethink received concepts and distinctions, and teach us to see and think *with* what is so pronounced and world-defining there, with their particular complexities.

Anglophone scholarship on eastern European travel-writing has tended to prioritize travel within Europe, initially western European accounts of eastern Europe, and more recently travel writing by eastern Europeans, such as the landmark volume edited by Wendy Bracewell and Alex Drace-Francis, *Under Eastern*

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6 Morgan, *Place Matters*, 8–9.

7 Morgan, *Place Matters*, 22.

*Eyes: A Comparative Introduction to East European Travel Writing on Europe*. Like *Escaping Kakania*, it tackles the question of self-ing and othering in a regional perspective (in contrast to the focus on a single nation characteristic of most eastern European scholarship). However, the double-focus on eastern Europe and southeast Asia distinguishes *Escaping Kakania* from *Under Eastern Eyes* and other past scholarship. *Escaping Kakania* shares this coupling of regions with travelers to southeast Asia (also in its limitation/positionality, the asymmetry of one region as the origin and the other as destination). This double-focus shows old questions in a new light, brings out new questions and comparisons (for both the travelers and the present authors), and expands and (dis)orients our thinking. Among eastern European traveler-writers and their readers, there was often a sense of novelty in learning about distant lands, but it was typically delayed relative to western European colonial exploration, sometimes like a dramatic or comic reenactment, in an era when travel to overseas colonies was increasingly quotidian for many British, Dutch, or French. Moreover, the eastern Europeans were seen as new and exotic by western European colonists and vice versa.<sup>8</sup> As they return to some seemingly old questions, the studies in this book, like the travelers' writings, exude an unsettled sense of novelty and adventure.

The notion of the region, and the particular histories of the two regions, are important in this book. However, we see regions and all world- and people-divisions as they variously emerge from life stories, travel experiences, and reflections, in which personal and collective identifications and attitudes co-exist, interpenetrate, and/or clash.

We use the word "traveler" broadly in this book to include anyone who has travelled for a variety and mix of reasons, often (also) for work. In their introduction to a volume on southeast Asian "traveling nation-makers," the editors write: "The contributors grapple with the notion of 'travel' beyond one that is paradigmatically defined as elite, European, male, bourgeois, scientific, heroic, or recreational movement across space."<sup>9</sup> I am tempted to say that this applies to this book as well; but rather than ever being quite "beyond," eastern European and southeast Asian travelers (certainly the "nation-makers") were both following and diverging from dominant paradigms of travel and travel writing, forever/never escaping them.

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8 See Marta Grzechnik's chapter and her example of the Polish ship *Dar Pomorza* in Singapore harbor; and Jan Mrázek, "Returns to the Wide World: Errant Bohemian Images of Race and Colonialism," *Studies in Travel Writing* 21, no. 2 (2017): 139–42.

9 Caroline S. Hau and Kasian Tejapira, ed., *Traveling Nation-Makers: Transnational Flows and Movements in the Making of Modern Southeast Asia* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2011), 5.

Moreover, as we speak about “dominant paradigms,” “Western European colonial travel writing,” or, for that matter, “postcolonial studies,” we have to remember that they were not stable and monolithic, even as they were indeed variously dominant and conformist. Morgan’s *Place Matters* is again useful here as an example. She shows the heterogeneity of British imperial discourse(s), not only through her focus on women authors, but also through her attention to the diversity and unpredictability of women’s (as well as men’s) discursive and political positions (with no homogeneous “women’s discourse” either), alongside her attention to both geographical and social place, including, for example, the ambiguous attitude to colonialism when a Brit criticizes the Dutch colonialists.

Like eating Indian-Chinese-Malay-English *mee goreng mutton* while listening to racialized and/or race-indifferent chat in a Singaporean coffee shop, we listen to travelers who navigate, lose, and/or rediscover themselves, like us, in the ever-shifting seas of Easts, Wests, Europes, Asias, and all manners of ethnic, racial, and national labels and manners of belonging and othering, never quite segregated from other ideologies and categorizations...; who are marked by their experiences, encounters, and physical and emotional sensations, and who act creatively and keep (re)inventing themselves, rather than their encounters being entirely pre-determined by a fixed episteme or identity, be it “colonial,” “European,” “Polish,” or any other; and who, like us when we write about them, encounter people and places in improbably unique modes and moods, with their own baggage of empathies and antipathies, memories and dreams, prejudices and obsessions.

## The Eastern Empire and Its Selves/Others

In both eastern Europe and southeast Asia, “region” is a tricky notion, with competing conceptualizations and ideologies. The Austro-Hungarian Empire is a useful starting point for thinking about “eastern Europe” as we speak of it here, as an area of shifting borders and definitions. (I choose “eastern Europe,” this unsettled and uncapitalized, imprecise but evocative phrase, not a name, noting the politics of inclusion/exclusion—we vs. they, Europe/Center vs. East—that are behind names and definitions of this part of Europe: Eastern, East-Central, Central, *Mittleuropa* ...) <sup>10</sup> In the nineteenth century, the re-

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10 In related scholarship, “eastern Europe” commonly designates the same geographical area as in this book; e.g., Bracewell and Drace-Francis, *Under Eastern Eyes*. On the politics of “Central” vs. “East” Europe, see Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), especially chapter 6.



gion—like southeast Asia—was divided up among several empires. Austria-Hungary was located in the middle of this borderland region, surrounded by the German, Russian, and Ottoman empires. As befits borderlands—and like European empires in southeast Asia—Austria-Hungary was ethnically complicated. Germans were socially superior to—and variously “colonizing”—the Slavs (Czechs, Poles, Serbians, etc.), Jews, and Hungarians. It is from among the subject nations—“Eastern” in perception, if not always geographically—that the protagonists of this book come.

After the empire’s demise in 1918, independent states (re-)emerged in the region—as somewhat later in southeast Asia—including Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (in 1929 renamed Yugoslavia [“south Slavia”]). They engaged in cultural and political redefinitions of collective selves and others, with the rhetoric of East, West, Center, and Europe prominent, even as former imperial nations—especially Germany and Russia—were at different rhythms re-emerging as new empires, with old and new Western Powers forever managing “their interests” in the region from afar. The Cold War—in whose early years this book’s scope ends—divided Europe into East and West with renewed enthusiasm, with the alliances and conflicts extending with particular violence to southeast Asia. As I am writing this, Russia has invaded Ukraine, America is “increasing its military presence” in eastern Europe, and Europeans speak yet again with a sense of moral superiority about “us,” “the united West,” and “civilized Europe.”

In the call for papers that began this book project, I have written about the title *Escaping Kakania*:

Kakania, Robert Musil’s name for the Austro-Hungarian Empire, comes from the designation *kaiserlich (und) königlich*, “Imperial (and) Royal,” abbreviated to *k. (&) k.* [kah-kah]. *Kaka-* is also a children’s word for “pooping” (in German and some Slavic languages). Kakania evokes a particular Empire, but we find in it also an attitude, like a giggle, to any empire, establishment, identity, mentality, theoretical framework, settledness. We understand “escaping” not as an accomplishable act, but an ongoing unsettledness, movement, or desire. *Escaping Kakania* is not meant to delimit scope, but to tickle and unsettle imagination. It should be understood in all its poetic and ironic (im)possibilities and contradictions, forgetting neither the emancipatory desires, unexpected encounters, revelations, and transformations that may be part of escaping, nor the ways we travelers carry Kakania—along with other dreams and nightmares of the self and homeland—within us, or rec-

ognize it in European colonies/settlements in Asia. Forever escaping Bohemia or Singapore is part of this unsettledness.

In what follows, I evoke “Austria,” the original Kakania—the faraway land as I imagine it from southeast Asia, as it overflows, as it always has, its narrowly historical existence, and as its selves and others overflow into each other. I am concerned here with *from where the travelers came*—as a backdrop for reading the chapters that follow. Overseas, the travelers would navigate among manifold Occidents and Orients, shifting definitions of “we” and “they,” superiority and inferiority, familiarity and strangeness. They were faced with possible analogies and contrasts, the ecstasy/danger of (non-)recognition of the self in the other, and the unsettling reversals and blurring of distinctions involved in such reflectivity/reflexivity. My sketch of “Austria” suggests the possibility that all their and others’ self-ing and othering in the colonial world was, in all its otherness, familiar from their complicated homelands, like a strange mirror image.

\* \* \*

In Joseph Roth’s *The Tale of the 1002nd Night*, the Persian Shah’s fantasies of the exotic Occident mirror and interpenetrate Viennese visions of the Orient. His boredom, travel to Vienna, and sexual adventures there evoke something of the dusty bordello splendor of Western fantasized and real travels to the “Orient,” including the novel’s own ironic fantasy of the Shah, loosely inspired by a historical event. Reading histories and fictions of the Austrian Empire, one enters a realm of inversions, kaleidoscopic mirrorings, and multiplications—of Orients and Occidents, of dusty realities and exotic fantasies, a hall of mirrors, a serving of *mee goreng mutton*.

The novel begins in Persia.

The Eunuch Pantominos pretended to think, and then he said: “Sire, you are pining for exotic foreign climes—for example, for Europe.” . . . He proposed a remote destination to the Shah. He suggested Vienna.<sup>11</sup>

The Emperor of Austria—the Eastern Empire (Österreich)—welcomed the Shah in an imperial manner.<sup>12</sup> In the Spanish Riding School in Vienna, the Shah

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11 Joseph Roth, *The Tale of the 1002nd Night*, trans. Michael Hofmann (New York: Picador, 1999), 12–13.

12 I summarize and quote from Roth, *The Tale*, 34–40.

watched “a rider in Persian dress—of the kind that the Shah had only ever seen in portraits of his ancestors and never once in Persia,” and listened to “a Persian melody that seemed largely unfamiliar to the Shah—it was actually a little effort of Nechwal’s own” (Nechwal is the imperial band leader, whose Czech name means “do not praise!”; it is one of many Slavic names in Roth’s German text, the East bleeding into the West). A horse trots “with a hint of a zigzag to suggest the mazy inscrutability of the Orient.” At a ball, “all the ladies ... are in love with the Shah of Persia . . . in love with the Orient,” and he is “in love with all of Vienna.” To satisfy his desire for the eroticized, feminized Occidental—“How inexhaustible the amorous arts of the Occident must be!”—his Austrian hosts discreetly guide him to meet a “Viennese lady” (a prostitute) in her “palace” (a brothel).

His Majesty the Shah must have had the impression of having arrived in one of those fairy-tale Occidental castles his thirsting imagination had evoked over the course of many years in Tehran. . . . [He] was enchanted by the secrets of the Occident he thought he had finally managed to uncover.<sup>13</sup>

The scheme was executed by Austria’s chief imperial spy—his Czech name, Sedlacek, means “the little farmer.”

There is something of such an exotic Austria also in Musil’s “Kakania”—a realm infused with distance, especially from the progressive West; thus also, paradoxically, a realm of homey settledness, the other of modern travelling. There “one could get off the train of time.”<sup>14</sup> Musil contrasts Kakania with a “super-American city where everyone rushes about”; “air trains, ground trains, underground trains, people mailed through tubes special-delivery, and chains of cars race along”; everything is “precisely timed”; “targets are short term” and “results are maximized”; with “travel fantasies reflecting our sense of incessant movement that carries us along . . . superficial, restless, and brief.” In Kakania, “there was tempo too, but not too much tempo”; there were “prosperous-looking roads from the era of foot marches and mail coaches.” Kakania, the Eastern Empire, appears half-remote from another Europe, epitomized by progress, fast travel and—colonialism:

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13 Roth, *The Tale*, 64.

14 Robert Musil introduces “Kakania” in *The Man Without Qualities*, trans. Sophie Wilkins (New York: Vintage, 1995), 1:26–31. The quotes in this paragraph are from pages 26–29.

A ship was now and then sent off to South America or East Asia, but not too often. There was no ambition for world markets or world power. Here at the very center of Europe, where the world's old axes crossed, words such as "colony" and "overseas" sounded like something untried and remote.

Mirroring this fantasized remoteness from Western colonialism, the Eastern Empire sometimes appears like a fairy-tale kingdom of diverse peoples happily co-existing under the benevolent rule of an "Emperor of Peace."

But all was not well in the Empire. In *The Tale of the 1002nd Night*, the Shah's travels and Occidentalist fantasies disturb the lives of police agents, prostitutes, and journalists, in a sweaty, dusty world of boredom, greed, and unbearable peace. Like in the *Arabian Nights*, one tale is embedded in another, but they also penetrate, motivate, and fragmentarily mirror each other. The novel's Jewish author came to Vienna from "the East"—the remote, Jewish, and Slavic "half-Asian" province of Galicia.<sup>15</sup> As with Scheherazade's tales, I must think of Roth's tale within the story of his life.

Austrian peace and unity are both upheld and threatened, not by an overseas, African or Asian otherness, but from within or underneath—by the internal otherness of the Hungarians, Jews, and Slavs. Musil (whose name means "he had to" in Czech) spent a large part of his youth in Moravia (one of the Czech Crown Lands), and the image of Austrian "young gentlemen" passing through a Moravian village in his early novel illustrates the otherness, filth, and dark skin of the Slavic natives: he describes the "low, hut-like cottages," "the women who were standing by the doors, in skirts and coarse smocks, with broad dirty feet and bare brown arms," and the "coarse Slav gibe."<sup>16</sup> Stereotypically Oriental, the Slavs are physical, both repulsive and arousing:

Nearly naked children were rolling round in the filth of the yards, here and there a woman's skirt would lift to reveal the backs of her knees as she worked, or a heavy breast would tauten the folds of a linen blouse. And as if all this were happening in a quite different, oppressive, animal atmosphere, rank stagnant air welled out of the doorways and Törless sucked it in greedily.<sup>17</sup>

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15 Cf. Karl Emil Franzos's 1876 volume about Galicia, *Aus Halb-Asien* (From Half-Asia). The Orientalization of Galicia has been widely discussed by scholars. See, for example, Ulrich E. Bach, *Tropics of Vienna: Colonial Utopias of the Habsburg Empire* (New York: Bergahn, 2016), especially chapters 1 and, with reference to Roth, 5.

16 Robert Musil, *The Confusions of Young Törless*, trans. Mike Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 15.

17 Musil, *The Confusions*, 16.

One of the local peasant women, Božena, is a prostitute frequented by the “young gentlemen,” in their eyes “an immensely base creature,” yet strangely motherly—the Austrian “gentleman” yearns “to find refuge with Božena to protect him!”<sup>18</sup>

Slavs and Jews are an insistent, defining presence also in Roth’s Austria and her East-West mirrorings and inversions. “The heart of Austria is not the centre, but the periphery,”<sup>19</sup> and Slavic blood flows in the veins of Roth’s Austrian protagonists, who struggle between an effort to outgrow their roots—that “animal atmosphere”—and a homesickness for Slavic origins that are both their ultimate self and their other. One in a lineage of these ennobled Austrians with Slovenian peasant roots, Carl Joseph Trotta, who “thought he felt the blood of his ancestors in his veins,” also “thought he knew the village” of his ancestors, Sipolje, although he never travelled there:

It nestled between unfamiliar mountains, under the golden beams of an unfamiliar sun, with wretched huts of mud and straw. A beautiful village, a good village! He would have given his officer’s career for it!<sup>20</sup>

This exotic, “native” Slovenian home is fantasized by Trotta inside the imperial barracks in Moravia. The barracks form another quaintly colonial image, complete with Slavs’ huts and brown skin:

The barracks gave the appearance of having been dropped in the Slav countryside by the royal and imperial army as an emblem of Habsburg power. ... [Seen above] the village-like huts ... the broad, arched, black-and-white gate of the barracks, held up in the face of the town like a mighty Habsburg shield, a threat, a protection, or a combination of the two. The regiment was based in Moravia. But its men were not, as one might expect, Czechs, but Romanians and Ukrainians.<sup>21</sup>

[T]he whole barracks was like a gigantic ship. Carl Joseph even thought he could feel it swaying, as though the miserable yellow oil lamps with their big white mantles were rocking on the swell of some unfamiliar ocean. The men were singing songs in an unfamiliar language, a Slavic language. The old peasants of Sipolje [in Slovenia] would have understood them! Even Carl

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18 Musil, *The Confusions*, 31.

19 Joseph Roth, *The Emperor’s Tomb*, trans. Michael Hofmann (London: Granta, 2013), 15.

20 Joseph Roth, *The Radetzky March*, trans. Michael Hofmann (London: Granta, 2018), 65.

21 Roth, *The Radetzky March*, 64.

Joseph's grandfather might have understood them! ... He could clearly see the movements of their rough brown hands, pushing the [harmonica] back and forth against their mouth ... The keening melancholy of the instrument ... filled the darkness with an inkling of village and wife and child and hearth. Back there they lived in low-ceilinged huts ... Peasants they were, peasants! And the Trotta family had lived just like them once! Just like them!<sup>22</sup>

The faraway flows in the veins of the Eastern Empire. The Moravian countryside (geographically nearby, north of Vienna) is like a distant tropical archipelago, "some unfamiliar ocean," colonized by the "gigantic ship" of the imperial barracks. Just as colonial armies were manned largely by colonized people, so here the soldiers are from the Empire's periphery. The Ukrainians from the Empire's far east (where Roth came from) blend with the Slovenians from the south, and embody the Austrian aristocrat's own peasant, Slavic home and self. Like and unlike in southeast Asia, the "colonizers" and the "colonized" are starkly separate yet embedded in each other like a thousand and one tales.

My aim is not to objectively represent a region, but to evoke its sense of (dis)orientation in the hall of mirrors; the reflections, reversals, clashing, and blending of East and West, High and Low, Self and Other, which have continued to play out even after the empire shattered into nation-states, into ever new (dis)orientations.

East, West, Asia, Europe, what is exotic, what "we" means—all these are relative to one's ceaseless positioning in a physical-mental geography of dreams and fears. Eastern Europe in its various permutations may be perceived as "Eastern" by "(Western) Europeans," but also by the "Easterners" themselves. Such positioning in a grand geography of East and West is repeated within the region of many Easts and Wests, in a pattern that historians have called "nesting orientalism." Bohemia was at some moments seen as the "Orient" while in other perspectives it was "the West" in relation to Slovakia or Galicia in the east, with the pattern repeated in "the Balkans" in the southeast, where Bosnia was orientalized by Serbs, Serbs by Croats...—although each of the "orientalisms" (sometimes accompanied by a unique "colonialism") is like and unlike the other. In infinite variations, people are both/either westerners and/or easterners, in ways that are forever unstable, conflicting, and contradictory.<sup>23</sup>

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22 Roth, *The Radetzky March*, 66–67.

23 See Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*; and Milica Bakić-Hayden (who introduced the term "nesting Orientalism"), "Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia," *Slavic Review* 54, no. 4 (1995): 917–31. These studies focus on "the Balkans," but Todorova discusses also "central" east-

“East,” “West,” “Europe,” and “Asia”—great and vague objects of desire and contempt—evoke changing constellations of dreams and anxieties: “humanity,” “civilization,” “progress,” “backwardness,” “brown hands.” The hierarchy of civilization and progress is often adopted and/or inverted/undermined, and one may identify with, fetishize, or see a hope or home in the West, East, or South, in ways that variously resemble, mimic, or differ from western European exoticisms.

It is from such a region that our protagonists travelled to southeast Asia. However, they were no shahs; nor were they Roths, Musils, or other prominent Austrian writers who, typically without leaving Europe, built alternate, fictional worlds that refracted reality, and whose German-language writing features in recent scholarship on Austrian Orientalist utopias.<sup>24</sup> Our travelers are more like the Slavic, Hungarian, and Jewish soldiers, doctors, and painters in Roth’s narratives, busy with their jobs and dreams of better life and more cash, in the dusty backstage of imperial and literary splendor. In their writing, worldly dreams and messy actuality ever interrupt each other, both at home and overseas.

Having looked at eastern Europe and seen in it not simply “the West,” but a disorienting interplay of (self-)orientalizations and (self-)occidentalizations, we will now bring southeast Asia more explicitly into the play—outlandishly juxtaposed to, even superimposed on, distant eastern Europe; shuttling between the two regions somewhat like a traveler’s thoughts and feelings oscillate between home and a foreign land.

### Between “Eastern Borderlands” and “Farther India”

Österreich means “Eastern Empire” in German; “Austria” comes from the Latin *marchia austriaca*, or “Eastern Borderlands” (of Charlemagne’s empire). Names such as Farther India (“India” is intrinsically far, and this is farther), or the Chinese Nanyang (South Seas), similarly frame southeast Asia as distant, east or south. The name “Indo-China” defines it as an in-between space. For the British Empire, the most powerful globally, southeast Asia was a stop-

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ern European countries. For a case where experiences/images of Galicia and especially the Balkans as “Orient” are entangled with poetic travel to southeast Asia, see Jan Mrázek, *On This Modern Highway, Lost in the Jungle: Tropics, Travel, and Colonialism in Czech Poetry* (Prague: Charles University, Karolinum Press, 2022).

24 See Robert Lemon, *Imperial Messages: Orientalism as Self-Critique in the Habsburg Fin de Siècle* (Rochester: Camden House, 2011); and Bach, *Tropics of Vienna*.

over, a passageway, an in-between space between India and China, a region outside the center of British imagination and interests, one where they hesitated to get involved too deeply, and one shared with other European powers, which were more established there.<sup>25</sup> It was as if both regions, at least in the dominant perspectives of those who name, were ever elsewhere—ever seen by a passing traveler, pervaded by otherness, outsideness, and in-betweenness.

A shared otherness? But this also suggests that familiarity or solidarity was felt across, clashing, or blending with, infused or intensified by, distance or strangeness. In her chapter, Marta Grzechnik shows how Polish colonial imagination remained in the realm of unrealized dreams, and southeast Asia in particular was not imagined suitable for practical projects. The region was particularly exoticized, particularly fantasized. Its remoteness from practical concerns—from reality, in a certain sense—can be cautiously thought beyond her Polish case study. Of course, some eastern Europeans did travel to southeast Asia for work, certainly many more than the small sample discussed in this book; one can think, for example, of those serving in the colonial armies, as can be glimpsed in the chapters by Kolodziejczyk, Mrázek, and Radonjić; or of the hundreds of Czechs working in the shoe industry in interwar Singapore, in Beránek's chapter. But during the period covered by this book, eastern Europeans emigrated overseas in the millions, primarily to America, and there was subsequent busy communication between the old and new homelands. Comparatively very few settled in southeast Asia, which, too, might have made its images different, rather more disconnected from practicality. Eastern Europeans who did travel to colonial Asia often felt as outsiders there, and were seen as such by citizens of the colonial empires, as their writings repeatedly suggest. Without generalizing too much (as we have just done), these conditions and the question of the particular remoteness and imaginariness of colonial southeast Asia is something to keep in mind as we reflect on particular lives, on the variety of experiences and dreams, on moments of strangeness and, especially, nearness, familiarity, and interconnectedness. Solidarity or a sense of a shared fate, too, were pervaded by distance; this—and more generally the interplay of great nearness and great distance—is one of the fundamental dynamics in the stories of this book.

At times, the dreaming of the two regions became entangled. José Rizal, the Filipino national hero (of Tagalog-Chinese-Spanish-Japanese ancestry), travelled widely around Europe, which he called his “intellectual homeland.” In 1887, he wrote a “tribute” to his close friend, the Austrian-Bohemian-Ger-

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25 For the place of southeast Asia in British Victorian imagination, see Morgan, *Place Matters*.



man professor Ferdinand Blumentritt. Rizal (who in the same year travelled to Blumentritt's hometown, Litoměřice/Leitmeritz, and birthplace, Prague) begins with an image of a fairy-tale Occidental city visited by an equally magical vision of *Extremo Oriente*, the Far East:

Prague, the city of one hundred tall towers, was his cradle. On the banks of the Moldau the Fairy of the Far East [*Extremo Oriente*] must have appeared to him for the first time, half wrapped in her green mantle, shedding pearls, and swimming in the light of early dawn. ... the poor Philippines, his golden dream.<sup>26</sup>

Rizal's Prague, too, is something of a "golden dream," like the Shah's Vienna, that wonderous Occident; and the half-wrapped Fairy of the Extreme Orient in the midst of Prague's tall towers is a similarly extremely disorienting, softly erotic blend of Orientalism and Occidentalism. Rizal's dreaming, too, has something of the unsettled inversions of East and West. One may wonder how this vision relates to his actual travels. We know that right after he visited Leitmeritz and Prague, it was in imperial Vienna that, like the Shah, "he encountered a figure of a temptress in the form of a Viennese woman, of the family of the Camelias or Margarite, of extraordinary beauty and irresistible attraction, who seemingly had been expressly invited to offer for a moment the cup of mundane pleasure to the apostle of Philippine freedom."<sup>27</sup> Could that Viennese prostitute been the model that has metamorphosed, in his later image of the young Blumentritt, into the Fairy of the Far East?

In an 1887 letter to Blumentritt, Rizal imagines the professor and the Austrian Empire—the two blend—as a non-partisan outsider to the colonial encounter between Spain and the Philippines:

The Philippines should be grateful to you if you would write [her] history, complete and purified by critique; I believe that you are the only one who can write such history ... You will be regarded as an impartial judge, you have no egoistic interests. As you have rightly said, Austria has no colonies: it does not covet our land; you don't have to alter the truth either for

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26 Jose Rizal, *Correspondence with Blumentritt* (Manila: National Historical Commission of the Philippines, 2011), 1. In quotations from this volume, I have amended the English translation.

27 Máximo Viola, "My Travels with Doctor Rizal," in *Reminiscences and Travels of Jose Rizal* (Manila: Jose Rizal National Centennial Commission, 1961), 328.

the Filipinos or the Spaniards, and you can look upon the past cold-bloodedly [*kaltblütiges*] as someone other [*andere*].<sup>28</sup>

Rizal's Austrian exceptionalism—a remoteness from colonialism—mirrors a recurring motif in the (self-)images of Austria, which we have already encountered in Musil. The picture of an impartial, self-less empire conceals as much as it reveals: the fact that the Philippines was named after a Habsburg king, and colonized by a branch of the same Habsburg family that ruled Austria, is evocative of a global imperial connectedness—the Philippines and Bohemia were part of the same family business. Blumentritt and Rizal disseminated the story that the Austrian-Bohemian Philippinist learned to “love” the Spanish colonial world as a child in the house of his aunt who moved to Prague from Latin America, avowedly a widow of a “Spanish-American” or “Peruvian creole” soldier in the Spanish colonial army, among whose ancestors was a Spanish governor of the Philippines. They also used this as evidence of Blumentritt's “impartiality,” or affection for both sides, to counter the perception that he was siding with the Filipinos against the Spanish.<sup>29</sup> But as Johann Stockinger has shown, the story is a product of Blumentritt's fantasy. The widowed aunt, in whose house Blumentritt indeed often stayed as a child, moved to Prague not from Latin America, but from the nearby Czech town of Mělník, and her exotic late husband was indeed a soldier, but a Czech—the ultimate Other in the German family?—rather than a “Peruvian creole.”<sup>30</sup> Reality and fiction, a Czech and a Peruvian, imperial Austria and colonial Spain, all bleed into each other in this history of impartiality and remoteness.

Part of Austria's remoteness-nearness to Asian colonialism was its own imperial rule of its “subject peoples”—envision again the “gigantic ship” of the Austrian barracks among the huts of the brown Moravians, in the “Slavic sea.” In 1878, Austria invaded and colonized Bosnia, with the blessing of the other Great Powers, including Britain and France, which were involved in both (south) eastern Europe and southeast Asia. It makes sense that the historian Norman Davies situates the partition of Poland among three empires in “a world”: “In a world of full-blown imperialism, they [the western Powers/statesmen] *did not question* the benefits of German or Russian rule in Poland, any more than those

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28 Rizal, *Correspondence*, 73.

29 Rizal, *Correspondence*, 547.

30 Johann Stockinger, *Der große Verteidiger der Philippinen* [The great defender of the Philippines] (Vienna: myMorava, 2020), 2:51–75.

of their own rule in Ireland, Egypt, Algeria, or Panama.”<sup>31</sup> He could have equally mentioned the British, French, Spanish, and Dutch partition of southeast Asia. Our two regions were part of one political and ethical paradigm, “a world” of not-questioning—one aim of this book is to show such an interconnected world through the particularity of two distant regions.

Rizal, like other southeast Asian intellectuals and like eastern European travelers, was living and dreaming with images of empires, races, progress, impartial rationality, East, and West, variously perpetuating and/or undermining them. His recruiting of Blumentritt for the Filipino cause as an “impartial” Austrian, and the fact that the “Bohemian professor,” with his Extremely Oriental fairies and Peruvian uncles, became one of the most prominent figures in the Filipino reformist movement, reveals-conceals the disorienting, fantastic, and real interconnectedness of southeast Asia and eastern Europe.

Delving deeper into the hall of mirrors, one finds the image of impartial, uncolonial Austria having its corresponding-contradictory counterparts in the imaginaries of the subject nations: if there was “nesting orientalism,” there was (and is) also “nesting exceptionalism,” a sense that “we” are/were remote from, and innocent of, colonialism, even as the Czechs, Jews, Poles, Serbs, and Hungarians, too, engaged in their own quasi-colonial/imperial imagination in conceptualizing their nations (often in respect to “eastern” neighbors and/or borderlands, or farther east, as with the Jews in Palestine).<sup>32</sup> At times, this sense of difference from imperial nations manifested itself in solidarity with anti-colonial struggles, also in southeast Asia. It is ironic that Rizal saw the Austrian Empire as impartial and (somewhat paradoxically) as an ally—personified in Blumentritt—in his struggle against colonial oppression, considering that German-ruled Austria was perceived as an oppressive imperial power by eastern European national movements, rather similarly to how Rizal viewed the Spanish Empire. Blumentritt, an ethnic German and Austrian loyalist, was not impartial either: while in Spanish papers he campaigned for Filipino rights in the Spanish Empire, in local German papers in Leitmeritz/Litoměřice, which referred to local Czechs as “enemies” and “terrorists,” he complained of Czechs infiltrating the German “world of learning,”

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31 Norman Davies, *God's Playground: A History of Poland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2:45. My emphases.

32 Filip Herza, “Colonial Exceptionalism: Post-colonial Scholarship and Race in Czech and Slovak Historiography,” *Slovenský národopis / Slovak Ethnology* 68, no. 2 (2020): 175–187.

expressed his fears of more Czechs moving to his Bohemian town, and celebrated its historical German “colonists” (*Kolonisten*).<sup>33</sup>

As I read histories and fictions, the two regions appear connected through a net of parallels, intersections, contradictions, inversions, ironies, and (mis)representations. Austrian “internal colonialism” appears as the other side of the empire’s apparent remoteness from overseas colonialism. Recently, some scholars have cautioned against thinking of the history of eastern Europe in terms of “colonialism” or “orientalism.” The resulting debate has been thought-stimulating.<sup>34</sup> However, reading about it in southeast Asia—with *mee goreng mutton* and Rizal on one’s mind—it is difficult to think of one overseas colonialism, which could be precisely defined and contrasted with eastern Europe. A historian of southeast Asia—or a traveler—is likely to get a sense of colonialism and orientalism as an extended family of practices and cultures varying widely in different empires, areas of each empire, and at different times, not to speak about the ways in which colonial ideologies were engaged with, adopted, and localized by local rulers, intellectuals, and post-colonial nations/states. With this sense of complexity, one is conditioned to think in terms of one diverse but interrelated world, and of Austria as yet another variation on imperialism/colonialism. Analogies and contrasts between the two regions—also with respect to imperial/colonial rule—also figure in the writings of eastern European travelers.

In both regions, “locals” and “subject peoples” participated in the functioning of the empire, predominantly in the lower and middle ranks of the imperial hierarchies. Rather than a simple opposition between the rulers and the ruled as two separate, homogeneous groups, there were competing hierarchies, individual and collective struggles for power and wealth, exploitation on many levels, ethnic, racial, and class stereotyping, and jealousies and enmities, all “nesting” among multiple groups and individuals, including “locals.” This word (like “colonized” and “colonizers”) needs to be used with an awareness of the various flavors and degrees of strangeness and relatedness among the many coexisting ethnic/religious/cultural groups, with their various histories of migration and various manners of colonization/settling (think *mee goreng mutton*). The inbetweenness of eastern European positions has to

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33 In articles in *Leitmeritzer Zeitung*, including “Das Tschechentum und die deutsche Gelehrtenwelt” [The Czechs and the German world of learning], April 17, 1886.

34 See, for example, Lemon, *Imperial Messages*; and Clemens Ruthner, “‘K.(u.)K. Postcolonial’? Für eine neue Lesart der österreichischen (und benachbarter) Literatur/en,” in *Kakanien Revisited*, October 1, 2001, <http://www.kakanien.ac.a/beitr/theorie/CRuthner1.pdf>. Bach, *Tropics of Vienna*, and Todorova, *Balkanism*, also provide useful perspectives on the issues.

be seen in the context of this southeast Asian complexity, on which our travelers often commented and saw analogies with eastern Europe (this is the focus of Ewertowski's chapter).

In both regions, the period covered in this book was not only the era of high imperialism, but also of resistance against the empires; the era of nationalist, communist, and religious movements, the dissolution of colonial powers and the reconfiguration of new empires, and the emergence of independent states, with their own old and new racisms and internal "colonialisms." In some cases, eastern Europeans saw in southeast Asia the familiar struggle of "nations" against empires before such a conceptualization became dominant there, such as when Durdík perceived the Acehnese holy war against the Dutch through the lens of Czech national emancipation from Austria.

The eastern Europeans who travelled to southeast Asia were like and unlike the southeast Asians who travelled within and beyond their own region, since the 1870s increasingly also to Europe.<sup>35</sup> Rizal was one of them. He corresponded and met with many European scholars, just as Blumentritt did with numerous Filipinos, some of whom also traveled to Leitmeritz. Rizal's close friendship and collaboration with Blumentritt was just one link in the networking among intellectuals from different Asian and European countries. For example, Blumentritt and the Austrian linguist Hugo Schuchardt shared an interest in "creole" languages, which Blumentritt also discussed with Rizal. In their correspondence, Spanish-Filipino and German-Czech "creoles" mixed.<sup>36</sup> Another glimpse of the same interconnected, creolizing world: it was about this time that Javanese, Moluccan, Polish, Czech, German, Jewish, African-Surinamese, and other soldiers in the Dutch colonial army fought together against the Acehnese in Sumatra, with Chinese shopkeepers supplying "Pilsen beer." Double-focusing on the two regions helps us—and had the potential to allow the travelers—to see "a world," the whole world, with a particular sensitivity to certain ironies, interconnections, and creolizations.

My aim is not to show how similar the imperial history in the two regions was/is; there were fundamental differences. Instead, I travel between them to allow us to see them disorientingly through each other in flashes of recognition and strangeness; and to suggest that this is how travelling eastern Europeans perceived faraway southeast Asia. In eastern Europe, in their complicated homelands, they had been conditioned to think of themselves and their

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35 See Hau and Tejapira, *Traveling Nation-Makers*.

36 See the online Hugo Schuchardt Archive, <http://schuchardt.uni-graz.at/>.

neighbors—obediently or rebelliously—in terms of unequal empires and nations, Wests and Easts, Europe and its Other. In the overseas colonial world, they often felt as outsiders, but so did some of them in their own homelands. Like and unlike at home, like and unlike southeast Asians, they navigated among different peoples, powers, and dreams, writing their own stories and adopting/adapting others'. The chapters in this book show how they did and did not compare, did and did not recognize something of their own personal and collective experience in the overseas colonial world, self-ing and othering on their travels, gaining new vision and new blindness.

## **The Chapters**

Most chapters in this book focus on individual travelers. Some discuss a group of people (Beránek) or a body of texts (Ewertowski, Grzechnik)—but in them, too, we hear the voices of individual traveler-writers. Each case complicates the larger picture. The sequence of chapters follows the chronological order of the journeys. This brings out the tendencies and issues particular to a time, and encourages the reader to get a sense of (and question) both continuity and change. Only glimpses of this, and of the diversity of particular histories, life-stories, attitudes, and unrepeatable moments, are captured in the quick “run-down” that follows, but I will return to selected key issues in the next section.

Before (relatively) independent travel became gradually easier and more affordable in the late nineteenth century, many eastern Europeans travelled to southeast Asia in the service of empires, and this is true also about the protagonists of the first two chapters—so much for any simple, “impartial” eastern European position. The Polish soldier Teodor Anzelm Dzwonkowski and, later, the Czech physician Pavel Durdík (in chapters by Dariusz Kołodziejczyk and Jan Mrázek, respectively) served in the Dutch colonial navy and army. Serving colonialism helped them see it closely and intensely, illuminated also by their eastern European experience. Dzwonkowski is the only eighteenth-century traveler represented in this book, and the difference between his more fluid sense of belonging and Durdík’s critical but unequivocal identification as a Czech, is in part a reflection of their different times, particularly the growth of national consciousness in Durdík’s era. Their complex positioning—Dzwonkowski’s playfully protean persona and Durdík’s Czecho-Slavic loving-hating patriotism complicated by his rejection of Russian imperialist Slavophilia—played out in the globally and locally “multinational” Dutch armed forces and in the diverse, mobile and mix-

ing local population, including the Acehnese in their struggle against the Dutch, which Durdík compares with Czech patriotism under Austria.

Durdík as well as the Serb Milan Jovanović Morski in Nada Savković's chapter are just two out of a number of eastern European physicians who wrote about southeast Asia. Their profession enabled them to travel the world and shaped their experience and vision. Both wrote about their travels, with Durdík also publishing ethnographic and medical studies. One gets a sense of how ethnic/national/regional and professional identities intersect.

In later decades of the nineteenth century, there was a growing diversity of characters who, like Jovanović, were not in the service of the colonial administrations. Jovanović's biography gives a good picture of the motley assortment of ethnicities and languages that was eastern Europe. He is a fascinating, yet somehow typical, case of an independent thinker, both patriotic and cosmopolitan. In this, and in his jabs at colonialism (even when he simultaneously adopts and contradicts European hierarchies: "the so-called European civilization seems to be another form of the primordial African barbarism"), the Serb is reminiscent of his Czech near-contemporary, Durdík.

Rafał Pankowski writes about two Poles of similar social background but strikingly different positioning in the world of empires. Their chance 1887 almost-meeting in southeast Asia evokes a recurrent theme in this book: the diversity of travelers' positions, which "is influenced by the complex positioning of Polish identity [or other eastern European identities] vis-à-vis European empires." Józef Korzeniowski (Joseph Conrad), a Pole who was born in the Russian Empire and came of age in Austro-Hungarian Galicia, was the captain on a British ship, while the revolutionary Bronisław Piłsudski travelled as a prisoner of the Russian Empire. Pankowski situates them in a broader discussion of the Polish relationship to colonialism, and reflects on continuities with their earlier eastern European and later Asian experiences.

The Polish painter Julian Fałat in Moroz's chapter, originally from Galicia, travelled through southeast Asia at about the same time. His story further complicates Polish positioning for us. A Polish patriot, on his travels he emphasized his "European" persona and—although he did not speak English—mimicked "travelling Englishmen," they and tourism being the signs of that "first class European" that he would want Poles to be.

The Czech adventurer and naturalist Enrique Stanko Vráz, discussed in Iveta Nakládlová's chapter, travelled to Singapore, Siam, Borneo, and Papua in the 1890s. While at first sight he might appear, more than some other Czech travelers, as the stereotypical nineteenth-century adventurer (although delayed

and without their resources, typical for us Czechs), Nakládalová calls for a nuanced approach to the individuality of his writings. Her chapter raises a larger issue in interpreting the travelers' texts: while certain attitudes may appear collective—such as colonial Orientalism or an anti-colonial solidarity linked to political conditions in eastern European—there is a danger of underplaying individual idiosyncrasies and ambiguities.

One gets a sense of more shifting positions from Tomasz Ewertowski's chapter on "ethnic comparisons" in the writings of several Polish and Serbian traveler-writers over a longer time period (1870s-1910s). It offers a broader view of a key issue in the book: how the multiethnic eastern Europe was a lens through which the travelers perceived an ethnically diverse southeast Asia, through "a web of analogies and contrasts," beyond the "conventional opposition between 'us' and 'them,'" and beyond "binary thinking in categories of 'East' and 'West.'"

As we move to early twentieth century, the arts begin to figure more prominently, interlinked with other endeavors. Marianna Lis discusses the Polish botanist Marian Raciborski, who did research in Java. She reflects on his 1901 performance with Javanese puppets in a village in Galicia and its representations, including a later novel about the traveler. Gábor Pusztai focuses on the Hungarian-Jewish writer László Székely, who worked on plantations in Sumatra. Pusztai examines his writings and drawings, emphasizing their humor, inversions of colonial society, and Székely's focus on its margins, which resonates with his own marginality in Hungary (and, Roth might add, with the centrality of the margins in eastern Europe).

While eastern European travel writing of the time is dominated by men, there were several female traveler-writers. Situating her case in a summary history of Hungarian women travelers, Vera Brittig discusses Ilona Zboray's perceptions of Java and Bali in the 1930s. Zboray had a keen interest in art, culture, and local life, and the chapter gives a sense of how she acted "White" and, at the same time, felt out of place in her role; how she saw Java and Bali with a mix of admiration, respect, discomfort, and shame, and reflected on her privileged position as a white woman and, especially in Bali, a tourist. What comes across from Zboray's texts is not so much a clear political position, but rather an individual, an eastern European, and a woman making sense of and navigating a world that is both new and relatable.<sup>37</sup>

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37 Another woman traveler-writer from interwar eastern Europe to southeast Asia, Barbora Markéta Eliášová (1874-1957), was outspoken both as a critic of colonialism and in her comments on women. See Mrázek, "Returns to the Wide World," 139-51.



Contrasting pictures, also from the interwar period, are offered by the next two chapters. They represent eastern European variations on colonial dreams, involving production and trade without political control of foreign territories, and variously reflecting changing Polish and Czech political and cultural imaginaries. Marta Grzechnik discusses the portrayals of southeast Asia (especially by travelers to the region) in the Polish monthly *Morze* (Sea), published by the “Maritime and Colonial League,” in the 1930s. Jan Beránek writes about the lives of Czechoslovaks in interwar Singapore, and particularly the Baťa shoe company. Baťa’s was an idiosyncratic Czech quasi-colony, embedded in the British realm but also part of a shoe empire, on which even today the sun never sets. Beránek depicts the lives of the Czechs and the relations among themselves and with others in Singapore, which echoed political and ideological tensions and developments in their homeland.

The last two chapters take us into the early years of the Cold War era and the final days of the colonial empires. They show how political positions in eastern Europe, including socialist anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism, shaped engagement with the ongoing ideological and political struggles in southeast Asia.<sup>38</sup> Michał Lubina’s chapter on the writer Gustaw Herling-Grudziński and his 1952 trip to newly independent Burma explores how a Polish-Jewish socialist and anti-communist critically engaged with the legacies of colonialism and local culture. In the last chapter, Nemanja Radonjić analyzes the development of two opposing views of colonialism, which reflect fundamental divisions in Yugoslav society. This case of “double vision” illustrates again the internal plurality of eastern Europe and of individual countries, as well as a fundamental dynamic of the eastern European engagement with southeast Asia: the tension between colonial othering in the shadow of “united Europe,” and a solidarity with the colonized “East.”

### Personas, Shadows, Mirrorings

In her chapter, Lis reflects on *wayang* (Javanese shadow puppet theatre) as performed by the botanist Raciborski in Galicia after his return from Java, and watched by the geologist Mieczysław Limanowski.

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38 For (anti-)colonialism in socialist travelogues after 1949, see also Eric Burton et al., “Imagining Spaces of Encounter: Travel Writing between the Colonial and the Anti-Colonial in Socialist Eastern Europe, 1949–1989,” in *Second-Third World Spaces in the Cold War: Global Socialism and the Gritty Politics of the Particular*, ed. Kristin Roth-Ey (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 237–60. For a case of a Czech communist’s (travel) writing on southeast Asia from the 1920s to 1951, see Mrázek, *On This Modern Highway*.

What could Limanowski see? Or: what could Raciborski see in Java? What attracted his attention? What caught the attention of Limanowski and other viewers gathered in Dublany, who watched the *wayang* ‘filtered’ and ‘interpreted’ by Raciborski and his understanding of Java? . . . What can we read today from and through the preserved notes, accounts, puppets, or poetic attempts to understand a distant culture?

In Lis’s disorienting series of questions, Javanese performers, Raciborski, Limanowski, and “we ... today” are all involved in watching, representing, and performing. Lis is a theatre practitioner and scholar who also travelled to Java to learn about *wayang*. In her reflections, she returns to her earliest memories of watching *wayang* and later representing it to Polish audiences. She also discusses a novel, inspired by Raciborski’s life, in which a *wayang* performance is described: “Arjuna appeared over his cradle in the childhood, from whom he received the gift of a sensitive heart, a broad outlook on the world and a love for nature.” Lis reflects:

The images and narratives I have invoked formed other images and stories that I transformed and retold into a new performance in which facts are mixed with fantasies and truth with assumptions. Each meeting . . . has become both an invitation and an introduction to the next one.

Raciborski’s first *wayang* performance in Poland was a response to Javanese performances, which, in turn, also represented/caricatured otherness, including the Dutch colonists (see Figure 0.1). The retelling continues when I “filter” Lis’s chapter here, or when it was discussed by Sumarsam, a Javanese scholar and *wayang* puppeteer, at our workshop in Singapore.

In all these thousand and one tales embedded in each other, there is something of the reverse–full mirroring between the Shah’s Occidentalizer fantasizing of Vienna and Vienna’s Orientalist fantasizing of the Shah; or of Rizal envisioning Blumentritt’s vision of the Fairy of the Far East in Prague. “We ... today,” as we represent travelers’ representations of southeast Asia, might be working (metaphorically speaking) with shadows and puppets, but so did the travelers we write about, who represented themselves before us; and so do Javanese puppeteers, as they re-imagine story characters, some of whom originally “came” from India. Our encounters across time with past travelers and dreamers are part of the endless multiplication of representation, in the ceaselessly recurring performances and interpretations of Javanese *wayang*—and of southeast Asia—by both the Javanese and foreigners.



**Figure 0.1.** Javanese *wayang* puppet of King Belgeduwel Beh. The puppet shows the clown-servant Petruk dressed in a bizarre, foreign way, as a caricature of the Dutch Governor-General. In the classic play, a satire of colonial rule, the clown-servant becomes a ridiculously pompous, self-indulgent, and corrupt autocrat. The same character/story has later been used to criticize presidents of independent Indonesia. (Author’s collection; photo by Try Sutrisno Foo.)

While “all the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players,” our ways of acting are diverse, and depending on one’s position, one acts more lazily or inventively. Many eastern Europeans felt as outsiders and newcomers in the colonial world, at times awed by both newness and unexpected familiarity (as were their readers). They had to act creatively as they improvised new parts or played with well-defined roles. Both mimesis and mimicry—involving a doubling or multiplication of the self—are fundamental to acting, and we encounter them in this book in ways that do not neatly fit into the colonizer-colonized binary; in ways that are closer to the ironic inversions of the Shah’s Occidentalism or the Slavic peasant “blood” of the Austrian noble Trotta.

Observe how Dzwonkowski, in Kołodziejczyk’s chapter,

navigated between various identities and cultures. Although ostensibly attached to his Polish noble roots and incessantly looking for countrymen in visited lands, he did not mind serving in foreign armies, and when he

feared anti-Polish prejudice of other crew members, he resolved to pass for a Hungarian and amused himself by mocking the Poles in the company of Germans and Dutchmen, as he openly admits in his memoir. . . . He boasts that he was so successful in his mimesis that everybody on the board took him for a Hungarian, even though he had never been to Hungary and had not spoken a word in the Hungarian language.

Many Poles “peacefully dissolved in the colonial world, in which Poles wanted to pass for Hungarians and Jews for Poles, often having dark skin through marriages with local women.” Dzwonkowski’s sense of self and his relationship to others was not a matter of asserting a fixed identity, but more like improvisatory acting in a play, conditioned by the multiplicity of both eastern European and Indies-colonial masks and selves. The degree of seriousness, playfulness, and mocking of self and others varied. Rather than wearing a single mask, Dzwonkowski was more like a puppeteer performing with a whole set of puppets—many of them distinctly eastern European (“the Hungarian,” “the Pole,” “the Jew,” “the German”)—and their more or less distorted shadows. The Self is not simply defined in opposition to the Other; and the others were not simply southeast Asians, not simply Western Europeans. Various manners of otherness, also eastern European, characterized these masks, these selves. It was masks, but also a play of images in one’s and others’ eyes. Pankowski discusses Conrad as a Pole, from a family that fought Russian oppression. He went into “forced exile in the depth of Russia ... an early experience of being an alien in a strange land.” Conrad repeatedly expressed his hostility toward Russia and certainly did not identify as a Russian, but according to Paul Langlois (who had known him in the 1880s), he “was not too popular with his colleagues [ship captains in the Indian Ocean] who, in irony, called him ‘the Russian Count.’”<sup>39</sup> Lubina’s protagonist, Herling-Grudziński, was a “Polonised Jew... considered a Jew by many Poles and a Pole by many Jews.” Such selves/others were not merely ethnic: our protagonists were simultaneously acting scientists (recall the geologist watching the botanist perform *wayang*), doctors, soldiers, tourists, artists, gentlemen ... always more than one part at a time.

I have thematized multiplicity, inbetweenness, and unsettledness. They should not be seen as pathologies in relation to an ideal of a stable, homoge-

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39 Quoted in Jerry Allen, *The Sea Years of Joseph Conrad* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965), 259. Thanks to Rafał Pankowski for this quote.

neous identity, but as an abundance of being: each person as a dance of selves and others. The thematization reflects the particular social/cultural/political complexity of both regions, and the ambiguous, unsettled positioning—a creative puppet play—of eastern Europeans in southeast Asian colonial society.

The question of how eastern Europeans should act in relation to colonists from western Europe—like them? differently? what mix of these?—was unavoidable, not only because the British, Dutch, and French played dominant roles, not only because the eastern Europeans were mostly seen as White and were expected to associate with other Europeans, but also because (not) acting “European” in the colonies reopened larger questions of eastern European positioning vis-à-vis “Europe.” Such discourse (and for travelers, behavior) was “performative,” in the sense that Grzechnik writes in her chapter on unrealized Polish colonial fantasies:

Rather than a means of justifying and upholding the colonial nations’ rule over non-European territory—as in the case of the established, western European colonial powers—it was to be the means to elevate . . . [Poland’s] own position, to move up in the global hierarchy. Adopting the colonial views and ideologies (such as European racism, European civilizing mission, etc.) was an expression of the aspiration, the dream to become fully European—since being European was understood, among others, as possessing colonies. The [Maritime and Colonial League’s] colonial discourse was performative: its goal was to talk this Europeanness of Poles into existence.

The southeast Asian desire for Western modernity resonated with this eastern European dream of *not* being an *eastern* European, and resonated in the region, as Radonjić suggests in his chapter, writing about the Sultan of Brunei travelling to England for medical treatment:

Photographed with his son dressed in a European manner, with only a hint of the East in the fez adorning his head, the sultan was represented to the Yugoslavs as a relic of South Asian history which needed to modernize in order to survive, both figuratively and literally. This image is important because it speaks to the Yugoslav desire to be more westernized; being that the country, one of the poorest in Europe and with a long history of Ottoman rule, was often orientalized in the western travelogue and had even developed a cascading discourse describing the eastern and southern provinces and countries of the Balkans as more oriental.

Moroz speaks of the “construction of [Fałat’s] persona as a ‘*dżentelmen*’—a gentleman—and an experienced tourist,” such as when the traveler “states that he (and his friend) go sightseeing ‘mostly to keep up the habit of travelling Englishmen.’” Fałat, who does not speak English, tries to act like a member of the colonial society precisely because his membership is in question, which is also the question of Poland (not) being part of Europe. His, too, is an eastern European “dream to become fully European,” in the image of the Western colonial powers. When Moroz speaks of “mimicry” and “mockery,” he illuminates the mimesis or performativity involved in a Pole “keeping up the habit of travelling Englishmen.”

Traces and variations of such “acting European” can be found in most chapters—just like in the biographies of southeast Asian intellectuals, Rizal above all (who is iconically represented, also on his monument in tropical Manila, in larger-than-life winter coat). At the same time, in the travelers’ writings, we also find fierce criticism of colonialism, images of the eastern European as an outsider in the colonial society, and expressions of solidarity with the colonized people. Such discourse and behavior, too, are performative and often concern the positioning of the traveler and his country or nation, such as when Durdík compares the Acehnese anticolonial struggle to the Czech “paper protests”; and here, too, there is no simple position, as even the sharpest critics of colonialism depended on the colonial infrastructure and administration, or, like Durdík, even worked for the colonial state. Pusztai’s chapter shows how Székely navigated, often not carefully enough, between criticizing colonialism and the acceptability of his work, both in the Dutch Indies and later when he was (mis)translating/adapting his texts—as if altering his mask, his performance—for different audiences (Hungarian, Dutch, or American). Some travelers reflected on the tensions and contradictions, others did not; but all had to decide how to act and what mask(s) to put on.

Instead of pigeonholing our protagonists into unambiguous categories, for or against colonialism, it has been more fruitful to explore the nuances, contradictions, ironies, and fluidity of each person’s attitudes, of each performance with multiple puppets. A variety of social, professional, and political positions and allegiances are involved. Such plurality, ambiguity, and constant performative negotiations are recurring themes in this book. They are not unique to eastern European travelers, but are particularly prominent in many of their stories, due to the “Easternness” of their Europe and the travelers’ questioned Europeanness; and, while not unique to travel in southeast Asia, these themes are nonetheless animated with rich variations and particular accents by the

region's own character. From the travelers' unsettled positions, on their travels in places that resonated with their homelands, they saw, fantasized, and acted in-between conforming to and deviating from colonial dreams and colonial propriety. From our positions, as we see the violence of settling, propriety, and black-and-white distinctions, we appreciate these glimmers of imperfection, inbetweenness, unsettledness.

The inbetweenness, multiplicity, and incessant performativeness reflect the travelers' positioning as well as the authors'. Recall Lis's narrative here, where each representation invites further representations—a hall of mirrors in which “we ... today,” too, play our parts, “filtering” and interpreting the travelers' retellings, like and unlike how they “filtered” and interpreted what they saw, heard, or read. Rather like how our predecessors had to travel on colonial ships and eat Dutch or English fare (sometimes the Otherest thing for them), rather like how they mimicked and complicated colonial concepts and distinctions, and rather like how they had to deal also with their compatriots, so we today are compelled to adopt/adapt/mimic/reject various powerful narratives and theories centered in and on “the West” as well as those from our regions, as we position ourselves and our stories in the world. Some authors in this book speak of postcolonial studies, Orientalism, mimicry... but also show how such concepts have to be reinvented to be helpful in particular cases.

This book does not resolve, but rather performs the contact/clash of various styles of thinking. One can discern a certain energizing difference between historians and literary scholars, and their different (post-)colonial anxieties; and between scholars of eastern Europe and southeast Asia. We are balancing between an emphasis on the particularity of *eastern* Europe as variously “colonized,” and an insistence that eastern *Europeans* were complicit in colonialism, accompanied by a critique of their “exceptionalism.” Moreover, there is a sense of ongoing conversations, not only among scholars today, but also with the traveler-writers we write about, or moments when they “resist,” like when Nakládalová notes that Vráz's poetic images “are capable of conveying ambiguities that resist the sometimes unambiguous or univocal postcolonial readings of the travel narrative in the imperial period.” The balancing, open-endedness, and many-sidedness of an inclusive conversation, an ongoing performance more than a statement or argument, should be seen as part of the unsettledness that this book explores and performs, and should not be dismissed as amorphous multiplicity. Such performance, its many masks or puppets, affords us glimpses of the two regions and the connections between them, not in sharp contrast to, say, western Europe or British India, but through emphasis

and nuance, which is in part a response, the travelers' and ours, to the character of the two regions; a way to let the regions, in their diversity and complexity, to show, like shadows on a translucent screen, in our writing.

Nakládalová reflects:

Although postcolonial criticism might seem to provide an adequate framework for this kind of account, in my view it tends to focus too much on collective symbols and voices. . . . Vráz's poetical and symbolic language is unconventional or atypical, in the sense that it is not universal; it cannot be extended to other texts, and can only be interpreted in relation to and in the context of the given author.

This could also be said about "us . . . today." While certain questions recur throughout the book and certain patterns emerge, each chapter presents a unique constellation of concerns, biographies, social contexts, and styles of travelling and writing. Rather than (merely) a clash of theoretical empires, this book is also a gathering of individuals—even if we are working with empires.

It was in a personal way that I became involved in this book. A scholar of southeast Asian shadow puppet theater, I became interested in the Czech poet Konstantin Biebl, who in 1926 travelled to the Dutch East Indies. His blending of poetry and travel, the desire to overcome distance and difference, the power of poetic associations to "extend their hands toward each other across oceans," and his penetrating images of colonialism, have helped me think about the colonial past and present, as well as my own dislocation from Prague to southeast Asia.<sup>40</sup> Later, learning about other Czech travelers helped me understand Biebl, how he was and was not unique, but this also expanded and complicated my idea of "Czech travel writing," and of being Czech. In working on this book, learning about my larger neighborhood has helped me further expand my horizons, but also correct or unsettle my generalizations based on what I knew from the Czech context; it "corrected my brain," as Durdík says of himself.

I share this self-centered perspective in the hope that the book can be helpful for others in a similar way: to connect and reflect across borders—most obviously, within the region and across eastern European languages and national perspectives. The diversity of the nations under Habsburg control, their real and fantasized selves, affinities, and mutual otherness, and perhaps especially their escaping Kakania, then and now, strangely echo in the diversity and af-

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40 Mrázek, *On This Modern Highway*.



finites of our scholarship, as well as its local and global orientations. But the book may also help scholars of “dominant”—especially British and American—traditions of travel writing to expand their horizon and enable them to look at those traditions and empires, and at the whole world, from half-elsewhere; and more generally, to help (further) decenter and diversify perspectives in the study of travel writing and colonialism. But rather than envisioning an empire of theory on which the sun never sets, I hope rather that the book can be like one of those embarrassing, unsettling moments when Biebl misbehaved onboard a German ship sailing to Singapore:

It is horrible, how we [Czechs] have such bad upbringing. Forgive me, O Lord, because I don't know what I am doing when I smile, perhaps at the sun, perhaps even at the Indians. One of them saw that I was smiling, walked over to me, smiled back at me, and asked me in German: “What time is it?” “Five,” I said, looking at my watch. The Englishmen were petrified. I will never forget their licked hair and heads numb with awe. Saint Wenceslas, what have I done again? Then they looked at each other, at me, at the Indians in rags, and again at each other, and broke into laughter. They knew that I was a Czech.<sup>41</sup>

### ***Escaping Kakania in Singapore***

Since long before the arrival of the English, the island where Singapore lies today had been a port of call for ships from China, India, the Middle East, Europe, and different parts of southeast Asia; for centuries, and today more than ever, people have been meeting here, trading wares, experiences, stories, and ideas. From my university canteen, I like overlooking the modern port of Singapore—the shifting mountains of containers, the giant cargo ships, the smaller boats. I think back to Korzeniowski's/Conrad's *Almayer's Folly*, published in 1895. The name of the fictional town of Sambir in Borneo, where the novel is set, is said to be borrowed from Sambir in Galicia (in today's Ukraine), where Korzeniowski previously lived (see Pankowski's chapter). Whether or not it is a scholarly fiction, the Bornean mirroring of Galicia is evocative. In the Ruthenian-Polish-Jewish Galicia, the “Half-Asia” on the periphery of the Habsburg Empire, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch had situated his “masochistic” narratives of erotic and social unsettledness, inversion, and pleasurable submission (also to the

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41 Quoted in Mrázek, *On This Modern Highway*, 169–70.

East: “She would dress up like a female sultan ... I was her slave, and she ruled me like a sultan”), in the midst of peasants who “have the wisdom of the Orient in them like the poor fishermen, shepherds, and beggars in the thousand and one nights.”<sup>42</sup> Joseph Roth, the author of *The Tale of the 1002nd Night*, was a Jew from Galicia. In Conrad’s Sambir, Malays, Arabs, Chinese, and a Dutchman co-exist, trade, and vie for power on the margins of the Dutch East Indies, where submission is feigned and colonial power ridiculed. Almayer, the lone, powerless Dutchman, dreams that his “mixed-blood” daughter would feel White (she elopes with a Balinese), and of gold that would enable him to “return” to Europe, where he has never been and never would be. There is much of Sambir and of Almayer’s folly in modern Singapore. Not just in the port-worthy coming and going and clashing and mixing of people, their cultures, and their dreams of gold, but also in its hypermodern technological connectivity, its fantasies and nightmares of a “multiracial” “Future City”/“Global City”/“Smart Nation.” People sometimes speak of the city’s “Westernization,” but if that is what it is, then Singapore has overtaken the West by far, unsettling old East-West hierarchies and labels; but it is far from simply that.

While planning the workshop that was part of writing this book, it was in Singapore, in this ultimate Bornean/Galician “Sambir,” that I imagined reality unpredictably interrupting and inspiring the conversations of eastern European and southeast Asian scholars. Envision a group of Czechs, Hungarians, Poles, and Serbs, fresh from their countries, a bit disoriented, a bit exotic, often mistaken for Englishmen, Americans, Germans, or Russians (or just seen as generic *angmos*, literally “red haired,” or “White”), walking the streets and chatting in the coffee shops, among themselves and with others, as if staging the narratives that they have come here to share.

But “reality, as usual, beats fiction out of sight,” wrote Conrad. With an ironic grin, it has beaten my imagination of *Escaping Kakanía*. Due to the “novel coronavirus,” the workshop was “moved” online—the latest form of modern travel and isolation, in a long history of increasing ease and speed of movement and vision, and of increasing isolation by the technologies of travel from uncontrolled reality, from otherness, and from travel itself, one might say. But into the virtuality of our event something of the port city of Singapore seeped, as did something of those other “Sambirs,” from where the participants joined us—Białystok, Gdańsk, Olomouc, Debrecen, Novi Sad, Belgrade, Budapest. . . In

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42 Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, *Love: The Legacy of Cain*, trans. Michael O’Pecko (Riverside: Ariadne Press, 2003), 41 and 81.

addition to the eastern European scholars commenting on each other's work—mostly experts on Europe, some on southeast Asia—we invited (other) scholars of/from southeast Asia to comment and join the discussion. They helped different perspectives, concerns, and histories—something of southeast Asia and its Sambirs—seep into the conversation, serving as a persistent, unsettling reminder of the limits of our vision, and of the one-sidedness, controlledness, and settledness of any “eastern European perspective”—just like the travelers of old did and did not see faraway lands and encountered people ever in-between self-isolation and a thirst for connectivity.

The event opened with Javanese gamelan music (“Welcome to Singapore, welcome to Kakania!” sang the chorus) and my student Said Effendy sang *Hikayat Pengkalan Raja*, his epic poem about a Malay ruler travelling to Prague and civilizing barbarian Bohemians, inverting both colonial and teacher-student relations, and making it more difficult for us to quote the other Said, or to question whether the subaltern can laugh. The multitude of foreign accents when we spoke English, in counterpoint to side-conversations in Serbian, Hungarian, Czech, and Polish, reminded us of our otherness, mutual and shared. Even as English still ruled supreme, these accents and languages mixed with those from southeast Asia and other parts of the world. Something of this journeying into the heart of the “Global City,” this ancient entrepot, seeped into our conversations, across the borders of regional or country specializations, disciplines, intellectual allegiances, national histories, academic cultures, and other follies.

Through the lens of eastern European history, divisions, improprieties, and blindness, this book also offers a limited but unusual glimpse of the southeast Asian neighborhood. Like some of our predecessors, we begin to recognize something of our eastern European neighborhood in it. The other direction—the travels of southeast Asians to eastern Europe and their views—has been largely beyond the scope of this project (even as we build on studies of southeast Asian travel writing, although not about eastern Europe, and research on southeast Asian engagement with Europe, mostly not framed as “travel writing”). But perhaps something of Singapore and southeast Asia, where we “almost-met” (like Conrad and Piłsudski), has seeped into this book. Certainly this introduction is marked and disoriented by the fact that it was written in Singapore by an “eastern European” “Southeast Asianist” who has lived longer in southeast Asia than in eastern Europe; written with an insistent consciousness of a southeast Asian gaze (remember *Hikayat Pengkalan Raja*, remember King Belgeduwel Beh [Figure 0.1.]) and the history of southeast Asian interaction with European ideas and practices, and no doubt shaped by his insti-

tutional context and intellectual community, southeast Asian and Singaporean in its international orientation. This book's vision remains "partial," Rizal might say; a folly, Conrad might declaim. Yet, or because of that, the hope is that an awareness of both the limits of our vision and the transregional mirroring and seepy interpenetration of our follies—think Javanese-Polish *wayang*, Rizal, *mee goreng mutton*, Bornean-Galician Sambir—even as an awareness of a lack, an unsettledness, may seep into and disorient or disturb, although ever not enough, our future conversations and travels.



# THE DUTCH EAST INDIES IN THE EYES OF A POLE

Teodor Anzelm Dzwonkowski and His Memoirs of Service  
in the Dutch Navy in the Years 1788–1793

*Dariusz Kołodziejczyk*



The protagonist of my chapter is Teodor Anzelm Dzwonkowski (1764–1850), a Polish soldier who left a fascinating memoir of his travels to Southeast Asia on a Dutch warship.<sup>1</sup> Coming from a petty noble family, he graduated from Piarist schools in Łomża and Warsaw and then served two years in the Prussian army. Looking for better job opportunities and some adventure, he arrived in Amsterdam and enlisted in the Dutch navy, taking part in a journey that brought him to South Africa, India, Ceylon, and the Dutch East Indies. Having returned to Poland, he took part in the Kościuszko uprising of 1794, but after its failure and the last partition of Poland he chose a peaceful life, settled down and married, became a respected citizen of Kraków, and died as an Austrian subject.

The Dutch East India Company (Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie, hence VOC), which at this time managed the Dutch colonies, is today regarded as a major multinational, established at a time when such initiatives were still rare.<sup>2</sup> Roughly half of the one million people employed by the VOC in the years 1602–1795 were foreigners, and this percentage was even higher among military personnel. The VOC's international character was best visible in the Company's final years: around 1770 no less than 80% of its soldiers were non-

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1 Teodor Anzelm Dzwonkowski, *Pamiętniki czyli Pamiątka po ojcu dla Józefy z Dzwonkowskich Komornickiej* [Memoirs or a keepsake of my father for Józefa Komornicka Dzwonkowski], ed. Stanisław and Tomasz Komornicy (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1985). The parenthesized page numbers in this text refer to this volume. The edition is based on the early nineteenth-century manuscript found in the family archives in 1976. Another copy, already known before World War II, perished in 1944.

2 Cf. Jan Lucassen, "A Multinational and Its Labor Force: The Dutch East India Company, 1595–1795," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 66 (2004): 12–39, esp. 12.

Dutch.<sup>3</sup> Among the foreigners one finds Germans, Scandinavians, Frenchmen, inhabitants of the Southern Netherlands, as well as Hungarians and Poles.<sup>4</sup> One should also add Asian sailors and soldiers, especially the Chinese, the Javanese, and the Bengalis, who were recruited by the VOC in still greater numbers throughout the eighteenth century.<sup>5</sup> This gives us an idea of the diversity of people in the colonial world. On his travels, Dzwonkowski interacted with those employed by the VOC as well as others in the communities he visited.

Judging by the contents of his memoir, Dzwonkowski not only displayed great curiosity of foreign peoples and lands, but also flexibly navigated between various identities and cultures. Although ostensibly attached to his Polish noble roots and incessantly looking for countrymen in visited lands, he did not mind serving in foreign armies, and when he feared anti-Polish prejudice of other crew members, he resolved to pass for a Hungarian and amused himself mocking the Poles in the company of Germans and Dutchmen, as he openly admits in his memoir. Another intriguing feature in his memoirs was an apparent lack of religious and racial prejudice, since he recorded his joy upon meeting countrymen, making little distinction whether they were Catholic Poles, Lutheran Germans, or Jews. Neither did he condemn interracial marriages, treating the fact that European emigrants in Asia had dark-skinned children as a mere curiosity.

### Reconstructing Dzwonkowski's Life and Travels

Teodor Anzelm Dzwonkowski was born into a petty noble family in northern Mazovia as the youngest son. After he was orphaned at the age of 13, his school education in Łomża was supported by his elder brother, who managed the family estate, yet after some conflicts Teodor moved to Warsaw where he continued his studies with the support of his uncles. Having graduated, he was em-

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3 Femme S. Gaastra, *The Dutch East India Company: Expansion and Decline* (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 2003), 81–82; Roelof van Gelder, *Das ostindische Abenteuer: Deutsche in Diensten der Vereinigten Ostindischen Kompanie der Niederlands (VOC), 1600–1800* [The East Indies adventure: Germans in the service of the VOC, 1600–1800] (Hamburg: Convent Verlag, 2004), 14, 262–264.

4 On the Hungarians, see Gábor Pusztai and Kees Tszelszky, “In de dienst van de VOC: Een voorlopige inventarisatie van Hongaren in dienst van de Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (1602–1795) [In the service of the VOC: A preliminary inventory of Hungarians in the service of the Dutch East India Company (1602–1795)], *Acta Neerlandica. Bijdragen tot de Neerlandistiek Debrecen* 12 (2016) = *Tropisch avontuur. Hongaren in de Nederlandse koloniën*, 25–108. On the VOC employees originating from Poland, see Mariusz Kowalski, “Poles in the Dutch Cape Colony 1652–1814,” *Werkwinkel* 10 (2015): 65–96, with further references.

5 Roelof van Gelder, *Naporra's omweg: Het leven van een VOC-matros* [Naporra's detour: The life of a VOC sailor (1731–1793)] (Amsterdam-Antwerpen: Atlas, 2003), 310–311.

ployed as a secretary by his cousin who worked as a court official, while at the same time he continued his education attending courses in law and improving his knowledge of German and French. He nonetheless admits in his memoir that during his sojourn in Warsaw he took a liking to balls, picnics, and cards and his earnings soon proved insufficient to cover his rising expenses. In 1783, he enlisted in a hussar regiment which was recruited in Poland by a Prussian colonel, Friedrich Wilhelm von Wuthenau, with the consent of the Polish authorities. After two years' service in the Prussian army in Soldau (Działdowo), Teodor resolved to go to the Netherlands, having heard of the *Patriottentijd*, the civil conflict between Stadtholder William V, the Prince of Orange, and the Dutch republicans who referred to themselves as Patriots (*Patriotten*). He wanted to join the conflict as a mercenary and in his memoir he openly admits that he was ready to serve the party that would pay better, although he sympathized with the anti-Orangist movement that he labeled as anti-absolutist. His plans turned into a fiasco, however, as by the time he boarded a ship from Königsberg to Amsterdam, a Prussian military intervention had already resolved the Dutch domestic conflict in favor of William V.<sup>6</sup>

Having no wish to return home empty handed, Teodor enlisted in the Dutch navy and participated in a military expedition to the Indian Ocean which took over four years between 1789 and 1793. He returned to Poland just in time to take part in an insurrection initiated in 1794 by Tadeusz Kościuszko, who desperately tried to reverse the course of events that led to the demise of the Polish-Lithuanian state. After the failure of the uprising and the third partition of Poland in 1795, Teodor decided to settle down and the remaining 55 years of his life were much less adventurous. Using his part of the family inheritance, augmented by the savings from his Indian trip, he leased a landed estate in the province of Lublin and then, in 1810, he moved to Kraków, having married and become the wealthy owner of a house facing the Old Market Square.<sup>7</sup> He died in 1850, four years after the city had been annexed to Austria, which technically made him a citizen of "Kakania" and a worthy subject of the present volume. Dzwonkowski's solemn epitaph, placed in Kraków's main church of St. Mary's, attests to his patrician status and can still be seen today.

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6 William V was married to Wilhelmina, a sister of King Frederick William II of Prussia.

7 In 1809, following Napoleon's victory over Austria, Cracow was annexed to the Duchy of Warsaw; hence, Dzwonkowski could move there without having to cross a border. In 1815, at the Congress of Vienna, Cracow was declared a Free City, but after a failed uprising in 1846 it was annexed to Austria. The narrative of Dzwonkowski's life before 1788 and after 1793 was squeezed into less than five pages in Teodor's memoir (Dzwonkowski, *Pamiętniki czyli Pamiątka*, 52–53, 112–116), whereas its major part is devoted to his trip to the Netherlands and the Dutch East Indies.



In the sparse Polish literature devoted to Dzwonkowski, he is typically regarded as a VOC employee, yet this attribution confuses the actual character of his service.<sup>8</sup> According to its charter, the Dutch East India Company enjoyed commercial and juridical monopoly in the waters and territories extending to the east from the Cape of Good Hope and no other Dutch institution could interfere in this region, so it might seem natural to assume that Teodor served in the VOC. Yet in his memoir he clearly states that, having learned of two ships of the Prince of Orange that were prepared to depart for the East Indies with the mission of surveying the Company's settlements, he went to the recruitment office in the Prinsenhof, the seat of the Admiralty of Amsterdam, and enrolled as a soldier with the rank of corporal (59). The two ships were placed under the formal command of William V of Orange, hence they were not VOC ships. We also learn the names of these two ships, namely the *Zephir* and the *Havick*, with the additional information that the *Zephir*, on which Dzwonkowski served, was a frigate equipped with thirty-six 12-pounder guns (5961).

Archives provide ample information on the voyage in which he took part.<sup>9</sup> As a result of the Fourth Dutch-Anglo War of 1780–1784, which coincided with the War of American Independence, the VOC suffered great military as well as financial losses and was forced to turn to the States General for support. In 1786, it was decided that a state loan to the Company would be given only after an independent Military Commission visited the VOC overseas settlements and provided expertise on the viability of their retention, with a recommendation to fortify those deemed most important and abandon those less valuable. The mission was postponed due to the domestic conflict which was resolved only in 1787 by the Prussian military intervention. The context of the mission was strongly politicized: while the VOC board of directors, Gentlemen XVII (*Heren XVII*), jealously guarded their monopoly in the Indian Ocean and only reluctantly allowed the government to mingle in their affairs, William V, bolstered by his recent triumph in the domestic conflict, attempted to strengthen his direct influence over the Dutch overseas colonies.<sup>10</sup>

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8 Bronisław Nowak, a historian who has provided an annotated edition of Dzwonkowski's memoir, maintains that its author served on a Company ship (120), and a similar opinion can be found in some other Polish writings. Kowalski refers to Dzwonkowski as the Company's employee though, having read the memoir more carefully than his predecessors, in another place he correctly observes that the expedition, in which Dzwonkowski participated, "was not undertaken under the auspices of the Company;" Kowalski, "Poles in the Dutch Cape Colony," 68, 83.

9 I would like to thank Erik Odegård who first directed me to the Admiralty archive (*archieff van de Admiraliteitscolleges*) and to the Ver Huell family archives in the National Archives in The Hague.

10 Jeroen Bos, "Unknown Knowledge: The Travel Diary of Carl Friedrich Reimer, 1789–1792," in Fabio D'Angelo, ed., *The Scientific Dialogue Linking America, Asia and Europe between the 12th and the*

The Military Commission was headed by three men: Captain Jan Olphert Vaillant, Captain Christiaan Antonij Ver Huell, and Lieutenant-Colonel Johan Frederik Levinus Graevenstein, who together signed its numerous reports and left rich individual correspondence. Vaillant was simultaneously the captain of the *Zephir*,<sup>11</sup> while Ver Huell commanded the *Havick*.<sup>12</sup> During its survey in Asia, the Commission was assisted by Carl Friedrich Reimer, a surgeon and self-taught military engineer originally from Königsberg in Prussia, who had spent many years in Dutch Ceylon after having joined the VOC in 1767. Reimer enjoyed the patronage and confidence of the VOC governor-general in Batavia, Willem Arnold Alting, who appointed him his representative on the Commission. Fully conscious of his delicate role as a servant of two masters, Reimer tried his best to meet expectations: on the one hand, he served the Commissioners with his expertise and local knowledge; on the other hand, he kept a detailed diary and reported on the Commission's activities to his superior in Batavia.<sup>13</sup>

Thanks to the existence of rich documentation resulting from the activities of the Military Commission, including ship logbooks,<sup>14</sup> ship payrolls,<sup>15</sup> and the diaries and correspondence of the main participants, we can double-check the information contained in Dzwonkowski's memoir and often provide precise dating and additional context.

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*20th Century. Theories and Techniques Travelling in Space and Time* (Naples: Associazione culturale Viaggiatori, 2018), 82–100, esp. 83–84.

- 11 For his biography and selected correspondence, see S. Dörr, *De kundige kapitein: Brieven en bescheiden betreffende hebbende op Jan Olphert Vaillant kapitein-ter-zee (1751–1800)* [The skillful captain: Letters and documents relating to the sea captain Jan Olphert Vaillant (1751–1800)] (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 1988). In 1795, after the French invasion of the Netherlands, Vaillant chose emigration and enlisted in the Russian navy, commissioned to serve in Odessa, a Russian Black Sea port built on the territory recently conquered from the Ottoman Empire. He died in 1800 in the Baltic port of Riga and his career provides a telling illustration of the intensity of global connections in that period.
- 12 For his biography, see Ton Landheer with Anneke Landheer-Roelants, *Oranje of Napoleon? De wisselvallige levensloop van Christiaan Antonij Ver Huell 1760–1832* [Orange or Napoleon? The precarious life of Christiaan Antonij Ver Huell 1760–1832] (Utrecht: Matrijs, 2006).
- 13 Bos, “Unknown Knowledge,” 84–85. Extracts from Reimer's diary, copied into two notebooks covering the periods from June 1789 until November 1790, and from January 1791 until March 1792, are preserved in the archive of Willem Arnold Alting in the Dutch National Archives; see Nationaal Archief, Den Haag (hereafter cited as NL-HaNA), Collectie Alting, 1.10.03, inventarisnummer 87. Jeroen Bos is currently preparing an edition for the series published by the Linschoten-Vereeniging. I thank the author for sharing his knowledge on Reimer's person and views.
- 14 The logbook (*journaal*) of the *Havick*, covering the period from September 1788 until July 1792, has been preserved in the archive of its captain, Christiaan Antonij Ver Huell; see NL-HaNA, Collectie 004 Verhuell, 2.21.004.04, inv.nr. 3; the same archive also contains an excerpt from the logbook of the *Zephir*, apparently copied by Ver Huell in order to doublecheck an entry in his own logbook.
- 15 For the payrolls of the *Zephir* and the *Havick*, covering the years 1788–1793, see NL-HaNA, Admiraaliteitscolleges, 1.01.46, inv.nr. 2223–2224. The *Havick*'s payroll is published (without margin notes and details regarding salaries) in Landheer, *Oranje of Napoleon?*, 180–185.

In his memoir, Dzwonkowski recalls that he enlisted in the Dutch navy under the name Pregonius, having declared the name of his coat of arms—Przegonia—instead of his surname (74). Indeed, we find him in the *Zephir*'s payroll, recorded as “Theodor Pregonia van Dzevoniek,” with the rank of corporal (*corporaal*) and a monthly pay of 14 guldens.<sup>16</sup> In another place in his memoir he explains that, on seeing that the majority of the crew consisted of Germans, he decided to pass for a Hungarian, fearing the anti-Polish mockery and prejudice that he had earlier experienced in the Prussian army. He boasts that he was so successful in his mimesis that everybody on board took him for a Hungarian, even though he had never been to Hungary and had not spoken a word in the Hungarian language. Moreover, while in the company of his German shipmates, he ridiculed such Polish traits as the excess in dress, the obnoxious habit of head shaving, fanaticism, superstition, and the tyranny displayed towards subjects, so that nobody realized he was a Pole himself (60).

Although service on the *Zephir* and the *Havick* formally began on August 22, 1788,<sup>17</sup> they departed from the roadstead of Texel only on February 27, 1789. The initial days of the journey must have been harsh for Teodor, since we learn from his file in the Admiralty archive that on March 2, 1789 he was demoted to the rank of ordinary soldier and his pay was reduced to 11 guldens a month.<sup>18</sup> On the following day, the same fate befell his immediate superior, Sergeant Jan Henrik Fosmer.<sup>19</sup> The demotion of the sergeant and the corporal is mentioned in the correspondence of Captain Vaillant, who explained his decision by the fact that both men had been shameless enough to boast of skills that they did not possess.<sup>20</sup> Dzwonkowski does not mention this confusing fact in his memoir. On the contrary, he reports that the captain highly appraised his spirit during stormy weather and the manner in which he commanded his soldiers, which is perhaps the most blatant departure from the truth in the entire memoir (63). We may explain Teodor's demotion by his inadequate command of Dutch, perhaps seasickness, and the allergic reaction of seasoned Dutch officers to foreigners who boasted of skills they did not possess.<sup>21</sup> Apparently with the pas-

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16 NL-HaNA, Admiraliteitscolleges, 1.01.46, inv.nr. 2223, fol. 55. As a matter of fact, the Dzwonkowski family surname derives from the village of Dzwonek (here recorded as Dzevoniek), so Teodor did not hide his genuine surname but rather provided it in a Dutch form.

17 NL-HaNA, Admiraliteitscolleges, 1.01.46, inv.nr. 2223, fol 0v (page facing fol. 1).

18 *Ibidem*, fol. 55.

19 *Ibidem*, fol. 54. His demotion to an ordinary soldier with a monthly pay of 11 guldens is dated March 3, 1789.

20 See Dörr, *De kundige kapitein*, 171–172.

21 Georg Naporra, a newcomer from East Prussia who enlisted in the VOC in 1752, followed the ad-

sage of time both men regained the captain's confidence although this is not reflected in their formal dossier.<sup>22</sup>

After a short break in Santiago, the largest island of the archipelago of Cape Verde, they reached the Cape Colony at the end of May 1789 (61-67). For European sailors who had experienced the arduous trip along the coast of equatorial Africa, the Cape Colony seemed like a paradise and this impression is fairly reflected in Teodor's memoir. After a three-month sojourn in South Africa, the Military Commission departed in early October and continued its trip towards Ceylon. This leg of the journey was extremely harsh since many crew members suffered from scurvy and some people died. On December 2, 1789, this fate befell Jan Henrik Fosmer, the formerly demoted sergeant, whose duties were taken over by Dzwonkowski.<sup>23</sup> Later on, he also took over command of a small boat used for chasing pirates when its commander died during a night skirmish fought at the roadstead of Cochin (74-75).

Between December 1789 and September 1790, the Commission visited major VOC forts in Ceylon, including Colombo, Galle, and Trincomalee, as well as the few remaining VOC settlements in South India: Cochin and Kollam on the Malabar Coast, and Sadraspatnam and Pulicat on the Coromandel Coast. They also paid a visit to the British Fort St. George in Madras (Chennai), which provided the occasion for some mutual courtesy along with some spying (84).<sup>24</sup>

On September 26, 1790, the two ships left for Malacca, and after a short stay there between October 16 and 28, they reached Batavia on November 15, 1790.<sup>25</sup> Impressed with the size of its harbor and the strength of its fortifications, Dzwonkowski described Batavia as a vibrant and populous commercial

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vice of his older comrades and declared that he had gained sailing experience in the Baltic Sea, whereas in fact he had never worked on a ship; van Gelder, *Naporra's omweg*, 179. A corporal in the Dutch navy was responsible for the upkeep of muskets, pistols, and other small arms (van Gelder, *Naporra's omweg*, 210). Teodor, who had served in the Prussian army as a *Fahnenjunker* (112) was perhaps overqualified for the job, yet it does not mean that he could easily handle the task which required some technical expertise.

22 As the ship's payroll does not reveal any other sergeant or corporal who served on the *Zephir*, Fosmer and Dzwonkowski apparently continued to fulfill their tasks albeit with reduced salaries. Judging by the contents of Teodor's file in the payroll, his entire pay, including down payments that he received during the trip, amounted to 647.5 guildens. Given that his service lasted 57.3 months from September 17, 1788 to June 27, 1793, this equals 11.3 guildens a month; hence, his overall pay was not based on the initial signing amount but on the one calculated after his demotion.

23 The date of Fosmer's death is recorded in the ship's payroll; see NL-HaNA, Admiraliteitscolleges, 1.01.46, inv.nr. 2223, fol. 54. Dzwonkowski recalls that he replaced the sergeant, who had died of scurvy, yet he neither mentions the name of the deceased nor the fact that the latter had been demoted (74).

24 Also Bos, "Unknown Knowledge," 86-87, 97.

25 Landheer, *Oranje of Napoleon?*, 82, 84. Dzwonkowski dates the arrival at Batavia as October 10, yet this date is apparently erroneous (90).

center which attracted visitors from various nations. At the same time, he observed that its marshy lowlands and drinking water were very unhealthy, especially for Europeans, who rarely managed to survive longer than five years in the local climate (96–97).<sup>26</sup>

Having spent almost two months in the principal city of the Dutch East Indies, they left Batavia on January 13, 1791, provided with detailed maps of the archipelago, and after a short stop at Semarang in Central Java they reached Ambon on February 4, 1791 (90).<sup>27</sup> During the month that they spent on this island, famous for its cloves and nutmeg, our author got a big surprise. In his own words:

Here our traveler,<sup>28</sup> having gone ashore, met the fortress commander, who recounted that he originally came from Poland from the province of Poznań, his name was Ostrowski, and that, having participated still as a boy in the confederation led by Pułaski, he had found himself in Holland, where he had been taken onboard a ship, and because he had behaved well and stayed healthy, he had gradually earned his rank and trust, so that by that time he was the commander not only of the fortress but of the entire island. He was married to an Indian woman and had Mulatto children, and he kept asking about Poland and the Poles as if he had never been there, for he did not even remember his parents (91).

Kazimierz Pułaski (1745–1779) was one of the leaders of the so-called Bar Confederation (1768–1772), which was directed against the Russian hegemony in Poland-Lithuania as well as the Russian protégé, King Stanislaus August Poniatowski. Its defeat by Russian troops was followed by the first partition of Poland in 1772. Pułaski later fought in the War of American Independence and was killed during the siege of Savannah.

The archive of Captain Ver Huell, the commander of the *Havick*, contains a document dated February 26, 1791 which refers to Frederik Ostrowsky as the captain of the local militia with a handsome pay of 80 guldens a month. Ostrowski's signature (*Fr. Ostrowsky*) figures on three documents issued by the main fort of the island, Kasteel Nieuw Victoria, on the occasion of the visit of the Military

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26 In the memoir, the description of Batavia is entered after the author recounts his trip to the Moluccas, apparently because the expedition's longest stay in the city preceded its return journey to Europe.

27 The dates recorded by Dzwonkowski have been corrected on the basis of Reimer's diary; see NL-HaNA, Collectie Alting, 1.10.03, inv.nr. 87, "Extract uit het Dagverhaal, gehouden door den Ingenieur C. F. Reimer, [Jan. 1791-Maart 1792]," 3–4.

28 In his memoir, Dzwonkowski constantly refers to himself in the third person.

Commission, including the regulations for service in the local militia, consisting of 16 articles.<sup>29</sup> To be sure, Ostrowski was not the highest Dutch official on the island, yet given the fact that since the mid-eighteenth century Ambon governors no longer resided in Kasteel Nieuw Victoria, having chosen a more pleasant residence in the valley of Batoe Gadjah,<sup>30</sup> in addition to often travelling to Batavia, the security of the island lay in the hands of the Polish captain. Alas, Ostrowski's military leadership did not find appreciation in the eyes of the British who conquered Ambon from the Dutch five years later, in February 1796. Captain Walter Caulfield Lennon, the secretary of the British expedition headed by Admiral Peter Rainier, recorded in his journal, submitted to the Directors of the British East India Company, that "the desertion among the Dutch native troops, many of whom carried away their arms, added much to this disorder, and in the first instances of it was not guarded against with sufficient attention by the Dutch commandant, captain Ostrowski."<sup>31</sup> After the Dutch surrender in Ambon, the British resolved to take into their service and pay "the company of the Wirtemberg Corps here, commanded by captain Gaup, consisting of 101 men, very well disciplined and behaved [...] being nearly all Germans, Poles and Prussians [sic]."<sup>32</sup> However, the conquerors were much less impressed by the local militiamen, as we further read in Lennon's journal under the date of February 29, 1796: "The Admiral reviewed the national troops today under captain Ostrowski. They were most of them half-cast, and unfit to be taken into our service, and as no dependence could be placed on them the Admiral ordered them to be discharged."<sup>33</sup> Apparently the laxity in observing racial distinctions, displayed by the Dutch in their recruitment of local militiamen and also visible in Ostrowski's personal conduct, was something the British observer found hard to stomach. Curiously, Lennon's dismissive opinion of the multicultural character of the Dutch colonial troops resurfaces in the writings of Dutch twentieth-century historian Hermanus J. de Graaf, who in a passage based on the same British report, sarcastically comments on the surname of the "Dutch" commander.<sup>34</sup>

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29 NL-HaNA, Collectie 004 Verhuell, 2.21.004.04, inv.nr. 35: Memories, berichten en staten, betrekking hebbend op het defensiewezen van Ambon (pages not numbered).

30 Hermanus J. de Graaf, *De geschiedenis van Ambon en de Zuid-Molukken* (Franeker: T. Wever, 1977), 192.

31 Jan Ernst Heeres, ed., "Eene engelsche lezing omtrent de verovering van Banda en Ambon in 1796 en omtrent den toestand dier eilandengroepen op het eind der achttiende eeuw," *Bijdragen tot de taal-, land- en volkenkunde van Nederlandsch-Indië* 60 (1908): 249-365, esp. 284.

32 Heeres, ed., "Eene engelsche lezing," 285-86.

33 Heeres, ed., "Eene engelsche lezing," 286.

34 De Graaf, *De geschiedenis van Ambon*, 198.

Having departed from Ambon, the Military Commission visited the Banda Islands and the island of Ternate, and then, in July 1791, they arrived at Macassar on the island of Celebes (Sulawesi).<sup>35</sup> They closed the loop in August 1791, having arrived at Rembang in Java, and from there moved westward along the coast, making calls on Semarang and Tagal (Tegal) in September and October, respectively.<sup>36</sup> From Dutch sources, we learn that between October 1791 and January 1792 the Commission sailed again to Malacca and on this occasion visited the island of Riouw (today Bintan) in the Strait of Malacca.<sup>37</sup> Dzwonkowski does not record this trip separately, but he describes both Malacca and Riouw earlier in his memoir (85-86), so either he confused the chronology when he wrote down his recollections after many years, or he decided to render his description more compact, without providing the reader with too many details as to when a given place was visited. Between January and May 1792, preparations for the return journey began, so the *Zephir* and the *Havick* were taken to Onrust Island just off the coast near Batavia, in order to be careened. Teodor did not hide his admiration for the strength and skills of the Chinese workers, remarking that their work was worth twice that of Europeans (97-98).

The Commission members used this time for visiting various places in Java situated along the coast as well as deeper inland. Dzwonkowski proudly recalled that by that time he had been admitted to the company of commissioners and engineers as they ventured together to all these places (98). The fact that he had received a high school education in Poland and spoke fluent German, and probably some French and Latin as well, certainly facilitated

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35 The chronology is based on Ver Huell's logbook (NL-HaNA, Collectie 004 Verhuell, 2.21.004.04, inv. nr. 3) and Reimer's diary (NL-HaNA, Collectie Alting, 1.10.03, inv. nr. 87, "Extract uit het Dagverhaal, [Jan. 1791-Maart 1792]," 6-33). Dzwonkowski correctly narrates the order of the visited islands, but his dating is incorrect. For instance, he dates the sojourn in Ambon from late November 1790 until early January 1791, and the departure from Ternate on April 10, 1791, whereas in fact the two ships departed from Ternate on June 21, 1791.

36 Dzwonkowski mentions that while en route from Macassar to Java they also visited Banjarmasin (in his wording: *Beniamassar*), the only VOC fort in Borneo (95). Indeed, in a letter to Joan Cornelis van der Hoop, sent from Semarang on January 21, 1791, Captain Vaillant reported that, time permitting, he planned to visit Banjarmasin along with Macassar on his return route from the Moluccas to Java; see Dörr, *De kundige kapitein*, 208. However, both Ver Huell and Reimer recorded that the trip from Sulawesi to Java took only five days without any stopovers (NL-HaNA, Collectie 004 Verhuell, 2.21.004.04, inv. nr. 3; NL-HaNA, Collectie Alting, 1.10.03, inv. nr. 87, "Extract uit het Dagverhaal, [Jan. 1791-Maart 1792]," 59). The question whether Dzwonkowski intentionally misinformed his readers by boasting to have visited one more island, or perhaps he assumed that Borneo was visited by other Commission members separately appointed for this task, remains unresolved.

37 See Ver Huell's logbook (NL-HaNA, Collectie 004 Verhuell, 2.21.004.04, inv. nr. 3) and Reimer's diary (NL-HaNA, Collectie Alting, 1.10.03, inv. nr. 87, "Extract uit het Dagverhaal, [Jan. 1791-Maart 1792]," 90-104).

his social advancement, which was further accelerated by the high mortality among the Europeans in Asia. To quote Teodor's own observation: "given the short duration of life [in the Dutch East Indies], promotion must be frequent and fast" (97). One ought to remember that Teodor entered Dutch service as a corporal and not an ordinary soldier; hence, it is likely that with the passage of time the officers and engineers onboard forgot his initial mishap and began to treat him on an equal footing, even though he was not officially promoted.

During a visit to Bantam in Western Java, Teodor met another Polish officer in VOC service. This was Walenty August Dunin, who explained that having become impatient with the slow pace of promotions in the Polish army, he had resigned and gone to Holland during the *Patriottentijd*. After its conclusion, he had enlisted in the VOC with the rank of sergeant and attained officer's rank after four years of service (99). Indeed, in the VOC archival records we find Valentien August Dunin van Warschouw (i.e., Warsaw), who boarded a ship named *Meerwijk* in Amsterdam, in 1788. Due to health problems, he had to interrupt his journey in the Cape Colony and continued his trip on another ship named *Nederlands Welvaren*. The only inconsistency with Dzwonkowski's account is that Dunin was initially registered as a corporal and not a sergeant, yet subsequent entries confirm that he remained in VOC service in the East Indies, first in Bantam and then in Batavia, with an officer's pay of 40 guildens a month.<sup>38</sup>

On May 31, 1792, the Military Commission began its return trip, heading towards South Africa through the Sunda Strait, with a short stop at Port Louis on Mauritius, which then belonged to France. Their layover in the Cape Colony was extended from August 1792 until February 1793, because of the news from Europe about the war against Revolutionary France, in which the Dutch Republic found itself allied with Britain. The fear of French corsairs caused the Dutch captains returning from Asia to form a large convoy under the command of Captain Vailant. After a short stopover at the British island of Saint Helena, the Dutch fleet set out for Europe, choosing a route around the British Isles for fear of a French ambush in the English Channel. The detour through the North Atlantic, where all the crew members suffered from extreme cold, gave Dzwonkowski an opportunity to share his knowledge of the Dutch whaling industry with his readers.

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38 For the main entry concerning Dunin's enlistment and his further career in the VOC, see NL-HaNA, Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC), 1.04.02, inv.nr. 6779: *Meerwijk*: Grootboek en journaal, 1788-1789, fol. 225; accessible online: [https://www.nationaalarchief.nl/onderzoeken/archief/1.04.02/invnr/6779/file/NL-HaNA\\_1.04.02\\_6779\\_0256](https://www.nationaalarchief.nl/onderzoeken/archief/1.04.02/invnr/6779/file/NL-HaNA_1.04.02_6779_0256); on his trip from the Cape Colony to Batavia on the *Nederlands Welvaren*, see NL-HaNA, VOC, 1.04.02, inv.nr. 6781: *Nederlands Welvaren*: Grootboek en journaal, 1788-1789, fol. 367; accessible online: [https://www.nationaalarchief.nl/onderzoeken/archief/1.04.02/invnr/6781/file/NL-HaNA\\_1.04.02\\_6781\\_0396](https://www.nationaalarchief.nl/onderzoeken/archief/1.04.02/invnr/6781/file/NL-HaNA_1.04.02_6781_0396).



Finally, on June 22, 1793 the *Zephir* reached the roadstead of Texel. The *Havick* was less lucky since it had broken its mast in a storm and returned only a day later, towed by five smaller boats. If we are to believe Teodor, only 48 men out of the original 200 who had departed on the *Zephir* in 1789 returned home on the same ship, while the rest of the crew who served on the *Zephir* on its return consisted of sailors and soldiers recruited along the way (100–109).<sup>39</sup> Regarding the *Havick*, a detailed study based on the VOC records reveals that out of 94 men who had left Holland in 1789, 44 returned home on the same ship, 31 had died, and the remaining 19 either deserted or were formally discharged, having settled in the Dutch colonies or returned to Europe on other ships.<sup>40</sup>

As for Teodor, he collected the overdue balance of his salary and resolved to return to Poland. Having boarded a ship to Hamburg, he then traveled overland to Lübeck and found a ship to Danzig, where he rented a horse cart with a driver and arrived in Warsaw (109–112).

### **Ethnic Groups, Nations, Races, and Religions in Dzwonkowski's Memoir**

When judging the scholarly value of Dzwonkowski's memoir for the present-day historian, one must admit that it cannot offer us much original information on the geography, flora and fauna of the lands he visited and on the life and culture of their inhabitants. Dzwonkowski spent relatively little time in the places he visited, did not speak the local languages, and lacked a formal education above the secondary level. Moreover, his position did not allow him independent travel. However, his memoir, written from an outsider's perspective, gives us a fascinating insight into the life and social hierarchies on a Dutch ship and in the Dutch Asian colonies. Even though he confused the chronology at times, passed over with silence some unpleasant facts (like his demotion), and boasted of unmade journeys (to Borneo, for example), his account is also a welcome contribution to our knowledge of a major event in Dutch colonial history: the expedition of the Military Commission, undertaken in the last days of the VOC when the Company struggled against European competitors, the British and the French, while facing the prospects of diminishing commercial profits.

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39 On the return trip from Batavia to Texel, see also Landheer, *Oranje of Napoleon?*, 85, 93–99; Dörr, *De kundige kapitein*, 219–40.

40 Landheer, *Oranje of Napoleon?* 99, 186–89.

Perhaps the most interesting are Teodor's accounts of individuals he encountered and his collective descriptions of ethnic groups and nations, European as well as non-European, which are at times highly perceptive and surprisingly unbiased. Although in his memoir he also mentions such creatures as jellyfish in the North Sea, elephants in Ceylon, colorful tropical birds on the Malay Peninsula, and sea turtles in the Moluccas, he informs his readers from the outset that "it is better to leave such descriptions to the naturalists" (55). It is humans who interest him most of all.

Let us start with the Dutch. For Dzwonkowski, Amsterdam was still the commercial capital of the world. He praises its cleanliness, the system of freshwater supply, the lack of beggars on the streets, and the majesty of the architecture, including the famous Town Hall (56-57). He even includes in his memoir an enthusiastic declaration that "he regarded it as an honor to serve with his military skills a nation whose might, attained through commerce, was well known to the entire world" (59). He also boasts of the friendly relations he maintained in Amsterdam with the family of his Dutch landlord and the fact that the Dutch captain of the ship that brought him from Königsberg reportedly offered him to marry one of his daughters (56, 109-110).

Yet he also notices a darker side of Dutch splendor, when he observes that "many kings and emperors in the East and the West Indies depend on the will [of the Dutch,] who provide them with a kind of honorary escort, consisting of Europeans, and thus hold them in their hand and in chains" (59). At another place, in his description of Ceylon, he observes that the king of Kandy was only waiting for the moment to rid himself of his Dutch patrons, yet he was militarily too weak to openly declare war (70). It is curious whether Dzwonkowski noticed the ironic resemblance to the political situation of his native Poland, whose king was similarly helpless in the face of his Russian patrons and forced to consent to the rising control over his kingdom by powerful neighbors. The fact that Teodor participated in the Polish uprising of 1794 may suggest that this was indeed the case. On his visit to the Banda archipelago, consisting of tiny volcanic islands, he sympathized with the VOC prisoners, condemned to lifetime of work in a local factory of hawsers and ropes. He accused the Dutch of deliberately keeping the inhabitants of the neighboring Seram (Ceram) Island in a state of savagery, so that prisoners held on the Banda Islands would abandon any hope of escape for fear of a terrible death at the hands of the natives.

The Dutch government [...] does not care about the acts of cruelty [committed by the Seramese] nor does it intend to civilize them. On the contrary,

for the sake of the benefits that the clever ones can always draw from [contact with] the stupid ones, it has resolved to keep them in their fanaticism as long as possible (91-93).

The VOC's monopolistic policy of destroying any nutmeg trees grown outside the Company's control likewise found little sympathy in the eyes of the Polish traveler. As he sarcastically observed: "such is the merchants' policy: to cut down, burn, or drown rather than allow somebody else to use" (95).

Dzwonkowski's attitude towards Germans was equally complex. Given the fact that he hid his Polish identity fearing mockery from the other—mostly German—crew members, one should expect that he had little sympathy for Germans. Yet this was not the case. Having arrived in the Cape Colony, he did not meet any Poles, yet he was warmly received by local Germans from Danzig and Prussia, who treated him as their countryman. In his memoir written many years later, he recalled his sojourn in South Africa with great nostalgia and admitted that he wished to settle there but was not allowed by his superiors. When he visited the Cape on his way back to Europe, he was again warmly received by his new friends and evidently felt at home in their milieu<sup>41</sup> (67-72, 101-102).

Teodor's fluency in the German language also allowed him to observe German migrants flocking to Amsterdam and make insightful remarks on the mechanisms ruling within the German diaspora, including instances of human trafficking. He described how inexperienced newcomers from rural Germany were often met on the street by their countrymen who invited them to their places, provided them with free room and board, and offered them all kinds of help, initially demanding nothing in return. Only later would the naïve newcomer learn of the debt he now owed his benefactor and would find himself on a ship heading for India, sold like a slave to the VOC or its sibling, the Dutch West India Company (WIC) (58).

Dzwonkowski also met Polish-Lithuanian Jews<sup>42</sup> in South India and Ceylon. His description of these encounters reveals curiosity, some prejudice, but also genuine excitement about meeting his countrymen so far from home. While

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41 The Baltic province of Royal Prussia was inhabited by Germans, Kashubians, and Poles. Until 1772, it belonged to Poland while its main city of Danzig (Gdańsk) remained under the suzerainty of the Polish king until 1793. Its inhabitants developed a strong local identity which would be subsumed by conflicting German and Polish nationalisms only later on. Roelof van Gelder estimates that approximately 1600 young men from Danzig enlisted in the VOC in the years 1756-1794 alone; van Gelder, *Naporra's omweg*, 503-4 (note 37).

42 On Polish-Jewish relations in the eighteenth century, cf. Jacob Goldberg, "Poles and Jews in the 17th and 18th Centuries: Rejection or Acceptance," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 22 (1974): 248-82.

staying at Cochin, he observed that “there are many Polish Jews [here] who, having incurred debts or committed a crime in their country, have arrived here with caravans and, having registered themselves as Christians with the local authorities, have become wealthy merchants by now; some of them are even ship owners and carry on trading activity, while not forgetting to observe the Sabbath” (76). In Ceylon, Dzwonkowski learned that a mile from Galle there was a cinnamon plantation owned by a Pole, so he paid the locals to be carried there in a litter and found out that the owner was the son of a Polish Jew. The host told Teodor that his late father had originally come from Tykocin.<sup>43</sup> Fearing a court trial, he had escaped to the Ottoman Empire where he joined a group of merchants heading for Malabar. Having earned a substantial amount of money through commercial activity, the father bought the aforementioned plantation under a Polish name. He had slaves, slave women, and a wife who had given birth to the present owner. Dzwonkowski observed that his host did not resemble either a European or a Jew, since having a black-skinned mother he was born brown-skinned; however he was circumcised, and his father had ordered him to observe that his own children be circumcised as well (81).

Asians also figure in the pages of Dzwonkowski’s memoir. While already onboard the *Zephir*, he met two Malay passengers who were returning from Holland to the East Indies, yet they died from extreme cold and frost during the first winter, even before the ship departed from Texel (60–61). He later encountered Malays in Malacca and described them as decent, loyal, and calm, adding that their language was a universal vernacular for the entire East Indies. He also noticed that they abstained from eating pork and practiced circumcision similarly to the Muslims, although he was unsure whether their religion was identical with Islam and he distinguished them from the Moors, whom he described as the real Muslims, who wore turbans and beards and engaged in trade (88–89). He devoted special attention to the colorful scarfs made of local fabric with which the natives covered their heads, and to the custom of betel-quid chewing (86). Regarding the Javanese, he had no doubts that they were Muslims and he praised their diligence in agriculture, ship-building, and other industries (98). Other groups to whom he devoted attention were the Bugis, described as prone to killing but also skilled in crafts (89, 95), and the inhabitants of the islands of Seram and Buton, depicted as ferocious headhunters (92–94). This description apparently reflected the fear of

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43 The town of Tykocin was inhabited by a vibrant Jewish community and boasted a monumental baroque synagogue constructed in 1642.

his Dutch co-travelers who must have told him many frightful stories. This was especially so with the Bugis, who at that time had not only checked Dutch expansion in Celebes, but had also ventured to the coasts of the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra, and were regarded by the Dutch with great circumspection.

Teodor was visibly fascinated with the Chinese, whom he encountered in great numbers in the Dutch East Indies. He described them not only as skilled workers and tradesmen, but also as the users of a very difficult language and script. In his description of their customs and beliefs, correct observations are mixed with superstitions, so it is obvious that much of his information was based on hearsay (87–88).

Given that Dzwonkowski spent some ten months in the Cape Colony, it is no wonder that he also wrote on the Hottentots (Khoikhoi), embarking upon a pornographic discourse on Hottentot female genitalia, which was repeated by successive European travelers at the time.<sup>44</sup> However, in contrast to other travelers who accused the Khoikhoi of idleness and denied them any social organization (44), Teodor describes them as fishermen and sheep breeders in addition to being indefatigable and efficient trackers who hunted for deserters from the VOC ships, even in the most remote deserts, and delivered them to the Dutch colonial authorities, treating this activity as a token of friendship (70).

Perhaps the most striking phenomenon in Dzwonkowski's memoir is his authentic curiosity and the relatively unbiased perspective which this Catholic Polish nobleman displayed in his description of Germans, Jews, Malays, the Chinese, and even the Khoikhoi and the Bugis. He did not hide that the main motive of his enlistment in the VOC was economic profit, yet he also wanted to see the world. To quote his own words, he wished "to see a lot, to lose nothing, on the contrary, to return to his fatherland with a gain" (59). He succeeded in both these fields and his future career proves that the money saved in the East Indies helped him to secure a better life when back in Europe.

It could be that the ethno-confessional inclusiveness and the liberal attitude towards interracial marriages, which are apparent in Teodor's narrative, had roots in his personal character or in the education that he had obtained in his school years. The Piarist schools that he attended in Łomża and Warsaw introduced a curriculum that closely followed the Enlightenment ideals and focused on natural sciences, law, mathematics, economics, and modern languages, so it is tempting to see its influence on his *Weltanschauung*. Or perhaps

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44 Cf. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation*, second edition (London: Routledge, 2008), 51, 248.

it was an effect of homesickness that allowed him to see countrymen in individuals whom he would rather not have regarded as such if he had stayed home?

One question that is hard to answer is why he resolved to pass for a Hungarian upon boarding the *Zephir*. At first sight, it may appear that the Hungarians, with their Orientalized fashion and noble culture, played a similar role to the Poles in Western European collective imagery, so prejudice against the Poles could apply equally well to the Hungarians.<sup>45</sup> He also could not count on his shipmates' ignorance of Hungarians, because Hungarians serving in the Dutch fleet and in the Dutch East Indies were not unheard of.<sup>46</sup> In 1779, there even appeared a booklet narrating the adventures of András Jelky (1738–1783), a Hungarian soldier in VOC service who experienced shipwreck and slavery, and had barely escaped death in the tropics at the hands of native headhunters. By 1784, the book had seen four German editions in Vienna, Prague, Buda, and Pressburg (today Bratislava), and in 1791, a Hungarian version was published too.<sup>47</sup> One can possibly explain Teodor's decision by his conviction that, in the Dutch and German Protestant popular opinion, Poles were strongly linked with the Catholic Church and hence accused of fanaticism and bigotry, whereas Hungarians were less commonly associated with Catholicism. Yet, as a matter of fact, Catholics also prevailed among Hungarians, although Protestants might have been overrepresented among the Hungarian migrants to the Dutch Republic.

Perhaps the most visible difference between eighteenth-century Hungarians and Poles was the situation in their respective states. After the compromise of 1741, Hungarian nobles and ambitious commoners could count on a successful career in the army and bureaucracy of the Habsburg Empire, whereas their Polish peers, even if decently educated in modern schools, could not expect a career at home in the army and state bureaucracy, because these institutions were almost nonexistent. It is symbolic that András Jelky, having returned home from his exotic travels, was reportedly received by Empress Maria Theresa, whereas Dzwonkowski joined an insurrection directed not only against

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45 Cf. Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe. The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 5, 41, 160–1, 186, 302.

46 See Pusztai and Teszelszky, "In de dienst van de VOC." The authors identified 118 men originating from Hungary who served in the VOC in the eighteenth century.

47 Gábor Pusztai, "Hongaren in de Nederlandse koloniën: In plaats van een inleiding" [Hungarians in the Dutch colonies: in place of an introduction], *Acta Neerlandica. Bijdragen tot de Neerlandistiek Debrecen* 12 (2016): 5–23. Jelky, who has been labeled "the Hungarian Robinson," gained even more popularity in 1872, when Lajos Hevesi made him the hero of his popular novel *Jelky András kalandjai* [The adventures of András Jelky], which has been translated into numerous languages, including a Polish translation published in 1964.

the Russian hegemony in Poland but also partly against the Polish king, whom many insurgents regarded as a Russian puppet. Teodor Dzwonkowski, Wincenty Dunin, and Fryderyk Ostrowski, whom we have encountered on the pages of the present chapter while serving the Dutch colonial empire in Asia, were not entirely dissimilar from their famous contemporaries, Kazimierz Pułaski and Tadeusz Kościuszko, who had left Poland in search of work and ended up as heroes of the American Revolution. In the nineteenth century, Poles would assist the French colonialists in their struggles in Santo Domingo and Algeria, in addition to supporting Ottoman and Peruvian statesmen in their efforts to counter northern imperialism by modernizing their armies and constructing railways. Many Poles became terrorists, a common fate of emigrants from failed states, so it is perhaps not a complete surprise that both Tsar Alexander II of Russia and President William McKinley of the United States were killed by Polish terrorists. Lastly, many of them peacefully dissolved into the colonial world, in which Poles wanted to pass for Hungarians and Jews for Poles, often having dark skin as a result of marriages with local women.

### **A fragment from Dzwonkowski's memoirs concerning Malacca, Riouw, and the Malays, the Chinese, the Moors, and the Bugis**

Translated by Dariusz Kołodziejczyk. From: Teodor Anzelm Dzwonkowski, *Pamiętniki czyli Pamiętka po ojcu dla Józefy z Dzwonkowskich Komornickiej*, ed. Stanisław and Tomasz Komornicy (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1985), 85–89.

Instytut Malacca and its neighboring places of Eüta and Pieso,<sup>48</sup> known for the excavation of the best quality tin, once belonged to the Portuguese, hence in its suburbs there still stands a [Catholic] church, where the faithful were massacred during service [at the time of the conquest].<sup>49</sup> The same is true for Slangenord,<sup>50</sup> known for a cane that grows with thick and long stems which lay and creep along the ground due to their length, causing a whistling sound when the wind blows. When these [stems] are cut and peeled, they are white, so if one wishes to color them, one lubricates them with

48 Neither place name can be identified.

49 In 1641, Malacca was captured from the Portuguese by the allied forces of the Dutch VOC and the Sultanate of Johor. It remained in Dutch hands until 1825.

50 Apparently a reference to the Sultanate of Selangor or to its capital Kuala Selangor, situated at the estuary of the Selangor River. The expression “likewise Selangor” [the above text states “Likewise Szlangenord”] (*nie mniej Szlangenord*) [see note] seems to suggest that Selangor had also belonged to the Portuguese, yet in fact, Portuguese control had not reached far beyond the territory of Malacca.

oil and dries them under the sun, whereupon they adopt the color of the oil. While cutting them, one must pay great attention to the nodes, because when one cuts them in two one spoils them.<sup>51</sup>

At this place, there are many green birds with sapphire spots and others of the size of a swallow, which can easily be taught to sing and be tamed; there are also parrots of different sizes and colors.

In Rigio,<sup>52</sup> the soil is rich in red dye<sup>53</sup> which is excavated in great amounts. There are also other places [of interest] that have earlier served the Buginese<sup>54</sup> [as a refuge]: they could safely build boats here and set out to plunder, and they could hide along with their spoils on their way back.

The natives of this land are Malays, [whose skin is] yellow-blackish. They have flat faces and noses, big black eyes, and thick hair, almost like horse hair. Their religion is similar to that of the Mohammedans, because they do not eat pork and they practice circumcision; they do not let anyone from another religion to enter their church, and if it happens, they immediately strangle such [an intruder] in the church; and if he is stronger than them, they will immediately burn the church after he leaves. In private life they are peaceful, loyal, and modest. Their language is almost ubiquitous in the entire East Indies as one can communicate in Malay with all other nations. Men and women wear headscarves of quaint color, made of local fabric. All Indians have the habit of oiling their hair, even their entire body, with various oils, most commonly copra [oil], in order to keep their hair neat, but also to render their skin shiny as it reflects the sunshine. No Indian uses snuff, but almost all smoke and chew tobacco<sup>55</sup> and for that reason they keep, depending on their means, silver or golden boxes with compartments, [holding] tobacco in one compartment, lime in the second, pine nut<sup>56</sup> in the third, and broad green leaves, resembling dogs' tongues, in the fourth. From this they first take a leaf, then a bit of lime with a tweezers, a knop of pine nut which resembles nutmeg, cut into thin slices, finally, a bit of tobacco, and having wrapped it all together in the leaf they put it into their mouth. A few minutes later they spit saliva that is completely red, because the color of pine nut<sup>57</sup>

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51 The description above apparently refers to a climbing rattan palm that was common around Malacca and known as *Calamus rotang*, that is, common rattan or Malacca cane. Its flexible woody stem was used for making furniture and wickerwork.

52 Riouw, today Bintan, an island situated in the Strait of Malacca.

53 Perhaps red ochre.

54 In the original text *Bokunezy*, i.e., the Bugis.

55 Actually, the description below is devoted to the custom of chewing betel-quid with an addition of tobacco.

56 The term *pina nuta* that is used by Dzwonkowski in fact refers to the areca nut that was a common ingredient in the chewing substance (*paan*).

57 Cf. above.



is scarlet. From this custom of chewing tobacco everyone has black teeth, however they maintain strict cleanliness all the time, cleaning their teeth and rinsing their mouth before each meal or drink, and repeating the same after meals and drinks; they also wash and wipe all body parts that are susceptible to moisture after each [toilet] walk or natural [bowel] emptying. One does not encounter here any cripples, humpbacked, lame, or people with twisted spines. All [locals] are short but well-proportioned, as if they had the same father and the same mother; they differ only in regard to their nationality and the climate [in which they live].

Among the local inhabitants and in almost the entire Indies, there are many trading Chinese. Every year, they emigrate in the thousands from China, because they cannot find [enough] food there, and they settle in various places. They are yellowish-skinned, with flat faces and noses, and with small black eyes; they shave the hair on their head but they leave a braid on its top. They rarely have a mustache or a beard, only odd thick hair can be seen. They wear hats made of straw or leaves in the form of canopies, they hold fans in their hands, and they wear long multicolor shirts and similarly long trousers, just like some Indians do in larger towns, [especially those] who have frequent contacts with the Europeans. And on their feet they wear sandals made of leather or wood. They do not clip their fingernails in spite of the fact that there is a special tax on nails. It is very difficult to learn their language, for every letter means another word, so they need as many letters as [they have] words, but if someone were to learn to write and read their letters, they would call him a sage. In general, they learn only those letters that they need in their craft or trade. At the time when Portugal possessed the entire East Indies and aimed to convert everyone to its own faith, in the hope of implanting the reign of Christ—or rather their own reign—in China as well, it sent missionaries to this land, having agreed on this issue with the Pope. [These missionaries] first needed to learn the language in order to make themselves understood, yet—contrary to the Spaniards in America—they were not successful. The Chinese became alert and treated them as spies, so having attained nothing, they had to return to Italy, with the only gain that they had learned to lie not only with women.

The Chinese write from top to bottom, not with a pen but with a brush, each letter, or rather each word, separately. They are strong but timid. They believe in two supreme beings, the Good one and the Evil one, but they do not pray on the assumption that the first one would not do them any harm because it is nothing but goodness. And lest the other one cause them any harm, apart from churches everyone keeps an altar in his dwelling, with a picture displaying the emperor sitting on a chair and a figure of European posture [physiognomy?] standing behind and holding the former's shoulder, staring ominously and intensively with its open eyes directly at the people, as if whispering something evil in the emperor's ear and instilling anger into his mind. In front of

this picture, each day at noon they light some candles and offer some food, depending on their means, so that any passerby that happens to be around at that time may eat and drink without any payment. On the contrary, the Chinese host would kindly thank him for having consumed his offering and wish him good health. However, if a passerby were so insolent that, not satisfied with the offered food and drink, he secretly took along more with him and left, the Chinese host, upon noticing the theft, would send an experienced killer after him, who would trace and follow him as long as he could kill him without any witness. The Chinese are used to eating all animals and creatures; they even eat reptiles, having removed the venom. Their women can seldom be seen [outdoors] for they are busy with housework; moreover, they cannot walk much, because since their birth they bind their feet in order to make them small, and as a result their toes are crooked. Most of them do not clip their fingernails, instead they taper their tips and paint them red.

One also encounters here Moors, thus called because they are true Mohammedans who engage in trade everywhere; they walk around naked like the Indians, but they wear turbans and beards.

There are also Buginese here, although not tolerated everywhere. They are coppery brown-skinned, with shapely faces and short hair. Their religion is unknown yet it allows for all kinds of murder, to which they are inherently predisposed and fast. One can see murder among them everyday. For that reason, everyone carries on his belt a kris,<sup>58</sup> which is a dagger with a length of 12 to 18 inches, which they sand and saturate with poison. With such a weapon they wound and kill each other at the slightest quarrel and the more one kills, the more one is respected and his kris is worshipped almost like a holy relic. They mostly eat meat of the horses that are raised in the entire Indies, which are very small but fast and fat. Besides, they are curious and easily learn crafts. There is a kind of linen of their own invention, which is made of bast fibre in various colors and types, and is very strong, which they use to cover their back and waist, having cut a piece 3 elbows long.

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58 Like the Polish term *kryś* that is used by Dzwonkowski, the English term kris is a loanword from the Malay *keris*.



# CZECH ARMY DOCTOR IN SUMATRA

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## Native Soil, Miasmatic Mud, Russian Hallucinations, All the Empires

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*Jan Mrázek*



### False Alarm and Hallucination as Method: Patriotism, Running

[A] great motley: Black, Javanese, and European soldiers, among them the sick in gowns and slippers, some bareheaded, others barefoot—all ran hither, wearing whatever they had on [at the time of the false alarm], only making sure to carry a weapon. About myself I can say that godlike Achilles in his armor looked much more grandiose than me, as I was running in my underpants. Forgive me that this letter, too, I am writing in the same underpants! I wore slippers, pink in color, on my feet, with my coat over the shoulder. I ran without a cap, with naked sabre and loaded revolver... I ran with the others...; finally, we reached [the hospital], each of us [doctors] running into the halls to our patients, but we did not find them there, because they all ran away, they ran in all directions... (74)<sup>1</sup>

Passages such as this, in his letters from Sumatra, summarize the life and thought of Dr. Pavel Durdík (1843–1903). Durdík grew up in Hradec Králové, a provincial town in eastern Bohemia with a large German-speaking population, but

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1 Throughout this paper, parenthesized page numbers in the body of the text refer to Pavel Durdík, *Pět let na Sumatře: Vypravování vojenského lékaře* [Five years in Sumatra: Accounts of an army doctor] (Prague: Bačkovský, 1893), a compilation of texts, many previously published; it includes many of his letters from Aceh (the originals are in the archive of Náprstek Museum; some were published in newspapers).

Selections from Durdík's early letters to his brother Josef were published in instalments in the newspaper *Samostatnost* in 1913. More letters are in the archive of the Museum of Literature in Prague (further: MoL). All cited letters are by Pavel Durdík.

I would like to thank Michal Lubina, Hendrik Maier, and Rudolf Mrázek for their helpful comments; and Michala Adnyani for her help with archival research.

also a center of the Czech “national rebirth.” In letters from his teenage years, he writes about his “large black *Slavic* hat” and moments of Czecho-Slavic patriotic effervescence among students and peasants, such as when he attended a Czech play, during which the audience broke into singing “*Hej Slované!*” and “*Kde domov můj.*” (“*Hej Slované!*” [“Hey, Slavs!”] celebrates “our Slavic language” and “spirit”; it was the anthem of the Pan-Slavic movement and different patriotic Slavic organizations and countries. “*Kde domov můj*” [Where is my home?] was a Czech patriotic song and later the national anthem.) Durdík’s earliest letters also tell stories of “local idiocy” and “despotism,” such as students being sued for singing the two songs. “In short, *I wish to go away from here!* I wish to go elsewhere from this German Hradec!”

Prague was the first patriotic escape. At seventeen, he writes from Hradec:

[Here] I am a foreigner to others and to myself .... O Prague, a year of my life, indeed more I would give, I want to suffer hunger for three weeks, as long as I can go away from here, away from Hradec! Otherwise, I am thinking: after studying medicine, to leave for India. ... In Vienna there are grants for those who agree to go for six years to India after finishing the study of medicine; after six years one can return to the motherland. ... There [in India] I could think freely, speak freely, and sing “*Hej Slované*” all I wanted.<sup>2</sup>

Durdík moved to Prague in 1861 to study medicine—a station on the road to “India”? From Prague, he writes of a lack of money and the condescending attitude of well-to-do, German-speaking relatives; and comments—as he will for the rest of his life—on the debates concerning the “national rebirth,” both passionately and critically.

Prior to receiving his doctorate, he writes about his plans to go East, not to India now, but to Russia, in order to practice medicine there. This he did, from 1868 to 1877. Russia loomed large in Czecho-Slavic patriotism, in recurring arguments between those celebrating Slavic unity—to the sound of “*Hej Slované!*”—with Russia as the holy motherland of the Slavs, and more skeptical voices. From Russia, he writes against Pan-Slavic “hallucination”: about “un-Slavic Poles” oppressing the Ruthenians;<sup>3</sup> the Germans in Russia—and not the Russians—being helpful to Czechs there; and—after fighting against the Ger-

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2 Letter, December 1860, in *Samostatnost*, February 29, 1913.

3 Letter, May 16, 1868, in *Samostatnost*, January 1, 1913.

man language his whole youth—he states that “we have to be grateful to the German language since it serves as an intermediary among Slavs.”<sup>4</sup>

Durdík already found something of “India” there. He writes to his parents about the “supreme beauty” of Moscow: “so far I have seen only a tiny part, but what I have seen was worth it—in its majesty, there is much that is Asiatic.”<sup>5</sup> In their correspondence from the time, he and his brother are skeptical about Pan-Slavic brotherhood and assert Russia’s otherness, drawing on multiple eastern European orientalisms: “Czech ÷ Russian = Hungarian ÷ Chinese”<sup>6</sup> (the Czech is to the Russian what the Hungarian is to the Chinese). Nonetheless, he would never quite escape Russia; he would keep returning to it especially in the Indies.

Durdík returned to Bohemia only to run away again. In his letters from this brief sojourn at home, his love-hate for his nation and his frustrations with his family pervade one another—perhaps that is why one always senses flesh and blood in his thoughts about nations, empires, and humanity. He laments the lack of national pride in the Czechs and of personal pride in his father; the “despotism” in Hradec silencing the Czech language and progressive views, and his father’s “thirty-year despotism” silencing his mother.<sup>7</sup>

In about 14-20 days I will break out from Bohemia. Today I received the book *Spreekt Gij Maleisch* [“Do You Speak Malay?”]. ... I will leave Bohemia without *the slightest* emotion/motion [*pohnutí*]. ... I am only happy that I can catch my breath abroad. *Brawls and squabbles*—that has always been the motto in our family and this motto can never sweeten one’s life in the homeland. ... Adieu!<sup>8</sup>

After only a few months in Bohemia, he left to be a doctor with the colonial army in the Dutch East Indies—“India”—where he served for five years. After briefly working in Batavia (“a thousand times healthier than Prague, which is among the least healthy cities”; 8), he was sent to the bloodiest of the Dutch colonial wars, in Aceh. “But I am still glad I did not stay in Bohemia. I am not made for small-town practice” (91). After six months, he was transported, while suffer-

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4 Letter, February 7/19, 1869, in *Samostatnost*, March 23, 1913. When writing from Russia, Durdík usually dates his letters according to both the Gregorian and the Julian calendars.

5 Letter to his parents, October 8/20, 1869, MoL.

6 Letter, February 7/19, 1869, in *Samostatnost*, April 6, 1913.

7 Letter to Josef Durdík, June 22, 1877, MoL.

8 Letter to Josef Durdík, June 22, 1877, MoL.

ing a high fever and hallucinations about Russia and Hradec, to a hospital in the hills of Western Sumatra—“like the most beautiful autumn in Bohemia” (126)—and then returned to Aceh. He hoped for a position in Java, “to escape from the embrace of Sumatra” (194); instead, in 1880, he was posted for two years to a tiny fort on the remote island of Nias, most of which was not under Dutch control. This he welcomed as an escape from the war and as a chance to make a home in the Indies: he writes of covering the walls of his house with a map of Prague and portraits of the leaders of the Czech “national rebirth” (198). In the spirit of “remembering the motherland,” he collected ethnographic materials for the Czech Industrial Museum in Prague and wrote about Nias for Czech readers.<sup>9</sup>

He returned to Prague in 1883, gave up doctoring, and spent his time translating from Russian and writing about Sumatra and later Spain. The diversity of his first-hand experiences and extensive knowledge led him to this diagnosis: “the human” is fundamentally the same everywhere, “a great fairy tale [i.e., beautiful dream], but also a great beast/monster” (160). Accounts of foreign lands, Sumatra especially, were occasions to reveal social ills in Bohemia and Europe, and to undermine Czech and “civilized” preconceptions about other people. His fiery criticism of his homeland is reminiscent of his earliest letters from “German Hradec,” as if he were saying about his homeland once again, with patriotic passion: “In short, *I wish to go away from here!*”

He departed in 1903. An obituary notes:

While he was in Russia, the darker and reprehensible sides made him forget about the bright and laudable sides. In Sumatra he thought lovingly about Russia, at home he reminisced in the same way about Sumatra, and finally distant Spain became for him a dreamed-up land of legends, a paradise on earth.<sup>10</sup>

And yet, in all this running and dreaming, and in his returns to the “darker and reprehensible sides,” one senses a doctor diagnosing diseases, seeking clarity about their hidden causes, and cutting into living flesh with a scalpel, with varying success.

In all this running and dreaming, at its roots, one senses an acute sensitivity to places, to home, and even to one’s own and others’ rootedness.

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9 On Durdík as a collector, see Dagmar Pospíšilová et al., *Pavel Durdík (1843–1903), Life and Work; Ethnological Collection of the Island of Nias* (Prague: National Museum, 2010).

10 A. Pikhart, “Dr. Pavel Durdík,” *Osvěta* 33 (1903), 902.

In all this running and dreaming, in his life and thought, there are multiple contrary (e)motions—contradictions? ironies? unhinged moments?—like when the doctors ran into the hospital from where the patients had already fled; like when the patriotic teenager fantasizes about travelling to India in order to sing “*Hej Slované*” “freely” there. Serving as an *army doctor* in Aceh was the crux of such contradictions, such clashes. “To burn, destroy, kill! To spill the warm, red, glossy liquid that maintains breathing and life! Really, I could never be dazzled by the soldier’s craft” (157). A doctor, eternally rushing to save human lives, and a patriot admiring Acehnese “patriotism” and “defense of homeland” (as he saw their struggle)—all in the service of the colonial army, whose “massacres,” “cruelty,” “injustice,” “lyingness” and “hypocrisy” he documents.

In this essay, I follow Durdík’s contrary motions and their moving constellations and intersections. Clashing and blending, they were played out with particular intensity in his writings on the Indies. The Acehnese theatre of war was for him an acute experience of both colonialism and patriotism; there all kinds of physical, mental, and social pathologies played out—including those endemic in Bohemia and Europe. Farthest from home, Durdík writes about the connection to native soil—Aceh/Bohemia—and about imperial violence most incisively.

I essay to show how he experienced Aceh and the war through the prism of a particular clash-blend of experiences and concerns—medical, Czech, Russian, Slavic, human—and their various ironies or contrary motions. This, I feel, adds intensity to the resulting chiaroscuro in Durdík’s picture of Aceh. Contrary to dominant scholarship on colonial travel writing, I *am* interested in the truth (the revealing) of this picture. The particularity of his view, the particular refraction, even, perhaps especially, his feverish hallucination, leads to a certain ever-escaping, unhegemonic truthfulness: what normally might be hidden, and what others did not see, is dramatically spotlighted and acutely sensed, like sharp pain, like a nightmare; what otherwise might remain Other, becomes—through an unsettled patriotism, through (mis)recognition—homely and, he would say, human. Don’t expect an unambiguous, uncontradicted position or a settled correctness; it is more like the ~~truth~~ panic of a false alarm.

In other words, this essay follows a Czech man in underpants and pink slippers, running to and fro in the Acehnese night. I struggle to catch a glimpse of him in the crowd, to catch a glimpse, on the run, of how he saw the world. In the reality of such experiences, contrary (e)motions are not subsumed in any theory, except perhaps in the fundamentally torn picture of a fairy-tale beast, “the human”: a doctor in pink slippers, with a naked sabre and a loaded revolver in his hands.





**Figure 2.1.** Dr. Pavel Durdík, photograph at Gle Kambing [“Kozinka”], Aceh, June 13, 1879. Archive of Náprstek Museum of Asian, African, and American Cultures in Prague.

## Healing Patriotism

In 1863, before his twentieth birthday, Durdík wrote from Prague:

Still, patriotism is the poetry of life, for it is like poetry—elation and pain.... My whole worldview has changed and [studying] medicine contributed to it greatly; it corrected my brain and released me from all eccentric ideas and efforts. I had not even finished school and already I wanted to reform the world. But I realize, from reflection and experience, that a human must be satisfied with striving for good and acting justly at least in a limited sphere.... It is a better patriotism than the kind that overflows with empty words and phrases in the newspapers.<sup>11</sup>

In the Indies, medicine continued to “correct [his] brain” and to intersect with patriotism, as a sense of “us” and “them,” blurring their distinction.

Science figures prominently in the colonial discourse of superiority and difference. Durdík, too, saw medicine and science as achievements of humankind, yet doctoring led him neither to enforce difference nor to transcend it;

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<sup>11</sup> Letter, April 26, 1863, in *Samostatnost*, January 26, 1913.

rather, it led him to a blurry sense of appearing-disappearing boundaries and diversity-sameness.

In the formal “Preface” to his *Five Years on Sumatra: Accounts of an Army Doctor*, he writes:

The medical vocation is beneficial for every European; it acquaints him with, and brings him closer to, the natives. ... Distribution of quinine against the chills and ammoniac against rheumatism makes a favorable impression on the minds of the natives, who then come to get medicine also for their ill wives or children and are generally friendlier, more forthcoming, and more communicative toward a physician than toward an ordinary white and mute foreigner. (5)

He visits patients in Acehnese villages where the locals allow no other foreigners. He is given mangoes and live chicken for his work. He enjoys chatting with the village head:

He has a large library of Arabic books and writes in Malay surprisingly quickly with a thin wooden stick. He is an old man of a small build, and he is nobody’s fool. In his house I drink sorbet, a tea with pepper and calamus, which burns the throat like mead. (171)

In Nias, after an exhausting hike, the doctor approaches a village where people are going to be vaccinated:

from afar you already hear loud chatter, and laughter resounds from the village (Niasans like to laugh very often)—you see many children merrily running and playing on the village mall—curious women and shapely girls appear in their plain dress in front of houses, dogs welcome us with loud barking, men call the Malay greeting “*tabe!*,” the hen with her chicks walks past with great seriousness, roosters crow their strongest, feeling that something special is happening. ... Some children run away scared to their mothers, calling “*ina! ina!*” (mummy! mummy!), because they have never seen a white man in pants and shoes.... [After being given coconut water,] you climb up into the house, offer chewing tobacco to your host—below the house the locals crowd and gaze inside—then mothers begin to bring their darling babies before the house, waiting for me to come down. If the little one cries during vaccination, one can see the pain in the mother’s face, the

child embraces her neck, and she firmly presses the child to herself—she feels just like a European mother.<sup>12</sup>

The Nias village is described through words (*na návsi, chasníci, hospodář*) that evoke an ordinary Czech village and villagers, and are uncommon in accounts of exotic lands. The whole experience is not so different from a doctor's visit to a Czech village at the time.

Durdík wrote extensively about both indigenous healing practices and modern medicine in the Indies. One of his studies, "O bájesloví a obřadnictví Niasovců" [On the mythology and rituals of the Niasans], from which I have just quoted, is a detailed ethnography of healing, interspersed with anecdotes, based on his interaction with locals—often his patients, including local healers—during his two years on Nias. He was interested in indigenous healing because he, too, cured people. He employs words usually used in the realm of modern medicine (*lékař*, "doctor," lit. "healer"; *lékařství*, "healing/medicine"; *léčit*, to heal/cure; *metody*, "methods") equally for Western medicine and for traditional healing in Nias, blurring the distinction between the two. He uses Western medical concepts in explaining Niasan ideas, for example: "these *bechu* [spirits] can spread malarial and smallpox epidemics and infectious diseases generally."<sup>13</sup>

Often, he brings out commonalities between Western and Niasan healing more explicitly:

From among various methods, the priest uses the one that has proven the best in practice, just like a *lékař* [doctor/healer], whose expertise is in the Latin cuisine [Western medicine], always prescribes the remedies that have produced satisfactory results in his previous cases.... Likewise, on this island, one *lékař* prefers his method to another's.<sup>14</sup>

Durdík calls his method "scientific," and he complains about "superstitions" (also European ones), but he collaborates with the priests. His and their healing practices intersect—such as when he supplies quinine to a priest, or when he asks for a pig to be sacrificed when he treats a patient. As this happens, Durdík goes beyond ethnographic othering, and towards seeing Niasan med-

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12 P. Durdík, "O bájesloví a obřadnictví Niasovců" [On the mythology and rituals of the Niasans], *Světlozor* 20 (1886), 10:147. For another lively account of vaccination in the Dutch East Indies half a century later, see Vera Brittig's chapter in this volume.

13 Durdík, "O bájesloví," 4:55.

14 Durdík, "O bájesloví," 6:3.

icine (*lékařství*) as the ideas and practices of fellow healers, methodological differences notwithstanding.

The priests come across as ordinary people, like European doctors/healers:

When the patient dies, people often blame the priest. The priest excuses this—and anyone who has ever cured [*léčil*] people knows how important good excuses are—by saying that...<sup>15</sup>

[T]he more powerful the deity, the grander the offerings he requires. The more powerful deities are therefore popular with rich Niasans and chiefs—just like in Europe, where the *lékař* prescribes more expensive medicines to the rich people than to the poor.<sup>16</sup>

The priests are human, all too human, like “us”:

With Niasan priests it is the same like *u nás* [“at ours (home/country)”] with doctors [*lékaři*], lawyers, and professors of philosophy [these happen to be his brothers’ professions]—the same jealousy reigns among them, the same mutual ill will and squabbling, in short, the same kind of collegiality.—*Tout comme chez nous!* [Everything like *u nás!*]<sup>17</sup>

Behind all these wandering comparisons, there is a sense of “*tout comme chez nous*,” or “a fundamental unity of human spirit.”

How can the Bataks believe in the miracles of the [sorcerer’s] staff which surely cannot heal sickness, a civilized reader might wonder. And Bataks can equally wonder at us: How is it possible that in Europe people can believe in the miracles of Lourdes water? ... It is an evidence of a fundamental unity of human spirit. One believes in miraculous water from a certain cave, another in a miraculous icon in an ancient monastery, another in his doctor, another in the sorcerer’s staff and magic formulas, another in the miracle-working relics of a saint, about whose life no-one knows anything certain. And yet in all these diverse cases the same effect is achieved with the help of suggestion and auto-suggestion—healing.<sup>18</sup>

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15 Durdík, “O bájesloví,” 5:67.

16 Durdík, “O bájesloví,” 6:3.

17 Durdík, “O bájesloví,” 7:99.

18 Pavel Durdík, *Ulidožrouťú: obrázky ze severní Sumatry* [Among the cannibals: Pictures from northern Sumatra] (Prague: František Bačkovský, 1897), 51–52.

Durdík retains his scientific method and understanding (he speaks of “auto-suggestion”), yet faith in the doctor is included in the list, as something that contributes to healing, like in the case of the sorcerer. (Was “auto-suggestion” his scientific reason to sacrifice that pig?)

Durdík ponders why a Malay man was unusually forthcoming with him: “Perhaps he opened up because he was talking to a ‘dukun’ (*lékař*)” (310). *Dukun* is often translated from Malay as “shaman,” but Durdík prefers *lékař*. The blending between *lékař* and *dukun*, this self-recognition/translation as a “dukun”—not despite being a “scientific” *lékař*, but because he is one—creates an opening between the Czech and the Malay.

As we will see, in the Acehnese warzone, too, the doctor had a particular access to people and to humanity’s physical, mental, and socio-political pathologies. Doctoring continued to “correct [his] brain,” often again in directions contrary to “empty words and phrases,” toward the opening of unsettled connections, the blurring of distinctions (us/them, Bohemia/Aceh), and even chaos—like that false alarm.

### **Orthopedic Patriotism: Upright Acehnese, Flexible Czech Spine, and Colonialism**

The “submissive” Javanese, comments Durdík, “squat just to appear smaller” when facing superiors, which is why “the Acehnese and the Malay scorn the Javanese as a docile, slavish creature who lets foreigners do anything to him, humbly and patiently suffering everything.” He then favorably compares the Javanese to the real target of his polemic, the equally “slavish,” but, additionally, “boorish” Czechs.

Now I understand why prof. Josef Thomayer wrote ... “There is no doubt about the benefits of physical education. But ... not all methods are right for every nation. For example, I would advise a young Czech man (who is not provided for) to exercise especially the spine. I am convinced that *u nás* a nicely bendable spine is much more profitable than a one-sided training of the fist.” (48–9)

Durdík describes meeting the Acehnese on a path: “they were slim men and straight like a fir-tree ... like some lords, they passed us wordlessly, indifferently looking ahead, without turning their gaze toward us” (105).

According to a legend that became particularly popular during the “national rebirth,” knights sleep inside the Blaník Mountain. When the Czech nation is in utmost distress, the knights will emerge and defeat the enemy. Describing the Acehnese “proud mountains,” the Acehnese stronghold, Durdík writes about the inhabitants of the Golden Mountain, about whom

people tell curious things, similar to our Blaník and the knights sleeping inside. But the Acehnese have no need of these Blaník (Golden-Mountain) heroes—they are themselves tough, manly, and they can take care of themselves without tall-tale heroes and greats. (51)

Likened to legendary knights, the Acehnese are nonetheless emphatically present, as when we encounter them walking toward us:

Every Acehnese is proud like a medieval knight. Even a subdued Acehnese—there are hundreds of them here and they call them friendly Acehnese—will never give way to you on a path; such a friendly Acehnese walks with naked *klewang* (sabre) and you must step aside unless you want to bump into him, which wouldn’t be advisable. (82)



Figure 2.2. A *gliwang* (*klewang*), translated as “chopping knife,” in the Museum Aceh, 2011. (Photo by author)



Figure 2.3. An Acehnese knife (*reuncong*) donated by P. Durdík to the Industrial Museum in Prague in 1882. Aceh is also called the “Land of the *Reuncong*.” (Courtesy of Náprstek Museum.)

Durdík writes home about “the Acehnese who refuse our civilization with sabre in hand. They do not know paper protests [hint: Czech patriotism] and cut straight into living flesh” (59). The reader gets a sense of this through descriptions of wounds, deaths, and false alarms (and he/she could contemplate Acehnese weapons, donated by Durdík, in a Prague museum; see Figures 2.3, 2.6 and 2.7). The accounts rely on the surgeon’s hands-on, scalpel-on anatomic expertise.

With the greatest nimbleness [the Acehnese] control their wide sabers (*klewang*), made of excellent steel, with which they can slash at once the sabre and the body of a European officer; so quickly they swing it and so powerful are their blows that the wounded soldier has several mortal wounds. For the *klewang* the Dutch soldiers have great respect; from the *klewang* they often retreat. After such clashes, chopped-off shinbones and pieces of heads lie around in the grass, and naturally the doctors’ work begins—amputation of legs and arms, because the hacked elbow, shoulder, and knee joints (sometimes all on a single wounded man), caused by a single *klewang*, necessitate amputation. (15)

The Acehnese “cut straight into living flesh,” as men of action/actuality (*skutek/skutečnost*), unlike the Czechs with their “paper protests” and “tall-tale heroes.” Durdík’s writing, too, feels like it is “cutting straight into living flesh,” as if emulating the Acehnese. There is another continuity between the fighter’s and the doctor’s work: the chopping of bodies leads to amputations; the doctors finish what the Acehnese have started. One senses a fascination, even “great respect,” as in an enthusiastic peer review, when the surgeon describes the Acehnese expertise in chopping up people and the “excellent steel.” Note the precision with which he describes the curve described by the *klewang*, contrasting with the colonial panic.

There was total chaos in the hospital. It was surprising how fast the sick were able to run in that panic, although normally they could hardly get up to sit.... It was all caused by the fear of Acehnese *klewangs*. The Acehnese, when he slashes with his *klewang*, usually describes a line in the air like a roman S—even if the enemy’s head does not fly off, with the same blow he hits the stomach or knee joints; usually these are mortal wounds or horrific mutilations. (71)

Later in life, Durdík wrote about Spanish bullfighters:

And now I was feasting my eyes on the national hero. In the past he was a butcher's apprentice. ... An ordinary Spaniard has personal pride and self-confidence. Everything that smells of slavishness is foreign to him. To him, no one has ever sung "Songs of a Slave" [a Czech patriotic allegorical poem about the plight and hopes for freedom of African slaves].<sup>19</sup>

As with the Acehnese, Durdík admires the bullfighter for his pride, the same way one might admire a colleague—surgeon, "anatomist":

The butcher's trade has benefitted Guerrita. He understands well the character and behavior of the animal, he knows its body and the spot where the sword must be thrust to immediately kill the bull. Notice how a butcher nicely and swiftly takes out the innards of an animal. Two, three cuts in a certain direction—and already he holds the liver in hand; he knows where and how to cut, like a skillful anatomist.<sup>20</sup>

The surgeon is involved with all kinds of "colleagues"—Niasan priests, Czech butchers, Spanish bullfighters, Acehnese patriots.... In Aceh, as in Spain, flesh-cutting embodies "self-confidence" and "personal pride" which contrasts to the "slavishness" of the Czechs (butchers excepted).

In his book about Sumatran animals, Durdík writes: "The crocodile does not spill tears. Tears, meant to conceal a cunning and cruel intention, are spilled only by the human" (316). Like the Acehnese, who "do not know paper protests and cut straight into living flesh," the bullfighter embodies a certain truthfulness, a closeness to action/actuality, which Durdík contrasts with writing: "The fame of toreadors cannot be created by advertisements like the fame of an ambitious literary zero. ... Swindlery and the production of greats with the help of magazines is impossible here."<sup>21</sup> A man serving the invaders and writing with admiration about the resistance fighters; a doctor working for the army yet protesting on paper against "paper protest": how ironic—or risky. Nonetheless—or therefore—Durdík always criticizes writing that evades actuality and action, while his own writing aspires to the incisiveness, a truth of sorts, of *klewangs* and scalpels.

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19 Pavel Durdík, *Zápasy s býky: dojmy a obrazy ze Španělska* [Bullfights: Impressions and pictures from Spain] (Prague: Bačkovský, 1896), 69.

20 Durdík, *Zápasy*, 80.

21 Durdík, *Zápasy*, 87.



Writing as if excising falsehoods, Durdík persistently shows that colonial representations are “lying.” The war embodies the hypocrisy that is colonialism:

The Niasan is said to be greedy, stingy, and untrusting towards foreigners—that is how he is described in official Dutch reports, yet the White, who sets out across the sea—is he not motivated by greed? How can the local trust the White, who invades his land for one reason only, to become richer? ... They also accuse the Niasans of *cruelty* in domestic wars ...; yet civilized Europeans, especially in tropical lands, lead much *crueler wars* than the locals, and than in Europe. In Aceh, I saw hundreds of villages burned and turned into ash by Dutch soldiers, thousands of fruit trees (coconut palms) cut down, enormous quantities of rice and silk destroyed, etc.—and no-one among the Whites paused over the cruelties that they were themselves committing, and they even proclaimed it to be the best way of leading a war, to destroy the enemy and everything that belongs to them.<sup>22</sup>

Durdík employs irony to bring out the falsehood of Dutch discourse about the war, repeatedly using, in scare quotes, phrases like “the evil Acehnese,” mockingly mimicking “ministers” and “Dutch patriotic historians” (157). “A local Acehnese historian will write very differently about this war” (57).

Attacks on colonialism are part of a broader offensive against the hypocrisies of “our” (European/Czech) civilization. “How tender the English rich are to their doggies, and nearby in the streets of London, statistics teach us, two or three people die daily of hunger.”<sup>23</sup> The colonies and Europe overflow into each other: writing about Spanish bullfights and “German sentimentality,” he mocks an article in a “Parisian daily”:

“[Our soldiers] saw terrible cruelties [in the bullring] ...” The army went to Madagascar to mass-kill locals who were defending their native soil—and the killing of a bull is a cruel show for this army? ... What happens in the arena are cruelties, but when in Madagascar soldiers shoot from cannons into locals like into sparrows, that is not cruelty, but—heroism?<sup>24</sup>

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22 Pavel Durdík, “O domácím životě Niasovců” [On the Niasans’ domestic life], *Lumír* 1884, 27–28.

23 Durdík, *Zápasy*, 191.

24 Durdík, *Zápasy*, 226.

Comparisons serve to critique “civilized circumstances,” and undermine European prejudices about the Indies. He writes in his *U lidožroutů* [Among the cannibals]:

The [Batak] boy is strong and healthy like a beech tree. What a difference from our school youth! A view of the pale, weak, short-sighted children walking to school makes the humanity-lover sad. ... The Batak boy seems mentally rather more developed than a European boy of the same age, and more independent. Why? He is left to his own devices and learns to test his strength and abilities much earlier than a boy in civilized circumstances.<sup>25</sup>

Comparisons between the Indies and Europe, and the writer’s war against the pathologies (prejudices, “bendable spine”) of his Czech readers, mirror the physical confrontation between the “rightful” Acehnese and the “thieving” Europeans.

The Acehnese defend themselves like true heroes against thieving, excellently armed White intruders; for all the so-called colonial domination by Europeans in various parts of the world ... is fundamentally nothing but robbery with respect to the locals, born on home soil and its rightful heirs. (33)

### **Miasmatic Homeland: Native Soil, Deadly Mud**

From the army hospital, at remote outposts, or during fighting, while amputating limbs and excising bullets, as his patients “die like flies” (76), Durdík saw colonialism particularly sharply.

Dutch “patriotic” propaganda echoes faintly from newspapers, disconnected from reality. The “Dutch” army comprised mainly Indonesians, and even among the various Europeans, the Dutch were in a minority. Durdík is one man in a disorganized “motley” of soldiers, porters, convicts, and doctors in a strange land. The whole army, the whole project, seems sick:

There were few soldiers with a healthy appearance. ... Enemy attacks on the outposts were a constant possibility: psychological strain and the need to be always alert, day and night, contributed to the soldiers’ exhaustion and illness. (181)

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25 Durdík, *U lidožroutů*, 121.

Sickness and the war are inseparable. “As many Dutch soldiers died from [malarial] chills and abdominal diseases as from enemy weapons” (23).

Sometimes half a company consists of soldiers with acutely enlarged and hardened spleens (the spleen tumor, hard like a stone, often fills a quarter of the abdomen). A man with such a spleen in his body cannot perform miracles of bravery like in Dumas’s *Three Musketeers*. These spleen tumors come from chills. The amputees keep dying on us; among them are many officers, at whom the Acehnese aim first. ... We take turns amputating, so no one falls short. (78-9)

The “chills” and abdominal diseases were thought to be caused by miasma, which Durdík describes as vapor rising from the soil—essentially “bad air” (*mal’aria*). Colonization exacerbated it.

When Europeans first settle in any tropical land, the chills rage in the area with unusual force; it is attributed to the vapors from excavated and cultivated land; in Aceh there was a plenitude of vapors. (183)

The sun, the mud, and the forests, which shelter the Acehnese, join forces to attack the “foreigners”:

*From above* the scorching sun, as if it wanted to melt the earth’s crust, *from below* mud unending, and next to us, on both sides of the path, thick forest and bushes delectably stinking—and in these bushes, the Acehnese, because they are always there, even when they are not shooting. (103)

When the Dutch began to build here, all the diseases were raging cruelly; freshly dug up soil/land [*země*] in the tropics nurtures so much miasma that, under the sun’s scorching rays, epidemics develop. Every foot of this soil/land/earth [*země*] is soaked with blood and is dearly bought with human lives, because the Acehnese fight furiously. They are Mohammedans, for whom death for the native soil is a religious duty and the greatest heroism. (59-60)

In Czech, the breadth of meaning of *země*, “soil/ land/country/Earth,” along with its pervasive association with Bohemia, has a potential, revealed by some writers, for an attachment to native soil to expand into, and be expanded by, the same feeling for the whole Earth, and for any land or



Figure 2.4. Rice fields and mountains in Aceh, 2011 (Photo by author).

country.<sup>26</sup> Writing about Aceh, Durdík uses the language of Czech patriotism of the “national rebirth,” a language of writing about the (Czech) homeland: “(native) soil” (*rodná země/půda*), “nation” (*národ*), “to defend the freedom of the homeland” (*brániti svobodu domoviny*), “national self-confidence/self-consciousness” (*národní sebevědomí*), “the people” (*lid*), and “yoke” (*jho*, often referring to the Habsburg domination of Czech Lands, but used by Durdík in reference to Dutch colonialism). The reader is drawn to see the Acehnese homeland through ingrained images of the (Czech) “homeland” and foreign “yoke,” and to understand Aceh as native soil.

Once in this position, the Czech reader is ambushed with his inferiority—evoked through another set of words evoking homeland—“paper protests,” “empty slogans” ...—in comparison to the more “truly defended” Acehnese *země*.

Such is the soil/land [*země*]: a rebellious, hardened population and natural elements, floods, earthquakes, chills, swamps, plus a cruel number of hawks. Yet despite all that, it is beautiful and bravely defended, truly defended. Such defense is more than paper protests, resolutions, objections, public certifications, and repetitive empty slogans, after which no action follows. Instead of noise, the Acehnese go and fight to the death. They don’t know any other protests. (121–2)

26 Jan Mrázek, “Returns to the Wide World: Errant Bohemian Images of Race and Colonialism,” *Studies in Travel Writing* 21 (2): 137–39.

The “mud unending,” through which the colonial soldiers trudge, the soil emanating deadly vapors, is recognized as “our *země*.”

Once the Dutch soldiers marched across a swampy countryside. Like steel the scorching sun glittered in puddles. Each held his weapon above his head. While they were wading through mud, exhausted, soiled, and wet, suddenly a voice resounded from afar. Loudly rang these words in Malay in the vaporous air: “White dogs! What do you want in our *země*? Who invited you here? We do not go to your *země*. You will all perish here!” “*Smeerlap* (insolent man)!” shouted a Dutch officer at the hidden Acehnese speaker. But Acehnese insolence manifested itself not only in words, but also in action. Few fought for their native soil with such raging and persistent bravery and military skill as the Acehnese. (43)

“Yet despite all that, it is beautiful...”: this—and the contrast between a beautiful, fertile, homey paradise and a war-torn, miasmatic hell—is a leitmotif in Durdík’s letters home.

I confess that I have never before experienced something as extraordinarily dear and touching as the view of this Acehnese village! Earthly paradise ‘tis to the eyes! ... Houses were concealed in luxurious vegetation.... It was clear from the houses and fruit trees that the inhabitants set up everything nicely and comfortably: each house had a ground floor and an upper apartment, which was reached by a staircase. (106)

No Czech reader could miss the phrase “Earthly paradise ‘tis to the eyes!” It is a quotation from the song “*Kde domov můj*” (Where is my home?), which we have encountered in Durdík’s earliest letters from Hradec. “Beautiful *země*, Czech *země*, my home,” answers the anthem. The beauty and fertility of the (Czech) *země*—alongside images of defending native land—pervade the imagery of the “national rebirth,” which echoes in Durdík’s description of Acehnese “native soil”: “It is a rich *země* ... ! Beautiful villages, a plenitude of fruit trees, fertile rice fields, little groves...” (163). “The most beautiful, healthiest, and most fertile...” (51). Fertility, health, and truly-defended-ness, entangled, are the land’s beauty.

Acehnese villages are entirely drowned in greenery, wholly concealed among trees and thick bushes. They are surrounded either by a wooden

fence (*pagar*) or an earthwork, which is overgrown with often impenetrable, entangled thorny bamboo (*bambu duri*). (52)

“The Acehnese are good agriculturalists [*zemědělci*, i.e. *země*-workers]” (33). Working the *země* and defending it are inextricable. The war follows an agricultural cycle: “As soon as the Acehnese harvest their rice, they begin the war [again] every time.” They pause in defending the soil only to work it:

A few minor chiefs came into the camp to announce their submission, so that they could return to their abandoned villages to cultivate the rice fields.... Everyone knows that on the first occasion [they] will again split from the Dutch. (112-13)

The difference between the Acehnese and the Dutch relationships to the soil concerns knowledge:

The Acehnese knows every corner in his *země*, he knows also every movement of the Dutch army, so he promptly retreats into the forest and cannot be attacked.... The feeling is deeply rooted in the Acehnese that he is *the master in his země*... “Why do you enter my *země*, seeing I don’t come to your land? *I am the master in my země*, and therefore you, foreigner, must step aside when you meet me; you tread our soil, uninvited, and you are very deluded / have lost your way [*bloudiš*] if you think that I, the native and heir of this *země*, will greet you first.” (16)

The Acehnese is characterized by the familiarity with which he moves in his land:

The Acehnese is an unsurpassable master of a special manner of war-making: he strides through mountain streams, climbs mountaintops, scales steep slopes, takes cover in forest hideouts and wilds, ambushes the “White” enemy in gorges and among rocks, attacks him in bushes or crowded villages. He does not know fatigue; no European can bear so much under the tropical sky. (13)

(Not) seeing him from the Dutch perspective, the reader senses how the invader is “lost/deluded”:

The Acehnese is everywhere and nowhere. He appears where he is least expected, while the silentest silence reigns where they are ready for him. The

European soldiers march lengthily, not a leaf moves, nobody is visible near or far, and suddenly a shot sounds from the bushes, followed by many more; people are killed and wounded, but no one has seen the Acehnese: they have disappeared into the bushes. Dutch soldiers fire hundreds of rounds from their quick-firing rifles into the bushes from where the shots were fired, but they don't find a single dead or wounded Acehnese. (14)

"We know so little about what is happening with the enemy," Durdík writes home, "that we have no explanation for anything. Not one Dutch knows the Acehnese language yet" (165).

The passage quoted at the beginning of this essay—the ridiculous chaos, panic, and madness caused by a false alarm—is typical of Durdík's image of the colonial army. There are descriptions of fighting, such as when officers, Durdík among them, overcome by fear, crawl in the mud, appearing "like fat puppies," "like ducks," "like calves." The hospital, too, is the doctor's theatre of war:

The noise made by the mentally ill reaches here ... screaming full of passion can be heard, resembling a dramatic actor: "May not I even embrace my daughter?" and something else about the end of the world, which I didn't catch. (104)

The chills caused by miasma rising from Acehnese soil—manifested in an army of delirious, hallucinating patients, some dying, some surviving physically and mentally deranged—pervade, epitomize perhaps, Durdík's perception of the colonial war and its madness. His account of his own "local Acehnese chills" feels like a summary of what colonialism was for him, its inner logic delusion; it seems no madder, no sicker, and no less revealing, than his most realistic descriptions of the war.

I saw figures rising from the patterns of my *klambu* [mosquito net]... Before me, I saw old generals with fathom-long moustaches, *above me* I saw hovering female figures; next to me I saw a drowned man from Pushkin's poem with the whole décor of the said poem: crayfish in his eye sockets, etc. Only on the left I saw nothing, so I kept looking there. In my head there was rattling, pounding, exploding like inside a volcano; I felt pain under my forehead as if there were crashing rocks there. But in my ears it felt pleasant and quiet; I felt in my ears as if a wave of time softly flowed past me, a silent movement, a quiet murmur of something, I don't know how to call this

flowing of extraordinary silence. Suddenly I hovered in infinite heights, where no Verne's balloon has yet reached. Again thoughts swarmed in my head, and my nine-year long stay in Russia and the return to Hradec, with all the happenings and mishaps, passed through my brain and burned my soul into the deepest entrails. ... But during all this, it was as if I had two brains, one mad and one normal. (91-93)

### Russian Mud and Pan-Slavism in Sumatra, and the Tangle of Isms

“When [the Malays in Sumatra] call poultry, they have a special expression: *kur kur!* (In Russian, the word *kur* means poultry.)” (232).

The Indies and Russia pervade one another surreally. Even when not delirious, Russia returns like Pushkin's drowned man, who in the poem keeps coming back, a decomposing corpse, and who returns also to Durdík in his hallucinations and blends into the army of corpses and delirious patients in Aceh, physically real yet so much like the drowned man.

The native, deadly soil of Aceh, the “mud unending,” is recognized as Russian mud:

But at the second *benting* [fort] the road ended, and the path was exceedingly extremely [*velice velmi*] muddy, because it rained heavily the night before. We progressed slower, and in this mud I recognized an old Slavic buddy from Russia, where mud is the fifth element, according to the true words of Napoleon I. (97)

Napoleon's 1812 invasion of Russia, another war where imperial armies invading from the West had to fight “General Mud,” keeps returning, too, with war and peace blending:

I'm in the Indies, the hot zone, but very often I reminisce about the cold zone. The whole series of haps and mishaps experienced in Russia comes to my mind.... I'm reading a Dutch translation of Zagoskin's novel *Russians in 1812*.... The protagonist, riding along a muddy road, doesn't know whether he is lost; it is pitch dark, add to it rain and wind, and under his cart mud up to the knees, at any moment the cart might overturn into a ditch or miss a bridge and end up in a flooded river. I often experienced such hardships.... The Russian road ... is not a road, it is an unfathomable plenitude of mud,



ponds, trenches, pits, and wobbling bridges. I would often return all wet from this Slavic labyrinth and ... Just now something scratched my hair—brrrr! a cockroach [šváb: lit. Swabian] as large as a flyswatter, I threw it far away, it ran off like a missile. But even this cockroach reminds me of far-away Russia. ... And you know what else reminds me of Russia?—German mice [německé myši, i.e. rats]! (87–89)

As he reads and writes about Russia in Aceh, or as he plods through the “Slavic buddy” there, Russia and the Dutch Indies blend and clash impossibly, like heat and cold, like the violent noise and “extraordinary silence” during his “passage through the fire of the chills [zimnice, from zima, “cold/winter”],” as he calls his hallucinations. In Aceh, after a short walk, he was drenched in sweat

like after undergoing Russian baptism, like a wet chicken; the rays of the local sun pierce my back like pins... No wonder that I am losing my sense of cold. When I read in a book that outside a frosty wind is blowing, ... in vain I try to remember the cruel Russian winter, under 20°, in which, during my doctor’s visits in the district, I frequently spent many hours under the wide sky; in spite of two fur coats, in which I was stuck, despite high felt boots, I would arrive home cold like iron in the cellar. (90)

Durdík experienced both Russia and the Indies as a doctor. He visits patients in Acehnese villages: “just like in Russia where they offer cigarettes to guests, here it is boiled rice and [betel nut mix]” (171). Excising a bullet from a woman’s buttocks in an Acehnese house, he worries that the relatives might “pounce at [him] with the speed of a charging Slavic father” (170).

The ambiguous relationship between himself as a healer and local healers in the Indies is prefigured in Russia, and he compares the two places. In Nias, it is

rare for the devil to speak through the patient. In Europe it is more common, such as in Russia, when peasant women suffer a special kind of hysterical illness, during which the devil speaks from them (see my article “Russian Klikushas” in the *Journal of Czech Physicians*).<sup>27</sup>

“Ruské klikuše” [Russian klikushas]—“by doctor P. Durdík in Batavia”—is an ethnography of magical/religious ideas and practices related to healing, sim-

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27 Durdík, “Obábjesloví,” 5:67.

ilar to his later writing on Nias.<sup>28</sup> Just like in Nias, where he would write about priests critically but with a professional interest, so in Russia he focuses on “sorcerers” and Orthodox priests.

The main cause of the “klikusha hysteria” is the “social evil-order” (*společenský zlořád*), including the widespread abuse of women and the medical and legal systems. Durdík’s descriptions of Russian peasant women, as they convulse in pain or hallucinate, are images of the “social evil-order,” just like in Aceh, descriptions of mutilated bodies, mental illness, and malarial hallucinations form a larger picture of a physically/mentally/socially sick colonial war, which embodies the European “evil-order.”

Colonialism is part of the blending of Russia and the Indies, of the hallucinatory foreshadowings and returns. Reading Durdík’s texts on “mother Russia” written during his stay there, before he experienced colonialism in the Indies, reveals more threads and contrary motions in his Czech-Acehnese entanglement with colonialism and patriotism.

The 1874 text “Slovanstvo v Asii a výprava Chivská” [Slavs in Asia and the Khiva expedition] begins with a history of the Russian expansion eastward. Years later, he would write in a book about Sumatra that “in our schools they teach us to misuse the word ‘savages.’”<sup>29</sup> In “Slavs in Asia,” he (mis)uses colonial stereotypes and iconic images of Western colonial cruelty in order to show the violence of “Slavic” expansion. Russian “*kolonialismus*” becomes comparable to the Spanish conquest and any conquest “wherever”:

The conquest of Siberia is comparable to the Spanish subjugation of Mexico and Peru; like there, a handful of adventurers shooting fire won against thousands of savages, armed only with arrows and spears.... The fate of these Siberian natives was equally woeful as wherever savages first encounter a powerful and more developed people. The Russian victors, equal in courage to the companions of Cortez and Pizarro, were also their equals in insatiable greed and inhuman cruelty. Under their cruel yoke, whole nations disappeared, formerly strong and numerous but now known only by name.<sup>30</sup>

As Durdík turns to recent Russian expeditions to Khiva (today in Uzbekistan), he takes the opportunity to discuss British colonialism. The word *osvěta* (“pub-

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28 P. Durdík, “Ruské klikuše,” *Časopis lékařů českých*, Aug.-Sep. 1878.

29 Durdík, *U lidožroutů*, 109.

30 A. F. Balan [pseudonym], “Slovanstvo v Asii a výprava Chivská,” *Osvěta*, vol.4 (1874), 1.

lic education, edification,” a keyword of the Czech “national rebirth”)—also the title of the magazine where the text was published—is sarcastically spotted. Here Russian and British colonialisms are equated.

The advancement of the Russians into Asia is very disagreeable for the English. Both the Russians and the English claim the right and historical calling to spread *osvěta* and the fruits of European culture in Asia. To this end, the [English] took possession of the most beautiful and fertile lowlands of the Indus and Ganges, up to the Himalayas. Enormous treasures of the *země* were the reward for these spreaders of *osvěta*; a stream of gold flows to England.... From the European mainland, however, another spreader of *osvěta* penetrated into Central Asia, having crossed deserts and marches. They were still more than a hundred miles away from magnificent India, but English newspapers struck the drum against inconvenient spreaders of *osvěta* and dangerous competitors in Central Asian markets.<sup>31</sup>

The diagnosis foreshadows his writings on Aceh: “Just like any ‘spreaders of *osvěta*,’ [the English] don’t like to confess that they are concerned only with material profit.”<sup>32</sup>

Durdík then turns to Russian “lying.” He agrees with the Russian critic Rayevsky about “darkness concealing for the Russian public the true state of affairs in Asia.” Rayevsky questions the prevailing notion that the subjugated people have “friendly feelings” towards the Russians, who

took away from them the greater part of their lands and turned independent, eminent Asian rulers into subjugated vassals. Is it believable that overpowered and humiliated rulers have friendly feeling towards Russians? Let us not lie to ourselves, says Rayevsky, both rulers and their subjects hate us.<sup>33</sup>

Durdík wants to go further:

Rayevsky does not address a single word to the question of who is guilty... whether perhaps the whole system, according to which the Russians ad-

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31 Balan, “Slovanstvo,” 8.

32 Balan, “Slovanstvo,” 10–11.

33 Balan, “Slovanstvo,” 180–81.

vance in Asia, is wrong ... The system is summarized in a few words: *to stride unceasingly forward and to attach everything on the way to the empire.*<sup>34</sup>

A year later, Durdík continues the discussion in “Ruský umělec Blažej Vereščagin” [Russian artist Vasily Vereshchagin], published again in *Osvěta*. Durdík admires the painter for similar reasons that he would admire the brave Acehnese: “all [his paintings] surprise with their courage, truth, and reality.”<sup>35</sup> Focusing on paintings of the Russian conquest of Asia, Durdík writes, as he would in the Indies, about people defending their *země* and deconstructs colonial (mis)representations. (Perhaps especially while writing in and about Russia, the word *země* must have resonated for him with its Russian cognate *zemlja*, sacralized in folklore, literature, and imperial patriotism—yet his use of *země*, for African, Central Asian, or later Acehnese homelands, undermined any Czech, Russian, or Slavic claims on exclusive possession of *země/zemlja*.)

Vereshchagin could be contrasted with some French [painters], e.g. Hor[ace] Vernet. ... [Vernet was] imbued with a one-sided patriotism, which even the French criticized. For him, the French soldier was a wonder of nature; he employed all colors to depict his unprecedented virtues and perfections...; inevitably, his enemy had to be smeared, humiliated—the Arab and the Bedouin, who did nothing bad except for defending a small part of their *země*. Vernet laid the prettiest, pinkest color on his darlings’ faces, bayonets, and sabers and heaped everything abhorrent, dark, half-dumb, and monstrous on the poor African victims of the French beardos. In Vereshchagin, we find nothing like this. His vision encompasses both sides. From his paintings rises a scream of outrage and protest against barbarity, insincerity, and cruelty, regardless whether he sees it in strangers or in his own.<sup>36</sup>

Representations of conquest through images of corpses and skulls deeply impressed the future army doctor—this was “courage, truth, and reality.”

It is too difficult to describe the impact of his painting: in the midst of a steppe burned into a desert, among dried, scorched trees and clamoring ravens, there looms a hill of skulls with sabre wounds and bullet holes, and

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34 Balan, “Slovanstvo,” 184.

35 A. F. Balan, “Ruský umělec Blažej Vereščagin,” *Osvěta* 5 (1875), 561.

36 Balan, “Ruský umělec,” 563.



Figure 2.5. Vasily Vereshchagin, *The Apotheosis of War*, 1871. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

on the frame, the artist wrote in bulging gold letters: *Apotheosis of War. For All Past, Current, and Future Great Conquerors.*<sup>37</sup>

Durdík would remark later about headhunting in Nias: “Of course, it is an appalling custom, but what are those few dozen heads next to the thousands and thousands of human lives lost in European wars!”<sup>38</sup>

Islam figures in both Russia and the Dutch Indies. The Russians fight “the Muslim population who hate Christians and consider war against them their duty.”<sup>39</sup> The Acehnese “are Mohammedans, for whom death for native soil is a religious duty and the greatest heroism” (60). Everywhere—Russian Asia, French Africa, Aceh—the Holy War blends with a patriotic defense of *země* against the Empire.

Durdík recognized Sumatran mud as a “Slavic buddy,” but it was also foreshadowed in “Slavs in Asia,” as was his “passage through the fire of the chills.” A Russian military expedition failed because the snow was so deep “that camels and horses sank into it up to their bellies and perished in droves”; or “there were deep waves of sand, with no trace of water, and the heat reached 50°C]; sixty soldiers died from sunstroke, among soldiers and camels there was an

37 Balan, “Ruský umělec,” 563–64.

38 Durdík, “O domácím životě,” 39.

39 Balan, “Slovanstvo,” 5.

outbreak of dysentery, and almost the whole army became sick”;<sup>40</sup> and there was the “terrible windstorm *tebbad* (a chill wind), which not only causes the chills on hard soil, but can bury anything it likes in the steppes.”<sup>41</sup> No wonder, then, that in the Indies he felt: “*Tout comme chez nous!*”

Durdík writes from Sumatra: “There are soldiers here who fought in Mexico, Spain, and the Crimea” (146-7). He mentions “a colleague, a German, who was formerly in Turkish service in the war against Russia” (95). The imperial wars did not coalesce just in Durdík’s mind. They were fought by the same soldiers, as if this was just one great battle in a global war between Empire and *země*.

Vereshchagin’s painting *Forgotten*, with its image of a “desert with a dead man in the middle of the mountains, after a battle, reminds the viewer of Lermontov and his poem *Valerik*.”<sup>42</sup> The Russian poet Mikhail Lermontov had served in the Russian imperial army in Asia and admired the tribal people he fought against. *Valerik* is the name of a place in Chechnya, where a battle took place. The poem is framed as a letter from the war. Durdík writes in a letter from Aceh how he was reminded again of “*Valerik*,” and some of his lines (“There is enough space...”) loosely paraphrase the conclusion of the poem:

From Kozinka, the enemies were visible on the mountains, running around, flitting like mosquitoes. Farther in the distance, there was a bluish mountain range, amphitheater-like, rising above groups of smaller mountains and the dense green of the hills: a lofty view, especially when the rising sun successively illuminated the peaks in a golden light. Lermontov’s miraculously beautiful poem “*Valerik*”—composed in the Caucasus after a murderous skirmish, when the air smelled of fresh human blood—came to my mind. There is enough space for everyone on earth [*země*], the sun is shining merrily, in nature everything breathes joy and calm, only people burn with hatred and let themselves be incited to kill one another... Oh, woeful people! And they even claim that such mutual mass killing is the most powerful agent of human progress. Isn’t such progress a delusion [*blud*] and deception? And doesn’t it benefit only the privileged classes? (148)

Kozinka, derived from *koza* (“goat” in Czech), is Durdík’s affectionate name for *Gle Kambing*, “Goat Hill,” near a fort where he was stationed. Kozinka is also

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40 Balan, “Slovanstvo,” 15

41 Balan, “Slovanstvo,” 16.

42 Balan, “Ruský umělec,” 564.

mentioned in an early letter (the one with the “*Slavic hat*”) as a spot in Hradec where he often went at sunrise. Acehnese mountains and the Dutch colonial war, the Caucasus and Russian imperial expansion, Durdík’s letters, Russian poetry, student days in “despotic” “German Hradec” ... homely Kozinka ... beautiful *země* ... people murdering each other ... —they all mix and coalesce like in a hallucination, yet with a strange, revelatory coherence.

Before the Dutch in the Indies, Durdík wrote about the Russians in Asia, the British in India, the French in Africa—and closest to home, the ultimate Other: the “Germans” in central/eastern Europe. His writings on Russia are interspersed with references to German imperialism as part of the tangle of empires, including Germany’s relations with Russia, and a potential conflict over “Western,” “non-Russian Slavs,” such as the Czechs. In England, he writes, people believe in Russian ambitions in Afghanistan and India, “just like many Germans believe in the instigation of non-Russian Slavs by the Russians.”<sup>43</sup> German imperialism in eastern Europe turns out to be a target of the critique of Russian involvement in Asia when Durdík represents the view of “progressive people in Russia”:

Not colonization of Central Asia, and not the Eastern question, but resisting the German people, strengthening the defenses against them, not merely by weapons and fortifications, but primarily by a good internal order, prosperity, and *osvěta* is the true calling. ... If the Germans subjugate... [Durdík describes the threat of a German expansion eastward into Russia].<sup>44</sup>

Russia’s relationship with other Slavs and the entanglement of multiple imperialisms in Central Europe is the focus of Durdík’s “*Slavjanofilská strana na Rusi*” [The Slavophile Party in Russia].

In Bohemia, the word Slavophile is used generally to denote a friend of the Slavs; but in Russia, the word has a precise historical meaning .... [Slavophiles] call for the Russification of other Slavs. The German-French War, having strengthened German unity, strengthened even more these Pan-Russists in their view that Czechs have no other option but voluntary Russification.<sup>45</sup>

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43 Balan, “*Slovanstvo*,” 7.

44 Balan, “*Slovanstvo*,” 99.

45 Pavel Durdík, “*Slavjanofilská strana na Rusi*,” *Osvěta* 2 (1873), 81.

Durdík quotes a Russian Slavophile, noting his “contempt for small nations”:

“Slavs in Austria deserve only the name of ethnicity and must inevitably be subjugated to the Germans, who, in all justice, must be called a nation, because the seven ethnicities—Polish, Malorussians, Czechs, Slovaks, Croats, and Slovenes—... are each separately so weak and so few, that not one of them can create an independent, powerful empire.” ... Why is it necessary that each Slavic people must inevitably constitute a big nation? ... The Czech has since time immemorial fought with the German without losing his spirit, and the Serbs liberated their realm on their own initiative from the Turks.<sup>46</sup>

While they claim “moral” motivations, Durdík suggests that the Slavophiles are, in their imperial mentality, more like the Germans: “A great nation, [Fadееv] says, calls for war—what morality is that? ... Then Fadееv should be admiring the Germans, who in a few years won against two superpowers.”<sup>47</sup>

In the Indies, Durdík would continue thinking of the right of small nations to exist in the face of empires: “As a matter of course, every Dutch administrator speaks perfect Malay,” in contrast to the language situation and “equal rights on paper [only]” in “the heart of Europe” (221).

Durdík’s analysis of Russian Slavophilia further entangles us in the tangle of imperialisms through which he would see Dutch colonialism in the Indies. The Russian imperial perspective on the Slavs in Europe, entangled there with German power, mirrors its imperial expansion into Asia, which is in turn entangled with the British Empire in India. But Russia is both an imperial threat to the Czechs and is also “mother Russia,” a land of origin not only for Russian Slavophiles, but also in a widespread Czecho-Slavic orientation. The “Editor’s Afterward” to the “Slavophile Party” article remains close to Durdík’s complex position when it endorses his warnings yet reconfirms the relevance of Pan-Slavism: “The arrogance, imperiousness, and greed of the Germans, announcing now shamelessly that it is their calling to rule over the Slavs, cannot but awaken and strengthen not only a feeling of Pan-Slavism but mutual devotion and affinity among Russians and Czechs.”<sup>48</sup> Durdík attacks certain “delusions” and “hallucinations” [*bludy, blouznění*] of Pan-Slavism, but never quite abandons his concern with Slavdom; and his devotion to Russian liter-

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46 Durdík, “Slavjanofilská strana,” 100–1.

47 Durdík, “Slavjanofilská strana,” 103.

48 Durdík, “Slavjanofilská strana,” 103.



ature, as its prominent scholar and translator, adds another layer to his critique. The title of his “Slavs in Asia” is provocative, as if saying: “Hey, Slavs! It is *our* Slavic colonialism, *our* violence and lyingness.” In letters from Russia, he writes critically about the Czechs—including “many families from Hradec,” among them a former classmate—participating in the “colonization” of Russian Asia as settlers—the “Slavs in Asia” were also Russiaward Czechs.<sup>49</sup> The ambiguous love/fear of motherly-imperial Slavs, at the moment of need for protection from the despotically paternalistic Germans, helps us to understand that when he writes about Empire “anywhere,” he is writing about home; and his war on imperial delusions, in the Dutch Indies and elsewhere, already began in his reflections on the Slavs.

Among the imperial *bludy* are Russian Slavophile images of exotic non-Russian “Slavs”: “Under the name Slav, some imagine a son of nature, in a picturesque dress, which is reminiscent of the costume of Italian bandits; this son lives on rocky slopes and sings songs full of hatred against the Turks.”<sup>50</sup> Durdík here seems to caricature the stereotype of the Montenegrin as figured in Russian as well as—with distinct resonances—Czech discourse.<sup>51</sup> Yet Durdík’s “brave Acehnese” in some ways resembles this and other coeval Czech images of other peoples whose fate resonated with the narratives of Czech national subjugation and/or liberation, such as the American “Indians” or African slaves. Both Durdík’s “Acehnese” and the Czech “Montenegrin” love and bravely defend their mountainous native land, in images of gory violence; both are physically strong, healthy, upright men, in contrast to sickly, Westernized/civilized/Germanized Czechs. They are Eastern and Southern, yet their very otherness, along with their affinity to Czechs as small nations whose existence is threatened by empires, qualifies them to serve as models for the Czechs.

However, Durdík ridicules the stereotypical Montenegrin, and his preferred model, the Acehnese, does differ from the former. The Montenegrin fighting the “Turk” abounded in derogatory European stereotypes of Muslims and the Orient. Durdík’s admiration for the Acehnese—Muslims fighting Europeans—went more straightforwardly against the grain. Moreover, the Montenegrin was above all seen as the unspoiled, original Slav. “Our” ideal was thus the

49 Letter to Josef Durdík, February 7/19, 1869, in *Samostatnost*, March 23, 1913; letter to parents, October 8/20, 1869, MoL.

50 Durdík, “Slavjanofilská strana,” 83.

51 My comments on Czech images of the Montenegrins draw on František Šístek, *Junáci, horalé a lenoši: Obraz Černé Hory a Černohorců v české společnosti 1830–2006* [Heroes, mountaineers, and sluggards: The image of Montenegro and Montenegrins in Czech society 1830–2006] (Prague: Historický ústav, 2011).

innermost of “our” in-group. Durdík’s model for the Czechs comes from far away from the Slavic world—even as the Acehnese *země* hallucinatingly mirrors Czech native soil. He first wanted to go to “India” to sing “*Hej Slované!*” yet he ended up escaping—never quite successfully—not just from the Germans, but from the Slavs as well.

When he was in Russia, he wrote to a Czech doctor who had just arrived in Moscow: the Czechs who admire “despotic Russia” are *zbloudilci* (“those who have gone astray,” from *bloudit*). “Pan-Slavism. What a gang! If I were you, I would rather go to Switzerland than stay in Moscow. ... Or wouldn’t you let me go to Switzerland instead of you?”<sup>52</sup>

Durdík attacks Pan-Slavic chauvinism—with its “East is East and West is West”—as an imperial delusion, and contrasts it to “true patriotism.”<sup>53</sup>

We are not like our bearded ancestors—thankfully! ... Everything national means nothing before being human. The main thing is to be humans and not such Slavs as our ancestors were.<sup>54</sup>

The motto of his article, from a classic of Czech Pan-Slavism, amplifies this point: “When one says ‘Slav,’ let one hear ‘human.’”

But for Durdík, the “human” is not an ideal either, but rather a patient to be diagnosed. In Aceh, he had a chance, yet again, to reflect on the “human,” in himself:

From the captured village I took as booty two pikes, two *klewangs*, a shotgun, some Acehnese coins, a tiny cannon, and a few Arabic books, beautifully written, religious in content; *all that is now my property by the right of the victor*. ... When I said the words, whispered to me by the devil himself, “that is now my property by the right of the victor,” I was very happy, yet soon I was ashamed of myself that a predatory beast had awakened within me, that I allowed myself to be overcome by the robbers’ lust, for which the European invented a special formula, which allows him to commit villainies and robberies .... The appalling robbers’ instinct joyfully moved my heart, albeit for a short moment, but it moved it nonetheless. ... That’s how they educated us! In schools, children recite “You shall not kill”—and when

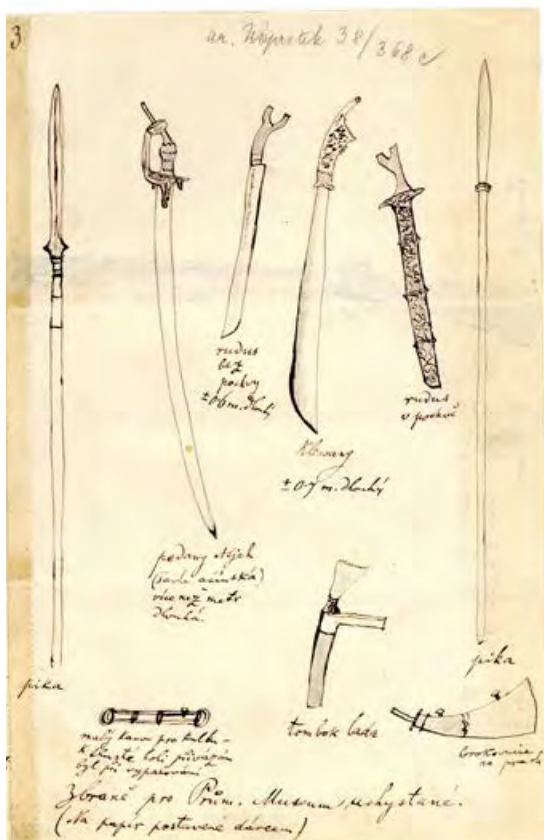
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52 Letter to unidentified colleague, July 4, 1871, MoL.

53 Durdík, “Slavjanofilská strana,” 85.

54 Durdík, “Slavjanofilská strana,” 95.

they grow up, they are told: “Kill as many enemies as possible.” And beastly cruelty at once takes over in the human. ... The human—a great fairy tale, but also a great beast. In him there is 90% of bestiality—in war, he becomes a total beast. (159–60)



**Figure 2.6.** “Weapons for the Industrial Museum, put on paper by the donor,” including two pikes, a *klewang*, etc. Durdík’s drawing in a letter from Aceh, 1879. The Czech Industrial Museum was a major centre of patriotic *osvěta* in Prague. It is now a branch of the National Museum. (Archive of Náprstek Museum.)



**Figure 2.7.** “*Pedang Atjeh* (Acehnese sabre) longer than a meter” (as described by Durdík in a drawing). Shipped by him to the Industrial Museum in Prague in 1882. (Courtesy of Náprstek Museum).

## Forever Escaping Kakania

A cognate of *blud* (delusion), *bloud* (an erring or delusional person), and *zbloudilec* (similar as *bloud*, or someone who lost his way), *bloudíš* can mean “you are wandering, have lost your way, or are deluded.” The words linked to *bloudění* (“wandering, getting lost, being deluded”)—along, and often interchangeably, with *blouznění* (“being delusional, hallucinating”)—were often used by Durdík in reference to Czech thinking about themselves and others, including very frequently about the Czech sense of Slavic fraternity with Russia and the “deification of Russian mud.”<sup>55</sup> However, it also referred to his readers’ thinking about people in the Indies, such as when he writes that whoever thinks that tribal people in Nias “do not have feeling and do not feel like civilized peoples, is utterly deluded / has wandered far [*bloudil by velmi*].”

*Bloudíš velice*—“you are utterly deluded / you have entirely lost your way”—says Durdík’s Acehnese as he encounters the invaders on a path. (“Why do you enter my *země*? ... you tread our soil, uninvited, and *bloudíš velice*...”; 16.) I think of Durdík’s chaotic running and dreaming to/away; of trudging through Sumatran and Russian mud, of all his wandering, his travels, his delusions and hallucinations; of all the contrary, risky directions of his thinking; of the wandering comparisons across the globe, across the tangle of empires, patriotisms, wars, and human beastliness, concluding in an unsettled “*Tout comme chez nous!*” Not despite *bloudění* and *blouznění*, but through them, he achieved, in a panic, feverishly, a certain truthfulness about the world in which he wandered; a sharpness of vision.

At eighteen, he wrote about “Hradec servility” and reported: “Many people have scolded me because I slouch when I walk. (As soon as I graduate from high school, I will walk upright in many and diverse respects.)”<sup>56</sup>

There is a directness and certainty, like that of a doctor’s hand holding a scalpel, to the Acehnese man’s admonition, to his gait, as he refuses to step off the path and make way for the invaders; a *klewang*-like, scalpel-like certainty that cuts through the tangle of delusions—of the “Dutch patriotic historians,” Czech “paper protests,” Pan-Slavic dreams... There is freedom in that Acehnese man’s words and stance, an abundance of freedom that was not there in “German Hradec”—and one wouldn’t be surprised if at the next moment the brave Acehnese warrior were to burst into singing with great patriotic fervor,

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55 Letter, February 7/19, 1869, in *Samostatnost*, March 23, 1913.

56 Letter, June 23, 1861, in *Samostatnost*, January 5, 1913.

in Czech of course, drawing an **S** in the air with his *klewang*, finally free to let his song resound over his *země*, his *domovina* (*die Heimat*):

Hej **S**lované!



**Figure 2.8.** The Acehese (Photo by author.) In 2011, I travelled to Aceh, now a province of Indonesia, long free from the Dutch. Expanses of old forests have been cleared by Indonesian and multinational corporations, each a palm oil empire. People talked to me about the Indonesian military occupation of the province in the last few decades, the cruelty of the Indonesian soldiers, the riches of the land that benefited only politicians and businessmen in Jakarta; the armed resistance; the forested mountains where they would retreat, and where the Indonesian soldiers, so much like the colonial Dutch before them, did not dare to follow them. Some showed me scars on their bodies, others in their land. I spent some time with a fisherman who invited me to join him on his boat, a warm, unobtrusively friendly man. There will be no peace in Aceh, he believed, until it is free from Indonesia, so they must fight on. Standing upright in his boat, he was used to speaking in a strong voice, which had to carry over the sound of the sea and the rattling of the engine, but it was a calm voice, simply sharing a fact: “Kami orang Aceh berani mati, siap mandi darah. Asal untuk keadilan.” (“We Acehese dare to die, we are ready to bathe in blood – as long as it is for justice.”) “Dr. Durdík?” I asked in Czech. “So you did escape Kakania.”

# THE FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF SINGAPORE IN SERBIAN LITERATURE

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*Nada Savković*



The first impressions of Southeast Asia in Serbian literature were written by Milan Jovanović Morski (1834–1896), a writer, world traveller, physician, professor, scientist, critic, playwright, and member of the Serbian Royal Academy.<sup>1</sup> He was born on April 24, 1834 in the village Jarkovac in Banat, about eighty kilometers north of Belgrade, just inside the southern border of the Habsburg Monarchy, and died in Belgrade on June 6, 1896. Baptized as Manojlo, he later changed his name to Milan. He finished four years of elementary school in his native village Jarkovac, a Serbian community, and subsequently learned German in the lower grades of secondary school in the town of Vršac where his father was engaged in trade. The Serbian village lay within the military frontier zone, where Jovanović's father was a border captain. The inhabitants of the zone were divided between Serbian soldiers, to whom the military regulations of the frontier zone applied, and farmers and peasants who worked on the landowner's fields, to whom Hungarian laws applied. These locals often fell victim to Hungarian robbers. After fighting broke out between Serbs and Hungarians in 1848 and 1849, the family moved to Vršac, a town that was also in Banat, about ninety kilometers to the northeast of Belgrade. Vršac was, for the most part, a German town, populated with Serbian inhabitants as well, living alongside Aromanians,<sup>2</sup> Hungarians, French, Italians, Czechs, Romanians, and Slovaks. Jovanović attended the lower gymnasium (preparatory high school) where he was taught in Latin and German. His father Lazar was

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1 Now the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (1841).

2 The Aromanians, also known as Tsintsari in Serbia, are a minor ethnic group native to the southern Balkans. Their vernacular descends from the vulgar Latin spoken in the Balkans during the Roman period.

engaged in trade in Vršac, which meant that the military regulations no longer applied to him.

Jovanović attended grammar school in Timisoara, a city about eighty kilometres north of Vršac, also under Habsburg rule and now in present-day Romania, where he learned Greek and Hungarian among other subjects, and graduated in Pest in 1854. Petar Jagodić, an aristocrat from the Banat region who owned land near Vršac, funded his medical studies in Vienna (1854–1865). In Vienna, he was elected the first president of the “Zora” student association at its founding assembly in 1863. While in Vienna, Jovanović married Theresa Labor, a Viennese lady of Czech origin. Jovanović’s contemporary, Andra Gavrilović, notes that theirs was a civil marriage, because she was a Catholic. She was born in Hořovice in Bohemia and spoke to her and Jovanović’s son in Serbian, German, and Czech. Jovanović had grown up and lived in a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional environment. For him, school was “the most important institution of our society.”<sup>3</sup> Thanks to his education, he had the opportunity to travel extensively and to become part of the intellectual and cultural elite of his nation. In addition, education helped him to understand and accept differences in the world around him.

In 1865, Jovanović suddenly left his studies and moved to Belgrade, where he became a part-time professor of forensic medicine and hygiene at the Higher School. He also taught hygiene at the Higher School for Women, the School of Theology, and the State Real Gymnasium at that time. He graduated from the Faculty of Medicine in Leipzig and defended his doctoral thesis in 1867. Almost two years later he received a double recognition: he became a member of the Serbian Learned Society and an honorary member of the Matica srpska, the oldest Serbian literary, cultural, and scientific society.<sup>4</sup> At the beginning of 1875 he went to Herceg Novi in Montenegro, where he worked as a municipal doctor, treating participants of the Herzegovina uprising. For almost two years, he was also the court doctor of Prince Nikola of Montenegro and later

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3 Milan Jovanović, “Školovanje u Srbiji i Slivnica” [Schooling in Serbia and Slivnica], *Otadžbina* [Homeland] XVII/66 (1887): 298.

4 Matica Srpska was founded in 1826 in Pest. From the very beginning, the aim of Matica Srpska was to present Serbian culture to Europe, on the one hand, while fully incorporating Serbia in modern European trends, on the other. At the same time, it aimed at maintaining Serbian cultural identity, as well as enlightening the people. Matica Srpska served as an example for many Slavic nations. Based on this model, the following were established: Czech Matica (1831), Illyrian Matica (1842; in 1874 renamed to Matica Hrvatska, Matica Lužičkosrpska (1847), Halych-Russian Matica (1848, Lvov), Moravian Matica (1849), Matica Dalmatinska (1861, Zadar), Slovak Matica (1863), Slovenian Matica (1864), Matica Opava (1877), Polish Matica (1882, Lvov), etc. In 1864, Matica Srpska relocated in Novi Sad, where it is today.

worked as a ship doctor for several years. He was in a childless marriage for ten years, when his only son, Mladen, was born in June 1879 in Vienna, whence he returned to join his family. However, not long after that, he decided that it was time to settle down and to return to Serbia. His cosmopolitanism was set aside due to his wish to raise his son in the Serbian spirit. He lived and worked mainly in Belgrade from 1882 until the end of his life. In addition to translating from German, French, English, Russian, and the classical languages, he also spoke Hungarian, Italian, and all the Slavonic languages.<sup>5</sup> Cultural Pan-Slavism was widespread among the Serbs as well as all the Slavs in the Austrian Empire, which contributed to the rapprochement of the Slavic peoples, while simultaneously adding to their resistance to Austrian and Hungarian domination.

Having been employed as a ship doctor with the Austrian Lloyd steamship company in the summer of 1877, he accepted the job once again and sailed on the *Helios* from Trieste to Bombay from 1878 to 1882. He sent his impressions to emerging Serbian-language magazines of the time: *Srpska Zora* [Serbian dawn], *Srpske Ilustrovane novine* [Serbian illustrated newspaper], *Javor* [Maple], *Letopis Matice srpske* [Chronicle of Matica Srpska], and *Otadžbina* [Homeland]. The magazines were not just literary in nature, but also had an educational and cultural emphasis. National ideas, due to censorship in the Habsburg monarchy, could not be presented openly, thus one of the ways to do so was to express them through educational instruction in various fields. Newspapers and magazines made a great contribution to the process of shaping the Serbian literary language and creating a national literature, in addition to promoting religion, the mainstays of the Serbian national and cultural identity. It was at this time, in the last decades of the nineteenth century and near the end of the age of romanticism, that the first Serbian literary magazines appeared.

Jovanović's texts, previously published in these magazines, were later edited and published as special travel books in the Srpska Književna Zadruga library: *S mora i sa suva* [From the sea and from the dry land, 1892], *Tamo amo po Istorku* [Hither and yon in the east: volume one, 1894 and volume two, 1895], and *Gore dole po Napulju* [Around Naples, 1898], which he dedicated to the travel writer Ljubomir Nenadović. His travel stories and impressions are most prominent in the texts collected in the book *Hither and Yon in the East*. Most of the travel accounts were published in the form of letters sent to Vladan Đorđević, the editor of *Homeland*, and first appeared in the journal of the same name in

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5 See Snežana Veljković, *Gospodin koji nije znao sanskrit* [The gentleman who did not know Sanskrit] (Belgrade: Laguna, 2016).



1883, 1887, 1889, and 1891–1892 (“Alexandria,” “The Suez Canal,” “Along the Red Sea,” “Aden,” “On the Ocean,” “Bombay,” “Ceylon,” “Calcutta,” “Bengal,” “Malay Sea,” and “Singapore”) while the last two accounts (“The Sea of China” and “Hong Kong”) were published as books in Srpska Književna Zadruga (Volume One, 1894 and Volume Two, 1895).

One of Belgrade’s more important journals, *Homeland* (1875–1876; 1880–1892) was founded with the financial help of Prince Milan Obrenović and used the old French magazine *Revue des deux mondes* as a model. Jovan Skerlić, a literary historian, considered it a “reflection of Serbian literature.”<sup>6</sup> The magazine favored “national sciences” such as Serbian history. Jovanović Morski was its editor during the last year of its publication, when the magazine was in dire financial straits. There is almost no issue of *Homeland* without a travelogue, with stories of foreign geographical and cultural areas predominating.

Milan Jovanović Morski wrote after his daily professional obligations were completed. In his view, travel writing was not a marginal genre, and he wrote several travel books about his impressions of the Far East and the Levant. The Serbian literary historian Ivo Tartalja once noted: “It is difficult to say whether Jovanović became a travel writer because he travelled a lot, or whether he travelled a lot to satisfy the call of a travel writer within himself.”<sup>7</sup> The writer Simo Matavulj (1852–1908) described Jovanović as an artistic soul, a man of encyclopedic knowledge, a musician, and an entertaining story-teller who was the life and soul of every party. His numerous displacements in life suggest that he always sought change. He worked or studied in Naples, Timisoara, Vršac, Vienna, Leipzig, Belgrade, Novi Sad, Herceg Novi, Cetinje, and Trieste, before spending the last years of his life in Belgrade. He not only moved to distant lands, but also often moved from one corner of the area where the Serbs lived to another: from north to south and from east to west. His decisions leading to frequent changes in his environment were influenced by dissatisfaction on either a professional or political level, and were often motivated by patriotic feelings. Such a lifestyle reflected his feeling that he never really belonged anywhere. Travel marked his life, just as travelogues marked his literary work. He strove to acquire as much knowledge as possible in order to be of the greatest benefit to his people. He also confirmed his patriotism as a military doctor in the

6 Jovan Skerlić, *Istorija nove srpske književnosti* [History of new Serbian literature] (Belgrade: Rad, 1953), 346.

7 Ivo Tartalja, “Jedan zaboravljen majstor srpske proze iz perioda ranog realizma” [One forgotten master of Serbian prose from the period of early realism], *Zbornik radova Naučnog sastanka slavista u Vukove dane* [Collection of papers of the Scientific Meeting of Slavists in the Days of Vuk] 13, no. 2 (1984): 130.



Figure 3.1. Malay Village, watercolour by Milan Jovanović Morski

wars in which Serbia participated. In addition to his journeys, he also acquired knowledge through tireless reading. The literary historian Goran Maksimović views Jovanović's travel books as the best part of his literary work.<sup>8</sup>

As a travel writer, Jovanović was the follower and admirer of Ljubomir Nenadović (1826–1895) the founder of the modern Serbian travelogue.<sup>9</sup> Jovanović's approach is peculiar for the marked symbiosis of the artistic and the documentary. He imbued his telling of events and human destinies and his striking traveler impressions of distant spaces, countries, and peoples with historical and geographical facts about the new spaces he had come to know.

In his second book, *Hither and Yon in the East*, he also gave his impressions on travelling around Southeast Asia—from Bengal to Singapore, describing, among other things, the Malay Sea and Penang. It was the first description of Southeast Asia in Serbian literature. The beautiful landscapes of the Straits of Malacca, the narrow stretch of water, the main shipping channel between the Indian and Pacific Oceans left an indelible impression on him. The first lines

8 Goran Maksimović, "Putopisna proza Milana Jovanovića Morskog" [Travel prose of Milan Jovanović Morski], *Zbornik Matice srpske za književnost i jezik* [Matica Srpska Journal of Literature and Language] 56, no. 3 (2008): 627.

9 It is interesting to note that the epistolary form was the most common form of Serbian travel prose of the nineteenth century. Nenadović's publications included *Pisma iz Italije* [Letters from Italy, 1851], *Pisma iz Nemačke* [Letters from Germany, 1852], *Pisma iz Švajcarske* [Letters from Switzerland, 1852], *Pisma iz Pariza* [Letters from Paris, 1855], *Druga pisma iz Nemačke* [Other letters from Germany, 1870], and *Pisma sa Cetinja ili o Crnogorcima* [Letters from Cetinje or about Montenegrins, 1889].

of his chapter about Singapore are a lively description of this heaven on earth as he saw it—admirable, fascinating, and dazzling.

If all the sea routes were as smooth and beautiful as the Malay Archipelago, maritime life would be the most pleasant thing in the world .... We are now on a quiet river that has no equal in the world, and it offers us so many interesting things, that we have nothing else to think about. Here, in this beautiful corner of the Earth, begins that vast Malay world, scattered over countless islands, large and small, which, if merged, starting from the east coast of Africa to the west coast of America, would probably form a continent larger than both of these worlds, the old and the new together.<sup>10</sup>

Jovanović also did watercolors of the Malay villages. He was mesmerized by the natural beauty of the area along the way from Penang southeast to Singapore. He was particularly impressed with the beauty of Penang, comparing it to the Bosphorus and Venice. He saw Penang not as a settlement, but as a *dubrava*—a very old Serbian word for “woodland”—distinguished by its lush vegetation. He had never seen such lush flora before, and due to the rich vegetation, one could barely feel the equatorial heat. Rows of trees stretched along the streets, protecting passers-by from the sun’s rays. It seemed to him that the flat part of the island, around seven or eight kilometers in diameter, was a wonderful park crisscrossed with straight and flat roads. Along the main roads there was a bamboo hedge, cut to one meter in height. The houses had flowerbeds in the front and shaded gardens in the back. The bamboo hedge made way for house entrances with blossoming trees on either side, as if they intended these to be natural green gateways.

Jovanović was an advocate of natural philosophy, believing in the unity of spirit and nature. He wrote often, enthusiastically, and in great detail about landscapes and nature, and believed that environment and nature were very important in forming a person’s character. He did not find it strange that people from the southeast were the first to give the greatest contribution to the development of human civilization, because all the conditions for the development of human nature were met there:

The warm climate multiplied humanity as it did the plants, and under the clear sky, one could see the joy of the soul, which found in rich nature an

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<sup>10</sup> Milan Jovanović, *Tamo amo po Istoku: druga knjiga* [Hither and yon in the East: second book] (Belgrade: Srpska književna zadruga, 1895), 110–11.

abundance of food for the development of its powers. [...] man could rise to the level of self-awareness, whence he felt himself part of a unity and adapted his activities to the overall benefit of the whole—in other words, he wanted to rise to the height of a cultured man.<sup>11</sup>

But Jovanović did not write only about the landscape and the environment. He also focused his attention on people, using every opportunity to explore towns and cities. He wrote about the Malays that their eyes “radiate wit which has created quite a great amount of literature, and their clothing and furniture show a certain degree of culture, which has always been important among the other tribes of Oceania.”<sup>12</sup> He observed that Englishmen were unscrupulous conquerors who had double standards in their treatment of the local population. The indigenous population was subjected to severe colonization, condemned to universal exploitation, and was unprotected by the law. The peoples of Southeast Asia:

must bow down to the greatest European master, and, if they have no wish to endure it, they are decimated in the most terrible manner until they are subdued. So-called European civilization seems to be another form of primitive African barbarism: the native sultans no longer sell slaves to America, but now both they and their subjects are slaves to European farmers, and their only vague relief is that they are enslaved in their own country.<sup>13</sup>

Jovanović felt deeply ashamed because of the cruelty and brutality of the ship’s officers and sailors towards the Asians. For example, in a pub in Singapore frequented by English sailors, he witnessed a scene for which he said “the word barbarism was too mild a term.” He emphasized:

In the middle of the day, in front of a pub, a drunken sailor chased an unfortunate female in the most scandalous manner, and to the joy of his not very sober pals, who, standing around, followed the desperate jumps and screams of the pitiful girl with Homeric laughter after each such attack. The English police ignored such excesses.<sup>14</sup>

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11 Milan Jovanović, „Pogled na kulturu Islama i na upliv njezin u našem narodu“ [An overview of the culture of Islam and its influence on our people], *Letopis Maticе srpske* [Chronicle of Matica Srpska] 134 (1883): 16.

12 Jovanović, *Tamo amo po Istoku*, 111.

13 Jovanović, *Tamo amo po Istoku*, 113.

14 Jovanović, *Tamo amo po Istoku*, 137.

In addition to describing the places where opium was used, he specified how much money, for instance, the English were making just from the worldwide opium trade and their efforts in encouraging addiction to this opiate. It was amazing to him that they, as invaders, had no respect for civilizations far older than their own.

Singapore is the Eldorado of opium smokers. The English State has an annual income of eight million pounds from raw opium. But that's not all the income she makes from that item. England ships it to Singapore where special entrepreneurs separate the soluble and smokable parts of opium from the raw product .... These entrepreneurs pay exorbitant sums in the form of "rent"... the sum of eight million pounds probably doubles by the time the opium reaches China. Such an income made it worthwhile for England to wage two wars against China, until they forced her to allow the import of this poison into her territory, thus destroying the health and morals of her people – and this is how the so-called European civilizing mission in Asia has shown its true colors.<sup>15</sup>

Jovanović loved to describe the sea (his nickname *Morski* means “mariner”); he wrote striking pages about sailing through the Bay of Bengal. Inspirational descriptions of a calm sea surface: “We will arrive in early November, when the Indian Ocean is as flat and smooth as a frozen alpine lake.”<sup>16</sup> The ship sailed quietly and silently. The beauty of the landscape induced him to express accentuated lyrical feelings. He often described the passengers on his steamer, as well as the sailors and the troublesome moments of their calling – the dangers of a stormy sea and the underwater reefs that make even the largest ships sink in a matter of minutes. He also pointed to the solidarity that exists at sea and the willingness to help those in distress, but also to the lack of solidarity among the English for whom time is money and which is why the crew of the English ship was not prepared to stop and render aid to a Russian ship in distress which needed fuel. The Russian ship had run out of coal due to bad weather that had lasted for several days. Despite the fact that maritime law requires that help be provided an endangered crew in such situations, and although they requested help from two or three English ships, they did not get any because the English were unwilling to lose a whole day's time whilst pro-

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15 Jovanović, *Tamo amo po Istoku*, 134–35.

16 Jovanović, *Tamo amo po Istoku*, 69.

viding assistance. Jovanović concludes ironically that “philanthropy and similar trifles do not pay off if they cost money or its equivalent in time, and only hurt pride can drive them to waste both mercilessly.”<sup>17</sup>

While on board, he was able to gain an understanding of Chinese society by observing its workers and merchants. The passengers on the ship were predominantly Chinese, and he wrote about Chinese culture. He described their habits, proper cleanliness, and orderliness. All Chinese, both adults and children, wash their hands and feet and brush their teeth thoroughly when they get up; they rub their feet “like ducks” until they are clean, so “their shoes are so clean on the inside that many Europeans might envy them.”<sup>18</sup> He also writes about their diet and tendency to moderation, which in his view was a reflection of the philosophy of Confucianism.

These people eat quite frugally, and yet they are not only healthy, but also unusually strong and tenacious when they work, and their children are very strong and cheerful. Among this crowd of Chinese, I began to wonder if the cause of many of our physical and moral troubles might not lie in our abundant and not easily digestible food, and since then I have been thinking about it more often, and it seems to me more and more plausible. I don't know if Confucius, like our wise men, advised his people to be moderate, but if he did so, I can freely say that the Chinese obeyed him more than we obey our teachers of moderation. Chinese people do not drink spirits, so there is no drunkenness, and therefore no excess behavior: in the ten days that these people were on the ship, no harsh word could be heard among them; they seemed to me like a harmonious family.<sup>19</sup>

He did not avoid writing about what he saw as the dark sides of their culture, such as smoking opium and the custom of preventing foot growth in women.

Jovanović wrote at length about Singapore, the largest city in the region. In addition to the impressions of the landscape, he also devoted attention to describing the flora and fauna of Singapore, writing about monkeys, parrots, and shells, and about the beautiful gardens and flowers, as well as providing information about trade, exports, and the cultivation of rattan and coffee. As in India, the English found local sultans here, whom they subdued. The town,

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17 Jovanović, *Tamo amo po Istoku*, 74.

18 Jovanović, *Tamo amo po Istoku*, 102.

19 Jovanović, *Tamo amo po Istoku*, 105.

which the English turned into a staging post on their way to China, was neither as beautiful nor as big as Penang in his opinion. It was far from the docks and could not be seen.

You have to walk down a long, overgrown alley to get there, and as you approach port you can see scattered suburban houses to the left and right along this dusty road. These are the settlements of mostly Chinese workers, who are here in large numbers because the soil is very rich and mostly planted with coffee, sugar cane, vanilla and other export products. If, therefore, we cannot have a view of Singapore from the port, because it is hidden by the dense vegetation around it, all the more beautiful is the view to the south towards those countless islands that surround this port.<sup>20</sup>

Jovanović strives to be interesting and informative, capturing an image, an anecdote, or a detail, and presenting equally people and nature, cities and ethnographic traits along with some of their history, in addition to statistics, physical descriptions, appearances, clothing, and food, which is why his travelogue approach has also been described as an “anthropological experience.”<sup>21</sup> What he sees is not homogeneous, either uniformly beautiful or ugly; instead, he often describes a range of qualities, from negative to positive. For example, he describes the contrast between the ugly, makeshift Chinese shops and the beautiful merchandise offered within them, whether made of wicker rattan, mother-of-pearl, stone, wood, silk, or clay.<sup>22</sup>

Apart from the Jovanović who observed and pondered, there was also the Jovanović who paid attention to sounds. He impressively painted the hustle and bustle of people in the port. For example, he made note of the sounds communicated by monkeys warning their troop if they were in danger. He stated that the more bustling the southern end of the main shopping street in Singapore, the quieter its northern part that ends in a park.

Jovanović presented examples of the barbaric, abominable behavior of drunken European sailors in the pubs of Singapore, who created a very ugly picture and caused contempt for European civilization<sup>23</sup> among the hardwork-

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20 Jovanović, *Tamo amo po Istoku*, 116.

21 Tartalja, “Jedan zaboravljeni majstor srpske proze,” 130.

22 Jovanović, *Tamo amo po Istoku*, 127–28.

23 For many people outside Europe, including those from the Far East, the world is still Eurocentric, which is one of the consequences of Western efforts to conquer territories outside Europe in the nineteenth century in the process of colonization. René Rémond, a French historian and politi-

ing and polite Malay people. He complemented his presentation on Chinese culture and way of life by showing the exemplary piety of these people and comparing them to how Christians worship. He did not see the Chinese praying to God, so he asked one of them if they did. The Chinese man replied that there was no room for that on the ship, but that:

every Chinese, when he gets up and when he lies down, says his obligatory prayer, and when he comes home, his first task is to go to the pagoda and pray, compensating for what he has lost along the way ... I must admit that the Chinese manner of worship, much like the Byzantines and the Romans, is designed to have more of an effect on the senses than on the soul. Walking around Hong Kong, I would often be surprised, as in India, by the similarity of Chinese religious customs with ours.<sup>24</sup>

Jovanović's way of seeing was different from the colonizers' attitude towards the Asian population. This was due not only to Jovanović's empathy as a physician and but also as an artist. Jovanović was born in what was then the Austrian Empire, lived in the subsequent Austro-Hungarian Empire, and died in free Serbia, in the Empire's tense proximity. He felt what life was like under foreign rule. He had neither the need nor the desire to associate with the representatives of colonial authority, which was in the hands of foreigners; he observed the results of their rule: impoverishment and the deprivation of basic human rights.

In the eyes of the English, the Chinese, like the other Asian or African peoples of their colonies, are draft animals who, because they cannot be sold, are worth as much as their labor; and if this "cattle" can no longer work,

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cal scientist, thinks that the process of "Europeanization of the world" was so powerful that this influence is still felt today in the prevailing impression that "everything starts from Europe and everything comes back to it." Professor Michael Herzfeld, when talking about the idea of *cryptocolonialism*, points to influences reminiscent of nineteenth century colonization. "Crypto" is used in the sense of "concealment," suggesting a covert form of colonialism today, because, according to Herzfeld, any country claiming independence from the global power structures of today is merely engaging in an act of self-deception. The degree of self-deception, at such a level that cryptocolonialism, as a specific phenomenon, is simply rejected by official politics – even the idea is rejected that a country has ever been anything but completely independent of the Western dominance. Indeed, there are only a few places on the planet that have not been influenced by the West at all. Everyone denies that there has been any form of colonialism. The citizens and governments of such countries say they have never been colonized. This is, for example, a constant mantra in Thailand. In all these cases, there is a very explicit denial of ever being part of the Western colonial system. One can also see this on the example of marionette figures like the King of Oude, set up by the English in India, to which Jovanović pointed out.

24 Jovanović, *Tamo amo po Istoku*, 147.



they are worth nothing, because their skin does not meet the standards for the leather trade. ...

As a result, it is not difficult to understand the mood of the Chinese people towards “foreigners,” nor is one surprised by their hostile behavior when they find themselves in a position of power. A people, whatever race they are, wish to take revenge when they feel despised and humiliated by a stranger, and this contempt, this humiliation is felt by the Chinese people more strongly than others because they have reached the cultural height from which a man can recognize a man’s nature and the rights that nature gives him in human society. We, Europeans, like to talk with contempt about Asian “savages,” perhaps in order to justify our cruel actions towards them in the eyes of the uninformed European world, but that image has its other face and I will try ... to portray it faithfully.<sup>25</sup>

Jovanović oscillates between condemning foreign rule in the name of “racial solidarity” and in the name of humanity, which he makes clear when he writes about the behavior of Europeans towards the Chinese. In any case, Jovanović is unequivocal in his negative judgment of the British occupation. It is not so much about describing political conditions directly as about expressing the attitude of the English and Europeans towards the Eastern peoples. Nemanja Radulović sees Jovanović’s position as that of a person who “belongs to European culture, but comes from the ‘small,’ ‘other’ Europe. A Serb from Austria, a Westerner by culture but also a patriot, a contemporary of the period when the fight against foreign power was both a glorious memory and a blueprint for the near future, Jovanović had a different vision than that of Kipling.”<sup>26</sup>

Jovanović thought about the future of East–West relations in a way far removed from colonialism. As a scientist he was not mistaken in his predictions about the future of Singapore, as well as about the Chinese. He believed in their great potential for inevitable dominance in the world.

The major European countries have their own territories in the East, and there they watch each other closely, so that the other will not grab more. To prevent England from basking in India alone, France has its Pondicherry in Hither India and Saigon in Farther India, and while the former is expand-

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25 Jovanović, *Tamo amo po Istoku*, 155.

26 Nemanja Radulović, “Slika Indije u srpskoj književnosti 19. veka” [The image of India in Serbian literature of the nineteenth century], *Dositejev vrt* [Dositej’s Garden] 6 (2018): 65.

ing over Hindustan and the Deccan, the latter in Annam in Farther India is trying to create that ‘balance’ so beloved by the diplomats; and in order not to be left alone in this laudable business of plundering other countries, Germany with Schiller under her arm has come to keep them company—“Ich sei, gewährt mir die Bitte, In eurem Bunde der dritte” (Please let me be the third in your alliance). And now all three ‘great powers’ are trying to bring happiness to these people, each in their own way. Their right to do so is granted by the dark skin of the people. It is true that even the smaller naval powers, Spain, Italy, and Portugal, have also had a morsel or two, and the looting, as we can see, in Africa as well as in India, is progressing within the ‘concert’ played by the great and small European powers. And it will probably continue to be so, until the sluggish Mongol-Aryan race in the south of the Asian continent is galvanized and knocks on the European door once again, and then it is likely that the ‘concert’<sup>27</sup> will end up as a minor and neglected entry in some historical record.<sup>28</sup>

Nemanja Radulović concludes that with Jovanović, there is no fear of that “yellow peril” which many authors expressed at the end of the nineteenth century, nor does he call for a “defense of the West” against spiritual colonization from the East.<sup>29</sup> At the end of *Hither and Yon in the East*, Jovanović asked himself:

Will our close contact with the Eastern peoples, and especially with the Chinese, have any impact, and what will be its nature? Will the diligence and peace of these peoples tame our war-mongering race and redirect it towards the paths of that sincere philanthropy and sublime patience with which every man, no matter what corner of the world he may come from, sees his own image—his fellow man; or will these nations, having been in contact with us, appropriate over time, like the Japanese have, our wild, conquering temper and begin to slaughter us with the weapons we have given them? [...] Isn’t there a possibility that a new, beneficial turning point in the life of Western nations will emerge from our current intensive traffic with

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27 The “Mongolian-Aryan race” was a vague concept in Jovanović’s day and the political meaning of the word *concert* was established by Klemens von Metternich, Austrian Chancellor, in relation to the balance of power between European countries.

28 Jovanović, *Tamo amo po Istoku*, 4–5.

29 Radulović, “Slika Indije u srpskoj književnosti 19. Veka,” 65.

the great Eastern nations? [...] Rome conquered Greece, but the “Hellenic” spirit still ruled Rome—and quite a few things are repeated in history...<sup>30</sup>

In order to understand Jovanović’s travelogues, it is important to pay attention to three elements: his personality, the time he had at his disposal, and his intentions. He was a Serbian Orthodox Christian who was born in an empire whose rulers believed that the only religion appropriate, not only for their realm, but for the whole of Europe, was Catholicism. The Serbs settled in the Austrian Empire as an organized people with their own Patriarch from the seventeenth century onwards. As a religious community they were treated as schismatics within the imperial environment. Their unfavorable position, as a people deprived of many rights, began to change after 1781 when the *Patent of Toleration* was passed and the process of mitigating the differences between the rights of Catholics and Orthodox followed. Jovanović was not inclined toward colonial politics. He stated that there were no civil relations between the white man and the man of a different skin color. He said that the whites found offering their hand to such a man to be humiliating beyond belief. The English considered people of a different skin color to be toiling animals: they gave more attention to a pet parrot or a monkey.<sup>31</sup> *Native*, according to the whites, meant a savage, an infidel, a slave, or something similar.<sup>32</sup> His anticolonial attitude can be seen in his recounting of the ways in which India was conquered, and the shameful politics of Warren Hastings, who bought India with Indian money. Jovanović could very well understand the position of the colonized peoples subjected to double standards, because he himself, being a Serb, was in a similar position. That is why his sympathies were on the side of the occupied peoples of the East.

Todor Stefanović Vilovski (1854–1921), Jovanović’s contemporary, pointed out that he was cosmopolitan both by nature and education. At the same time, Jovanović also expressed his sincere fondness for his own Serbian people.<sup>33</sup> His cosmopolitanism did not exclude his patriotism, which was a feature common among the followers of the ideology of enlightenment. As a man who delved in science, Milan Jovanović Morski believed that scientists were “cosmopolitan always and everywhere,”<sup>34</sup> and this attitude may be key to his understanding

30 Jovanović, *Tamo amo po Istoku*, 194–95.

31 Jovanović, *Tamo amo po Istoku*, 126.

32 Jovanović, *Tamo amo po Istoku*, 133.

33 Todor Stefanović Vilovski, *Moje uspomene* [My memories] (Belgrade: Nolit, 1988), 282.

34 Jovanović, “Pogled na kulturu Islama,” 28.

and analysis of the people and countries he described in his travelogues. Although he drew attention to England's enormous plundering of the conquered countries,<sup>35</sup> he also noted the contribution of English scientists who "by opening the rich trove of the Indian spirit to the European world, proved that Great Britain does not place its cultural interests before its political and commercial interests"<sup>36</sup>. Jovanović was not a narrow-minded or prejudiced man, which is confirmed by his essay entitled "Overview of the Culture of Islam and of Its influence on Our People," in which he states, among other things, that the measure of the cultural value of an individual nation is in harmony with its contribution to humanity which can be determined by becoming acquainted with its history.<sup>37</sup> This is why Jovanović does not ask which nation is more civilized. Susan Sontag points out that a trip to exotic lands always includes the opposition "us" and "them", but also that "modern travel literature begins when the concept of a civilization becomes a critical as well as a self-evident notion, that is, when it is no longer so clear who is civilized and who is not."<sup>38</sup> Jovanović was probably speaking the truth when he wrote about his days in the port of Colombo, "I spent the most pleasant days of my life in the port of Colombo."

For his introductory speech at the Serbian Royal Academy, he chose to speak about Indian theatre, and cited verses from an Indian drama *The Canda-kausika* of Arya Ksemisvara as his motto:

*There is nothing in the world without fault,  
But there is a bit of good in everything:  
Therefore, you the experts, cover the faults,  
And publish only what is good.*<sup>39</sup>

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35 During one conversation, an Indian told Milan Jovanović Morski that the salary of one senior English official could support their [who does "their" refer to?/there was no single native Indian government at this time] entire (governmental) office [This was part of the main body of the paper, and I was asked to place it in the footnote. I do not know what governmental office this Indian person was referring to, because Jovanovic does not specify. The Indian may have used it as a hyperbole]. Morski also described the Bank of India, the largest financial institution in the world, which collected money not only from India but from the entire Eastern world. "This is the principal source from which Great Britain draws her capital, and its daily flows would probably cover the debts of some small kingdom in Europe." (Jovanović, *Tamo amo po Istoku*, 55).

36 Milan Jovanović, "O Indijskoj drami, Mričakatika (Vazantasena)," *Letopis Matice srpske*, 183 (1895): 72.

37 Jovanović, "Pogled na kulturu Islama," 16.

38 Susan Sontag, "Model Destinations," *Times Literary Supplement*, June 22 (1984): 699.

39 Milan Jovanović, *Pogled na indijsku dramu* [An overview of Indian drama] (Belgrade: Srpska kraljevska akademija, 1894), 3.

The verses suggest that on his travels, his intentions were to search for, above all, what was good. As a humanist he sincerely believed that the better side of humanity would prevail.<sup>40</sup>

Dositej Obradović, the most notable writer of eighteenth-century Serbian literature, who moved and travelled widely for years, reveals the meaning of travelling in the moral of his fable “The Travellers and the Poplar Tree”: “Only when we get to know others will we be able to judge ourselves...”<sup>41</sup> The experience of otherness also contributes to a different perception, that is, an affirmation or contestation of one’s own identity. A travelogue is also an image, which reveals both the traveller and others. Like other travel writers, Jovanović pointed to the differences he had encountered, building a bridge between two cultural environments. He was not susceptible to accepting stereotypes when learning about new places and people. Of course, he was used to things in a European, Balkan, or Serbian manner, but he accepted other ways of life and customs as legitimate, with understanding and sympathy. In writing his travelogues, Jovanović, it seems, kept Horace’s dictum in mind: “Omne tulit punctum, qui miscuit utile dulci” (He who has blended the useful with the pleasant, has gained every point).<sup>42</sup> He intended to teach his readers, because enlightenment was very important to him. He believed that a person must develop his reason during his lifetime, because that is the only way that he can rise to the level of a moral being.

*Translated by Nebojša Pajić*

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40 Milan Jovanović, “Prirodna nauka” [Natural science], *Vila* [Fairy] 48 (1866):764.

41 Dositej Obradović, “Putnici i topola” [The travelers and the poplar tree], in *Basne* [Fables] (Belgrade: Učiteljski fakultet, 2011), 156.

42 Horace, *Ars poetica*, vers. 343.

# JULIAN FAŁAT IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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## Hybridity and Mimicry in the Memoirs of a Polish/Kakanian/European Painter

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Grzegorz Moroz



In his *Pamiętniki* (Memoirs), Julian Fałat—who was born, educated, and spent most of his life in the Austro-Hungarian Empire—depicted an 1885 trip round the world, of which South East Asia was the most prominent part. This study focuses on the “hybridity” involved in the construction of Fałat’s identity in his memoirs. The tools which have been developed by postcolonial studies will be used to analyze the ways in which Fałat portrayed himself and the people he encountered on the trip: his fellow travelers, the crews on the ships he travelled on, and, last but not least, the local people he met there. In *Orientalism* (1978) Edward Said employed Michel Foucault’s concept of discourse to describe “Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient.”<sup>1</sup> Said used travel narratives of eminent French and British writers such as Gérard Nerval, Gustave Flaubert, and Richard Francis Burton (narratives concerning travels undertaken by Europeans to the Orient in the same historical period when Fałat was making his trip) and claimed that travel books were crucial in constructing the Orientalist discourse as they “are about as ‘natural’ a kind of text, as logical in their composition and in their use, as any book one can think of.”<sup>2</sup>

But whereas analyses of British and French travel narratives of the imperial period, including Said’s own, show their authors writing almost invariably from the perspective of the colonizer, and hence constitute subjects of straightforward, “Saidian” Orientalist critique, the situation is far more complex when it comes to writers embedded in other literary and cultural traditions. In the

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1 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 3.

2 Said, *Orientalism*, 93.

case of Polish literature, both “the white man’s perspective” and the “(post) colonial condition”<sup>3</sup> are strong and prominent, as Dariusz Skórczewski and other scholars applying postcolonial theory to Polish literature testify. On the other hand, James Hodkinson and John Walker, in their introduction to a volume of essays tracing the deployment of Orientalism in the German speaking part of Europe in the nineteenth century, argue that the contributors to their volume “are informed by an idea of linguistically and culturally diverse, yet simultaneously shared, histories, which calls into question the need or indeed the possibility of individuals, groups, or nations identifying absolutely with either side of the dualism of Orient and Occident.”<sup>4</sup>

Another tool of postcolonial scholarship which will be applied in the analysis of Fałat’s travel narrative is David Spurr’s classification of key Orientalist tropes. In his influential book entitled *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration* (1993), Spurr identified eleven rhetorical tropes dominant in American, British, and French colonial discourse in the period after 1870. “These rhetorical modes,” argued Spurr, “must be understood as more than merely literary or philosophical; they are tropes which come into play with the establishment and maintenance of colonial authority.... There is nothing especially conscious or intentional in their use; they are part of the landscape in which relations of power manifest themselves.”<sup>5</sup>

Julian Fałat was born in 1853 in Tuligłowy, not far from Lwów (Lviv, Lemberg) in a district of Kakania named in accordance with the former empire’s predilection for pomposity: *Königreich Galizien und Lodomerien mit dem Großherzogtum Krakau und den Herzogtümern Auschwitz und Zator*. His father was an organist and sexton in the village’s Roman Catholic church, and had a small farm to support his large family. Fałat was to embark upon a long road from being a cowherd in Tuligłowy to becoming the director (and later vice-chancellor) of Kraków’s prestigious Akademia Sztuk Pięknych (Academy of Fine Arts). He was a self-made man, strongly intent on pursuing his dream of becoming a

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3 Dariusz Skórczewski, “Toward a Better Understanding of the Self: Polish Literature in the Light of Post-Colonial Theory,” in *The Task of Interpretation: Hermeneutics, Psychoanalysis and Literary Studies*, ed. Dariusz Skórczewski, Adam Wierciński, and Edward Fiała (Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2009), 194–96.

4 James Hodkinson and John Walker, “Introduction,” in *Deploying Orientalism in Culture and History: From Germany to Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. James Hodkinson and John Walker (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2013), 5.

5 David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1993), 3.



Figure 4.1. Julian Fałat, Self-portrait.

painter. In 1869, at the age of 16, he moved to Kraków, where he succeeded in enrolling as a student in a local art college. He subsequently studied painting in Zurich, Munich, and Rome. In 1895 he became the director of the Szkoła Sztuk Pięknych (School of Fine Arts) in Kraków, the school where he had himself studied two decades earlier. In 1900 the school was transformed into an “academy” and Fałat was “elevated” from its “director” to that of “vice-chancellor.” In 1909 he resigned from his vice-chancellorship and settled down in a house which he had built for his family in nearby Bystra. During the Great War he supported the Polish case for independence with a series of patriotic paintings of the Polish brigade (*legiony*) led by Józef Piłsudski, fighting as a part of the Austro-Hungarian army against the Russians in the Volhynia region. After the war, which brought, among other things, the demise of Kakanian and the rebirth of Poland as an independent country, Fałat lived in Toruń and in



Bystra, actively participating in Poland's cultural, social, and political life. It was then, when he was in his seventies, that he decided to write his memoirs, which were first published posthumously in 1935.

This text is chiefly concerned with the five chapters of Fałat's memoirs which cover a round-the-world trip he embarked upon in 1884-1885, and with the second part of the preceding chapter entitled "Hiszpania" (Spain), which, somewhat misleadingly, describes the first leg of his round-the-globe voyage, from Marseille to Port Said. Fałat opens his memoirs with the following declaration:

Someone once said that each person is capable of writing one novel—their own life. Well, my life described here will be this novel, but a real one, lived in reality, in which the presented situations often look like miraculous coincidences, so that my children, grandchildren, and the Polish youth, who will read it can draw strength and faith in actions undertaken from the spirit, from the love of one's homeland and people, from serenity of life, and who will look for this serenity in the fulfilment of their duties, in their surroundings, in nature, and in noble hearts.<sup>6</sup>

This statement, worded in a manner full of pathos so typical of the period, defines the overtly implied readers of the book—Fałat's children, grandchildren, and Polish youth—and expresses, albeit not directly, the conviction that his own life can serve as a model for future generations of young Poles. Love of one's homeland appears alongside love of people and serenity of life as key drives which he ascribes to himself. But a close reading of Fałat's memoirs reveals a different focus from the one declared in the preface.

Theoreticians of life narrative genres generally point to the fact that the key distinction between an autobiography and a memoir (memoirs) is that while the former focuses on the chronology of a writer's entire life, the latter has some specific focus around which the narrative is organized. Fałat's book is entitled *Pamiętniki*, that is *Memoirs*, and rightly so, for this is clearly not an "autobiography" as the book has a very selective attitude to the events presented and ends in 1895, when Fałat was only forty-two years old, thirty years before he wrote the short preface signed. "Bystra na Śląsku, roku 1925" ["Bystra, in Silesia in the year 1925"].<sup>7</sup>

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6 Julian Fałat, *Pamiętniki* [Memoirs] (Katowice: Śląski Instytut Naukowy, 1987), 13.

7 It is not clear if Fałat had already written any chapters of his book by 1925 or if he started writing with this preface. He lived in relatively good health for four more years. So, it seems that he could have easily gone on to describe events which took place after 1895. The book could have veered

The individual chapters of Fałat's book present selected events or periods, and there is no overall, general sense of one dominant goal or purpose, but rather a series of sketches. Despite the declaration in the preface, Fałat's persona as a Polish patriot is given minimal attention. His older brother Józef's dramatic participation in the Polish January Uprising of 1863 is mentioned with sympathy and compassion, but this is the only context in which the issue of Polishness and nationality is overtly considered. This minimal focus largely applies to the professional-artistic part of his life and persona. True, there is a chapter entitled "Jama and Jamniki" (A cave and cavers) devoted to the colorful and bohemian life of Fałat and his friends as art students in Kraków in the early 1870s and later in Munich, but these artistic considerations also play only a minor role in the narrative. The two aspects which are clearly central in the book are his travels and his relationships with the aristocracy. The whole book consists of twenty chapters of various lengths (from three to thirty-six pages). The first six are devoted to Fałat's childhood and education. Then, we have ten chapters devoted to his travels, which are followed by three chapters describing his life as the "court painter" of Prince Wilhelm (later Kaiser Wilhelm II). The last, short chapter is about his promotion to the post of director of the School of Fine Arts in Kraków in 1895. It is not Fałat the Pole or Fałat the artist, but Fałat the traveller (tourist) and Fałat the court painter who is foregrounded. Of the ten chapters devoted to travels, five of them deal with Fałat's travels in Europe, namely, to Italy, Spain, Germany, and Warsaw (then in Russia). The other five travel chapters are devoted to one journey, the round-the-world trip Fałat embarked on in 1885: "Port Said," "Aden," "Hongkong," "Jokohama" (Yokohama), and "Podróż przez Ocean Spokojny" (A journey across the Pacific Ocean).

Fałat went on this trip thanks to the generosity of his friend Edward Simler, a wealthy banker, who paid the expenses. Fałat briefly stated that Simler undertook this trip "for his health," while he himself saw in it "the lucky opportunity for the fulfilment of my dreams: painting the southern sun. Hildebrand's watercolors, recently seen in reproductions, make this desire stronger, and I dream that soon I will be painting, from nature, red sunsets and palm forests in Ceylon and near the equator."<sup>8</sup>

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into a patriotic direction, particularly if the events during the Great War were to be described, with Fałat actively supporting the Polish fight for independence with his decision to become a "front painter" at the Volhynia front in 1916, when he painted watercolours praising the heroism of the *Legiony* and portraits of its commanders.

8 Fałat, *Pamiętniki*, 101.

Fałat's hybrid persona on the round-the-world trip with Simler is constructed around three major aspects: firstly, as a painter of landscapes and portraits; secondly, as a European traveler (tourist); and, lastly, as a "dżentelmen"—the Polish word for "gentleman." This English word in its Polish transcription appears in the round-the-world chapters of Fałat's *Pamiętniki* several times and in different contexts. These three aspects of Fałat's hybrid persona will be approached here separately, for the sake of clarity, but it should be remembered that in Fałat's text they are intermingled and combined into one whole.

As we have seen in the quotation above, Fałat considered the round-the-world trip a "lucky opportunity" to paint. In the five relevant travel chapters he is never very detailed or very technical about his activities as a painter, although "snippets" of it are interspersed throughout them. In a Buddhist temple near Colombo he admits that he is so "overwhelmed" by the light, the strong smell of incense, the flowers, and the believers (which form a real "embarras de richesse") that he cannot decide what is "most beautiful and characteristic"<sup>9</sup> and states that instead of painting he only makes a few notes to mark his stay in Colombo. He expresses his more professional side elsewhere—as, for example, when he describes painting (for one hundred dollars) a portrait of Mr. Samuel, his "only fellow-passenger in first class"<sup>10</sup> on board a ship from Hong-Kong to Yokohama. While praising Japan he notes that as "an artist-painter I am struck by the fogginess of the landscapes, creating specific perspectives and kinds of understatements, giving much space for the artist's imagination."<sup>11</sup> One key development in the narrative is also presented as a result of Fałat's skill as a painter and a teacher of painting. He describes how he befriended a seven-year-old girl named Emmy Becker from Lübeck. Emmy was sailing from Marseille to Singapore to visit her father, who owned a hotel there. Her mother was constantly sea-sick, so Emmy would sit next to Fałat while he was working, particularly when he was painting "the Chinese or Arabs with Monkeys."<sup>12</sup> After all three of them disembarked in Singapore, Fałat moved to another (cheaper) hotel, in which he was instantly visited by Mr. Becker, "der Papa," who invited him to move and stay in his hotel. Fałat remarks that in this way his good deed was rewarded "by fate in a truly royal manner."<sup>13</sup> As he explains, "the relationships with this household, which, although it did not belong to elite English society, was visited by many outstand-

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9 Fałat, *Pamiętniki*, 113–14.

10 Fałat, *Pamiętniki*, 122–23.

11 Fałat, *Pamiętniki*, 128.

12 Fałat, *Pamiętniki*, 115.

13 Fałat, *Pamiętniki*, 116.

ing persons, allowed me to make a string of acquaintances, particularly with (people) from the consular world.”<sup>14</sup> But fate destined that royal treatment would come later, when Fałat, after a spell of painting in “various nooks and crannies of Singapore,”<sup>15</sup> fell ill with terrible malaria, and was convinced that he recovered exclusively thanks to the care and medicines offered to him by “the Beckers and their friend Bricha, a Siamese princess.”<sup>16</sup>

Fałat presents his persona not only as a painter but also as a tourist: an educated European of the end of the nineteenth century who thinks it is absolutely essential that he goes “sightseeing,” even to see those sights he had already seen before. Such was the case with Naples, the first stop for their ship, the *Irrawody*, on its way from Marseille to Yokohama. Fałat first describes, with the detachment of a very experienced tourist, the ship’s arrival in the port of Naples, and the ensuing spectacle of musicians, divers, and other performers who “try to hypnotize the barbarians from the north in order to draw from their pockets the greatest possible amount of liras, francs, or pounds.”<sup>17</sup> And then, after a paragraph describing naive travelers being coerced into buying useless trinkets for considerable sums, Fałat’s persona declares in the name of himself and his friend Edward Simler:

We want to refresh our impressions of Naples more thoroughly and say goodbye to Europe, so we disembark and place ourselves in the care of a certain gentleman cicerone, who promises to show us all sorts of wonders for 20 lira. We take him along mostly to keep up the habit of travelling Englishmen, because both my friend and myself are already acquainted with Naples.<sup>18</sup>

This fragment is interesting for several reasons. In it Fałat continues the description of “tourist customs” in Naples with the air of a detached man of the world, an experienced traveler, who (similarly to his wealthy, experienced friend) has already seen Naples (and presumably other “compulsory” sights in Europe as well). Moreover, he and his travelling companion take along “a certain gentleman cicerone,” not because they really need a guide, but because they want to keep up the habit of travelling Englishmen, who in this way are shown as the ones setting the standards in the world of tourism. In the phrase “jakiegoś

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14 Fałat, *Pamiętniki*, 117–18.

15 Fałat, *Pamiętniki*, 116.

16 Fałat, *Pamiętniki*, 116.

17 Fałat, *Pamiętniki*, 103.

18 Fałat, *Pamiętniki*, 103.

dżentlemena cicerone” [a certain gentleman cicerone], the English word in the Polish transcription “dżentelmen” is used in a patronizing, ironic fashion. It is difficult to assess, though, to what extent Fałat, when writing this fragment, wanted to extend this irony by adding to a Polish word taken from English (“gentleman”), the word “cicerone”—in the meaning of a “guide”—which Polish took from Italian—or if this second word (now obsolete in Polish, replaced by the indigenous “przewodnik”) came to Fałat “naturally.” Another characteristic feature of this fragment is that Fałat, in a manner he often resorted to in other fragments of his round-the-globe chapters, uses the present tense, a rhetorical trope enlivening the narrative, which he used much more sparingly in other parts of his memoirs.

This fragment is also interesting because it highlights a difference between Fałat’s attitude to being a tourist, in which he is guided by a paid guide/cicerone, and the attitude of many British or American tourists of this period. Such attitudes have been most perceptively described by James Buzard in “The Grand-Tour and After”:

Through varieties of what the sociologist Erving Goffman has called the ‘rôle-distance,’ modern travellers and travel writers identified themselves as anti-touristic beings whose unhappy lot it was to move amidst and in the wake of tourists, *for one of whom they might even be mistaken*; on the increasingly beaten path of Continental travelling, self-differentiation, not imitation became a guiding purpose. Romantic authors such as Germaine de Staël, Lord Byron, William Hazlitt, and Samuel Rogers provided prototypes and models for these efforts.<sup>19</sup>

Fałat’s strategy in Naples was clearly not “rôle-distancing” but rather “mimicry.” Despite constructing his persona as an experienced traveler, rather than “distancing” himself from the crowds, which was the standard procedure for British and American tourists who did not want to be perceived by other tourists as tourists, he states that he (and his friend) go sightseeing “mostly to keep up the habit of travelling Englishmen,” even though they have already visited these sights on earlier trips. However, this (textual) gesture of mimicry should not be seen exclusively in terms of conformity to a role model. As David HUDART assessed while discussing Homi Bhabha’s understanding of the concept

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19 James Buzard, “The Grand Tour and After (1660–1840),” in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002), 49.

of mimicry, it “is not a slavish imitation,” but rather “an exaggerated copying of language, culture, manners, and ideas” and therefore “this mimicry is also a form of mockery.”<sup>20</sup>

When Fałat describes the ship’s stop in Colombo, Ceylon, we get a change of mood when the initial impression of newness and freshness is quickly replaced by tourist routine. At first his persona is almost exultant:

The greenness of the palm forests, testifying to an eternal summer, some ethereal scent, the sun suffusing this entire world, trigger a cry of admiration from my breast: everything here is wonderful, unusual, different from what I could have created in my imagination. The water is blue, the earth is red, the palms are green; there is a plethora of some deciduous trees, unknown to me, besprinkled with flowers similar to azaleas.<sup>21</sup>

The attitude exhibited by his persona changes dramatically when the sightseeing begins: “We start at the botanical garden and the museum, both are similar to others all over the world, with only the slight preponderance of local flora and fauna, or—culture.”<sup>22</sup> Fałat, the tourist, notes the poverty and misery around him, both of the local people as well as migrant workers, but does not connect it in any way with the economic system which allowed him to travel first class around the world while treating others, less fortunate, brutally:

While walking along the deck I made my way to the bow of the ship, to the place reserved for the so called “deck passengers.” Out of a vent coming from a room for this category of travellers I was attacked by a stench so horrible that, as if unconscious, I turned back and ran away. On my way I asked a ship’s officer whom I encountered about the reason for this horrible smell: he explained that it was the smell of Chinese men on their way to build the Panama Canal. It was only then that we learned about the existence of 1500 passengers who had been kept locked up all this time and were only now being allowed air in batches. Nobody would expect that living people could emit such an odour.<sup>23</sup>

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20 David Huddart, *Homi K. Bhabha; Routledge Critical Thinkers* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 39.

21 Fałat, *Pamiętniki*, 113.

22 Fałat, *Pamiętniki*, 113.

23 Fałat, *Pamiętniki*, 135.

Earlier on in his travel narrative he describes a situation before the ship reached Aden. He notices “a group on deck consisting of about a dozen Askari Arabs with bundles and suitcases, dressed in various, unusually tacky, European clothes.”<sup>24</sup> Fałat’s persona asks a steward about them and learns “that they are stokers from the boiler room, who are leaving the ship at the end of the voyage and will be replaced by others, recruited by an agency. The work of a stoker is so arduous that with the 40 degree heat it can only be performed best by people from the Aden region and the coast of Africa, that is, by Ashanti and Negroes.”<sup>25</sup>

Apart from a tourist and a painter, Fałat’s persona is also constructed as a gentleman. Fałat and his friend travel first class. On the first leg of their journey, while the ship is going through the Suez Canal, they become acquainted with their fellow-travelers:

There are several English officers of senior rank going to Ceylon and to Bombay, several Dutchmen to Java, a dozen or so Frenchmen to Pondicherry and Saigon, a Swedish woman and a German woman with a little daughter to Singapore; all of whom together with us two Poles comprise the first class society. In the second class there are several Chinese men and several Frenchmen, apparently clerks of petty rank, and a band of mediocre French actors and actresses.<sup>26</sup>

Fałat’s persona is obviously proud to be one of the Poles who comprise, together with senior ranking officers and civil servants from the key European colonial powers (Britain, France, and the Netherlands), along with a German woman and a Swedish woman, “the first class society.” The class distinction here is not only national but also hierarchical and economic. After all, in second class we have lower rank colonizers: petty French officials and second-rate actors. The pan-national stance of a white gentleman is particularly prominent in a fragment where he describes leaving the British colonies in the Hong-Kong chapter:

Upon leaving the territory of the English colonies one feels great admiration for the colonizing talent of the English. They have brought about a situation in the port towns, for example, in which natives learn English without compulsion; they speak this language most willingly and treat those Eu-

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24 Fałat, *Pamiętniki*, 109.

25 Fałat, *Pamiętniki*, 109.

26 Fałat, *Pamiętniki*, 106.

uropeans who do not know this language as being less worthy. At the same time the English care immeasurably about the prestige not only of their own nation, but of the white race in general; on trains and on ships white people travel in separate compartments, while the natives travel on deck and in lower classes. People who come here from Europe in search of a career must represent the white race in a dignified manner; anyone who does not follow it and, for example, gets drunk and gets involved in some game in an inappropriate setting, will surely be soon sent to some unhealthy spot, most often to the island of Borneo. During my stay in Singapore I myself witnessed such an occurrence.<sup>27</sup>

On his round-the-world trip, Fałat constructs himself much more as a pan-European gentleman than as a Pole. His “Polishness” is mentioned only twice in the chapters describing the entire trip: once, in a fragment already quoted, when he lists the first class passengers, and once in the Yokohama chapter, when he states that it was only love of Poland which made him and his travel companion want to leave Japan. What is characteristic about Fałat’s description of the round-the-world trip is that his gaze is focused much more on himself and his fellow passengers and high ranking colonizers than on descriptions of “the Other,” that is, the local population. Perhaps the only fragment in this vein, from Singapore, is quite telling of Fałat’s method of narration:

The suburbs are full of picturesque nooks and crannies, inhabited mostly by the Chinese, who support themselves by trade and craftsmanship and who comprise three-quarters of Singapore’s population; they live in absolutely horrible hygienic conditions, at the mouths of canals and among the mud flats. Despite this, judging by their appearance, they are healthy and well. I often see how a group of small Chinese scruffs enjoy themselves eating a pineapple, lifting it with their fingers to their mouths, bit by bit; it is reminiscent of Murillo.<sup>28</sup>

Fałat’s construction of his persona as a “dżentelmen”—a gentleman—and an experienced tourist in the chapters recollecting his round-the-world trip is strengthened by his foregrounding of himself as a professional painter, that is, as someone who socially, even if not quite financially (after all he was “spon-

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27 Fałat, *Pamiętniki*, 125.

28 Fałat, *Pamiętniki*, 119.



sored” by his banker friend), was part of the European elite travelling first class to the regions of the world colonized by Britain, France, and the Netherlands. The fact that he was also a Pole and a Kakanian seems to be far less central in these fragments. It is merely implied, rather than foregrounded, that as a Pole speaking German (and French but not English) he felt that he was a representative of a highly developed European civilization travelling to its commercial outposts.

The concepts of hybridity and hybrid identity are tools introduced into the postcolonial discourse by Homi Bhabha in *Location of Culture* (1994); tools which have been employed quite often by various scholars when describing the social situation and interactions in the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the second half of the nineteenth century. For example, both these concepts were crucial for Agnieszka Dudek when she analysed the multi-ethnic community of people living at that time in Austrian Silesia,<sup>29</sup> while Agatha Schwartz employed them to analyse the prose of Fałat’s near contemporary fellow Kakanian—Eugenie delle Grazie (1864–1931) in “Hybridity, Alterity, and Gender in Eugenie delle Grazie’s Autobiographical Prose.”<sup>30</sup> It can be argued, that Fałat’s self-representation as a (pan-European) gentleman touring the world is also best explained by this “hybrid” construction of his persona’s identity. Indeed, the very fact that he conceived of himself as a “dżentelmen” owes a lot to this hybridity. The main building blocks of Fałat’s hybrid identity—even though some of them are not present in the fragments dealing with his round-the-world trip—are his Polish national awareness, his Kakanian education, which meant (among other things) that he was fluent in both German and French, and his profession as a painter, made possible by the knowledge and skills he acquired in art schools and bohemian communities, first in Kraków, and later in Munich. Had he remained on the farm in Tuligłowy near Lviv, most probably the only sea voyage he might have made would have been the one-way crossing of the Atlantic on board a German ship from Bremerhaven bound for Ellis Island in New York. But then, he would have been travelling third class, rather than first, and probably would not have conceived of himself as a gentleman.

Whereas Fałat’s construction of his persona travelling in the Far East can be rendered in terms of hybridity, an analysis of the language he used in the

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29 See Agnieszka Dudek, “A Monolithic ‘Dead End’ or a ‘Hybrid Exit’?; Cultural Hybrids Facing National Image Construction and Their Role in the History of Intercultural Communication,” *Journal of Intercultural Communication* 44 (July 2017), <https://immi.se/oldwebsite/nr44/dudek.html>.

30 Agatha Schwartz, “Hybridity, Alterity, and Gender in Eugenie delle Grazie’s Autobiographical Prose,” *Journal of Austrian Studies* 49, no. 1–2, (2016): 51–69.

process reveals a number of tropes which are, from the perspective of postcolonial studies, quintessentially “Orientalist.” In fact, to a greater or lesser degree, all of Spurr’s Orientalist tropes can be found in this narrative, with the possible exception of “eroticization,” which is probably the result of Fałat’s self-imposed censorship in view of his prospective readership which he mentioned in the preface: his own grandchildren and young Poles.

The first of the Orientalist tropes listed by Spurr in *The Rhetoric of Empire*, is “surveillance.”<sup>31</sup> Fałat’s gaze is not that of a Richard Francis Burton-like explorer, not “the monarch-of-all-I-survey,”<sup>32</sup> but rather what John Urry called “the tourist gaze,” the gaze of a privileged Western tourist (and a gentleman). We see this best in Fałat’s descriptions of entering various ports and his experience as a tourist, allowing him to see through the commodified customs of the local people in Naples or Ceylon alike. Fałat’s surveillance is connected with the second of Spurr’s tropes, “appropriation—inheriting the earth.”<sup>33</sup> As a European gentleman he assumes it as absolutely natural that the European civilization rules supreme over the local population in places like Port Said, Ceylon, and Hong-Kong, or that it defends its outposts militarily in places like Formosa.

The third of Spurr’s tropes, “aestheticization,”<sup>34</sup> came easily to Fałat because, as a professional painter, he was very well versed in the aesthetic discourse of Western civilization and keen to use its elements when he felt like it, as in the fragment “aestheticizing” the “picture” of dirty local children eating pineapples in Singapore through reference to the Spanish baroque painter Murillo. “Classification—the order of Nations,”<sup>35</sup> the fourth of Spurr’s tropes, appears in Fałat’s narrative, both in his careful descriptions of differences between passengers travelling first, second, and third class, and in his eulogies on the skills and powers of the British to do business and preserve “prestige” through careful segregation from the local populations. Spurr’s fifth trope, “debasement—filth and defilement,”<sup>36</sup> is strongly connected with the fourth, “Classification,” but whereas in the former trope it is the leaders of the “order of Nations” which are focused upon, here we have “the negative end of a system of value,”<sup>37</sup> that is,

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31 Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire*, 13.

32 Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 201–13.

33 Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire*, 28.

34 Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire*, 43.

35 Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire*, 61.

36 Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire*, 76.

37 Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire*, 77.

the local population. Fałat's only glimpse at the Oriental "Other," the image of Singaporean children at play, is "aestheticized" through the reference to Murrillo (and in this way to the entire European "painterly" aesthetic), but, first of all, it offers a picture of dirty children living in "horrible hygienic conditions."

Spurr's seventh trope, "affirmation—the white man's burden,"<sup>38</sup> is best seen in Fałat's narrative in the fragment when he describes the segregation practices of the British as a means of preserving "the prestige not only of their nation, but of the white race in general." He affirms the superiority of the white race and "the white man's burden" as he shows it is "to represent the white race in a dignified way" or expect to be sent away to a place like Borneo.

To conclude, Fałat's narrative demonstrates many of the central tropes of Orientalist discourse as defined by David Spurr. At the same time, Fałat's hybrid Polish and Kakanian identity during his round-the-world trip in 1885 made it possible for him to construct his persona as a European gentleman highly affirmative of the European imperial project in the Middle and Far East. Fałat's hybridity, his Polish national awareness, and his education in German-speaking Kakanian, Munich, and Switzerland prevented him from seeing any similarities between Poland's loss of independence and subjection to the "colonial" powers of Russia, Prussia, and Austro-Hungary and the fierce colonial rule over Oriental people. In this construction Poles were civilized Europeans, part of the European "civilizational" order set firmly against the "barbarian Orientals," and thus they were not the victims of the European empires and their expansionist policies. However, Fałat's use of "mimicry" rather than "rôle-distancing" when he was a tourist may point to a certain lack of security he might have felt after he had self-elevated himself to the status of a gentleman.

### A fragment from Julian Fałat's *Pamiętniki*<sup>39</sup>

Translated by Grzegorz Moroz.

[In Singapore] I spent my time gathering material for drawings and painterly sketches. However, my work, carried out here with European intensity, was not only tiring but also dangerous. Fighting the heat depleted one's energy and strength. During the day, even the hottest one, you can alleviate the problem by taking frequent baths and changing

38 Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire*, 109.

39 Julian Fałat, *Pamiętniki* [Memoirs] (Katowice: Śląski Instytut Naukowy, 1987), 118–20

clothes several times, but the nights were horribly tiring; particularly because in order to dry yourself and your bedsheets from sweat you would probably have needed several beds prepared for this. Bloodthirsty mosquitoes were yet another kind of plague; despite spreading incense in the bedroom in the evening and careful inspection of the bed curtains, it was enough if one mosquito had found its way inside and you would get up in the morning after a sleepless night with burning and itching blisters.

Before taking my first bath I was terrified by a knot of multi-colored snakes on the floor. I had to chase them away with a stick, whereupon they hid in corners and crevices—but it did not help much, because before I finished my bath many of them had returned to the brick-covered floor. These are non-venomous snakes, but nevertheless, for a European they are abhorrent to look at.

Europeans here—mostly Englishmen, Frenchmen, Germans, and Dutchmen—wear white blouses, fastened at the neck (with no shirts), and loose white trousers. After a few hours, a gentleman, covered with sweat, takes a bath and changes his clothes, of which he usually has dozens. The washing, drying, and ironing of suits is done by Chinese people and it takes just a few hours.

Life comes to a standstill at noon; only around four do the sporting grounds come alive. Everyone has to play a compulsory game of croquet or tennis; even Chinese and Sinhalese people do not abstain from this custom, and they look extremely funny with their pigtails when they do it. Then there is *corso*, in which everybody takes part, from the governor and his wife to the consuls and local *nahabs*, in all manner of vehicles, including modest *jinrickshaws*. After several circles of promenading, everybody goes to dinner, served in the European fashion, but with a preponderance of wonderful sea fish and fruit, particularly pineapples and bananas. Wines are of the same types and by the same manufacturers as in Europe. Apart from wine a lot of whisky is drunk, usually with Seltzer water. In the morning one gets a delicious tea with condensed milk; moreover, there is five o'clock tea. Tea in this climate has a very good effect upon the body.

The suburbs are full of picturesque nooks and crannies. They are inhabited mostly by the Chinese, who support themselves by trade and craftsmanship. They make up three-quarters of Singapore's population and live in appalling hygienic conditions at the mouths of canals and among the mud flats. Despite this, judging by their appearance, they are healthy and well. I often see how a group of small Chinese scruffs enjoy themselves eating a pineapple, lifting it with their fingers to their mouths, bit by bit; it is reminiscent of Murillo.

In Singapore there are a great number of huge warehouses of indigo, coffee, tea, and coconuts. It is only here, in the colonies, that the true might of England can be recognized, a might with which no other country can compete. However, I am more interested in the sky, the sun, trees, people, animals, and the sea—the sea which splashes

continuously against the low shore near the hotel. This sea in Singapore is strange: although it is in a bay it is very choppy. The waves are short, in constant restless movement—the pale-blue water sometimes takes on a yellowish or willow-green shade. The lawns, which are meticulously maintained in the English fashion, are full of Indians, Sinhalese, Persians, Javanese, Chinese, and Jews, who rest here and invigorate themselves with pineapples and bananas.

I spent most of the time in the Chinese district painting Chinese people, who pose willingly but are very intrusive. After several weeks, one day I felt that my head was getting heavy and confused. The doctor who was summoned immediately diagnosed malaria of the worst kind. It was then that Mrs. Becker and her friend Mrs. Bricha began looking after me with the utmost consideration. They even contacted the Maharaja to get the best quinine.

After several weeks I was able to stand up. However, the doctor advised me to leave Singapore as soon as possible and to sail away and be on the open sea, as the change of air, and particularly the sea breeze, are very effective cures for malaria.

# COLONIALISM, FREEDOM FIGHTERS AND POLISH AMBIGUITY

How Joseph Conrad Korzeniowski and Bronisław Piłsudski  
(Almost) Met in Singapore

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*Rafal Pankowski*



This chapter focuses on certain historical connections between Poland and Southeast Asia in the context of (post)colonial and cultural studies. It attempts to connect several seemingly disjointed aspects of memory, identity, and geography. In particular, it focuses on the ambiguity of roles played by Poles in Southeast Asia in the late nineteenth century (personified by the examples of Joseph Conrad and Bronisław Piłsudski), which was influenced by the complex positioning of Polish identity vis-a-vis European empires—and the world.

## Polish Orientalism

It should be noted that Polish perspectives on Southeast Asia have been strongly filtered by the Orientalist lens. The imagery of Asia's South and East in Poland has been influenced, in multiple ways, by the discursive mechanism of "Orientalization." The multi-faceted phenomenon of "Orientalism," as conceived by Edward Said, is based on a stereotypical and essentialist perception and representation of the cultures of the "East" in the "West."<sup>1</sup>

Southeast Asia—as a region of the Asian East—has often been "orientalized" in Poland, a country in East-Central Europe with a strong sense of identification with the culture and values of Western Europe. It would be wrong, however, to apply Said's perspective to various forms of the Polish relationship with Southeast Asia in an uncritical manner. Interestingly, Said wrote his PhD dis-

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1 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

sertation about the Polish-born writer Joseph Conrad, but apparently had relatively little to say about Conrad's Polishness.<sup>2</sup>

For historical, cultural, economic, and political reasons, the case of Poland's relationship to the colonial world has been both similar to and different from that of the Western European centers of political and economic power. In fact, Poland has been the object of (external and internal) Orientalization in its own right: for centuries Poland itself has been a part of Europe's East rather than its West. Therefore, Said's approach to Orientalism in the Polish case needs to be problematized and supplemented with some nuances as "East" and "West" tend to be relative and fluid categories.

Maria Janion invoked Said's theory of Orientalism to discuss Poland's complex relationship with (post)colonialism, including its lengthy history as both a victim and a victimizer, sometimes alternately and at other times even simultaneously. A key—perhaps permanent—dilemma of Polish identity has concerned its self-definition as part of "the West," along with a certain uneasy perception of (semi-)peripheral status, combined with a complex sense of both superiority and inferiority with respect to other cultures.<sup>3</sup> In the words of Marta Grzechnik,

Poland ... is also implicated in the European system of colonialism and imperialism in a number of ways. It can be considered a victim of its neighbours' (Germany and Russia/the USSR) imperialism, and mechanisms of orientalization and "othering" coming from Western Europe. However, it can also be considered a colonizer in its own Eastern borderlands, and complicit in European overseas expansion as a nation sharing in the European "colonial mind", reproducing its hierarchies and stereotypes, for example in literature and science.<sup>4</sup>

The lack of experience in overseas colonization has been frequently mentioned as a factor that distinguishes Polish history and identity from that of Western Europe. In consequence, Poles, reflecting upon their history of foreign occupations, have often tended to identify as the colonized (victim) rather than as the colonizer (oppressor). Such an approach might contribute to a level of empathy

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2 Edward Said, *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

3 Maria Janion, *Niesamowita Słowiańszczyzna* [Uncanny slavdom] (Cracow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2006).

4 Marta Grzechnik, "The Missing Second World: On Poland and Postcolonial Studies," *International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 21, no. 7 (2019).

with historically oppressed peoples (as exemplified by the writings of Ryszard Kapuściński, for example),<sup>5</sup> in line with the nineteenth century slogan of Polish radicals: “For your freedom and ours.” The internationalist element of the Polish patriotic tradition was invoked, for example, by members of the late nineteenth century Polish revolutionary movement in their fight against imperialist forces such as the Russian Empire. The Piłsudski brothers, Bronisław and Józef, joined the movement as students in the 1880s. Bronisław later became a champion of marginalized indigenous communities of the Russian Far East, while Józef became the leader of the reborn Polish republic built on the ruins of imperial Russia, Germany, and Austro-Hungary.

On the other hand, it has been argued that Poland’s historical detachment from the colonization process has often superficially “absolved” the Poles from their share of “European guilt” and thereby made them less (rather than more) inclined to sympathize with the plight of the post-colonial “Third World,” as illustrated in the case of the 2015 refugee crisis and its aftermath, when Poland refused to accept non-European (non-Christian) refugees. In 2022, however, millions of refugees from the worn-torn Ukraine crossed the border into Poland and were welcomed with solidarity and sympathy.

The era of major geographical discoveries and the period of early colonization which followed them, from the late fifteenth to the late eighteenth centuries, coincided with Poland’s entering its union with Lithuania, i.e. an eastward expansion. Poland’s lack of participation in overseas colonization can be qualified by the problematic nature of its relationship with its own Eastern territories. Historians have pointed to the exploitative nature of social relations in the Polish East (in the territories of contemporary Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine),<sup>6</sup> which bore resemblances to colonial practices and patterns. Similar analogies were sometimes made about social relations in mainland Poland itself, with the exploited Polish peasants being compared to slaves in colonies by writers such as Edmund Burke.<sup>7</sup>

Poland as a state did not colonize non-European lands, although individual Polish-born adventurers could be found among the colonizers. In this context one might also mention the ephemeral colonial episodes in The Gambia

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5 Ryszard Kapuściński, *The Shadow of the Sun* (London: Penguin Books, 2001).

6 Daniel Beauvois, ed., *Les confins de l'ancienne Pologne: Ukraine, Lituanie, Biélorussie XVIe-XXe siècles* [The borders of ancient Poland: Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus in the sixteenth to twentieth centuries] (Lille: Presses Universitaires de Lille 1988).

7 Edmund Burke, *The Modern Orator. The Speeches of the Right Hon. Edmund Burke* (London: Aylott and Jones, 1847), 564.



and Tobago. In fact, Polish history cannot be completely cut off from the story of European colonization. After all, Poland was a (semi-peripheral) part of the European socio-economic “world-system” (to use Immanuel Wallerstein’s terminology)<sup>8</sup> and its trade relations constituted a key link with the colonial powers. In the Jagiellonian period Polish agricultural production became inextricably linked with the international market, providing grain supplies paid for by Western European silver, gold, and spices obtained through colonial conquests. For centuries, large amounts of Polish crops were shipped to Amsterdam, the seat of the East India Company.<sup>9</sup>

Clearly, the “internationalist” element of Polish identity was never fully hegemonic or permanent. The rise of nationalism in Poland in the 1930s was reflected by the government-supported organization named the “Maritime and Colonial League” (described in detail in Marta Grzechnik’s chapter).

In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, a number of Polish exiles visited and/or played a role in the region of Southeast Asia. A majority of them were ex-combatants of the failed freedom uprisings in Poland who were engaged in the colonial plantation business on the territory of present-day Indonesia. The paradox of former freedom fighters becoming active participants in the regime of colonial exploitation is vivid.

There were also seamen and travelers, the Polish-British writer Joseph Conrad being one example. Conrad’s insightful novels inform many contemporary debates on colonialism and genocide. In an analogy between the different types of “exotica” perceived by a “Polish eye,” Conrad’s biographers attributed his fascination with distant lands and oceans to a longing for the vast spaces of the Ukraine, the East European “exotic” land of his childhood. In the words of Barbara Kocówna, when one reads Conrad’s “novels and short stories which take place in the Malay Archipelago (...) a justified suggestion can be made that the people of that country could have reminded Conrad of the demographic structure of the Ukraine.”<sup>10</sup> Kocówna developed her original argument even further:

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8 Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System* (San Diego: Academic Press, 1989).

9 Maria Bogucka, “Żegluga bałtycka w XVII–XVIII wieku w świetle materiałów z archiwum w Amsterdamie” [Baltic shipping in the seventeenth–eighteenth centuries in the light of materials from the archives in Amsterdam], *Zapiski Historyczne* 83, no. 4 (2017): 123–37.

10 Barbara Kocówna, *Polskość Conrada* [Conrad’s Polishness] (Warsaw: Ludowa Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza, 1967), 5.

Why did Conrad come to love this country [Malaya – R.P.] so much? Did he find a similarity to his native Ukraine, the Promised Land of many Poles who had broken radically with their environment and bravely traveled into the steppe in their quest for shelter and sometimes a better life? The whole historical past of the Ukraine, represented in Polish literature, especially by Sienkiewicz, was not alien to Conrad. The layers of the past were visible, as well as the clash of influences of the newcomers on the local population, and the other way round. Of course one must be very careful and not make too far-fetched analogies. What is ... important is the climate of human relations in the Ukraine and in the Malay Archipelago.<sup>11</sup>

While Kocówna's analogy may seem far-fetched, there is one striking detail in Conrad's novel suggesting her thesis is not entirely off the mark. The fictional village of Sambir, the Malay setting of his first two novels, *Almayer's Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands*, had been named by the author after Sambir, a town in Ukraine, where the Korzeniowski family spent their last years of relative happiness.<sup>12</sup>



Figure 5.1. Joseph Conrad, 1916

One of the threads connecting Conrad's fascination with Southeast Asia and his Polish background is the very idea of "the East" so strongly embedded in Polish culture. Both menacing and attracting, "the East" in the Polish tradition often meant the lands of contemporary Ukraine, the vast spaces of the East European steppes which the most famous of the Polish Romantic poets, Adam Mickiewicz, famously compared to an ocean.<sup>13</sup> For centuries, the Polish so-called "civilizing mission" was directed at the spaces of Ukraine rather than overseas territories. For Polish landowners, settlers, and even poets, the Ukraine evoked feelings of oriental exoticism and attraction, unlimited opportunities, and a fear of semi-barbarian, unpredictable natives. Born in the Polish-Ukrainian borderland, Conrad's first encounter with the sea occurred in Odessa, on the Black Sea coast. Un-

11 Kocówna, *Polskość Conrada*, 155.

12 Kocówna, *Polskość Conrada*, 144; Maya Jasanoff, *Joseph Conrad i narodziny globalnego świata* [Joseph Conrad and the birth of a global world] (Poznan: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2018), 169.

13 Adam Mickiewicz, *Sonety krymskie* [Crimean sonnets] (Moscow: 1826).

doubtedly, some of the “oriental” features of Ukraine’s imagery in Polish culture resonate with Conrad’s perception and depiction of Southeast Asia.

The above observations pose a set of questions which are relevant in the Southeast Asian, East European, and universal contexts: What are the challenges of such (quasi-) colonial ambiguities? Can we understand “the other” by referring to “the familiar”? Can East Europeans contribute an original perspective to contemporary postcolonial debates?

### **A Prisoner Below the Deck: Bronisław Piłsudski**

In 1887, two Polish men traveled through the waters of Southeast Asia with both their ships stopping at Singapore. They had no chance to meet at the time, although they had a lot in common: they represented a generation of young Polish noblemen from the eastern part of historic Poland (at that time a part of the Russian Empire). Both of them had come of age in the wake of the failed Polish revolt, the January Uprising of 1863–65. Both of their families suffered repression for participation in the Polish revolutionary movement and paid a large price for their patriotic ideals. Both men were socialized in the spirit of the Polish Romantic tradition of the nineteenth century, which prophesized a resurrection of an independent Poland as an act of historical justice.<sup>14</sup> Importantly, both of them were to make a huge contribution to global intellectual history, directly and indirectly, through a number of mutual friends, artists, and thinkers.

Their paths would cross again more than two decades later, during the historic Japan-British exhibition in London in 1910,<sup>15</sup> but it was not possible for them to meet personally in 1887, because—unbeknown to each other—they found themselves in very different personal circumstances. Józef Korzeniowski (known later as Joseph Conrad) was not yet a writer, but rather a trade ship officer operating in the region, who was successfully climbing up the sailor career ladder. In 1886 he reached the rank of captain and became a British citizen. His home ports were first Singapore, and then Bangkok and Sydney. He

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14 The similarity in social backgrounds of Korzeniowski and Piłsudski was noted by Stefan Zabirowski in “O Conradzie i Piłsudskim” [Conrad and Piłsudski], *Teksty Drugie* 3 (2009): 33–46. Zabirowski wrote about Józef Piłsudski, Bronisław’s more famous brother.

15 Jerzy Chociłowski, *Bronisława Piłsudskiego pojedynek z losem* [Bronisław Piłsudski’s duel with fate] (Warsaw: Iskry, 2018), 89. Piłsudski served as a translator and mentor for a group of Ainu who were a part of a “living exhibition” and while fulfilling the task he spent much of his time in the company of Stefan Żeromski, a famous Polish writer who was also an acquaintance of Conrad’s and the author of several prefaces to the Polish editions of the latter’s books. It is unknown, however, if Piłsudski and Conrad met in London on that occasion.



Figure 5.2. Bronisław Piłsudski with Ainu children.

became especially familiar with the coast of eastern Borneo which he repeatedly visited on trade missions. He had first seen the sea in Odessa as a youngster and was now living his childhood dream of being an accomplished sailor.<sup>16</sup>

The other man's status at the stop-over in Singapore was radically different and much less comfortable. Bronisław Piłsudski was a political prisoner of the Russian Tsarist regime who was on his way to many years of imprisonment and exile in the Russian-controlled Far East. Piłsudski's biographer Jerzy Chociłowski compares the function of Russia's Sakhalin Island in the nineteenth century as a Tsarist colonial dumping ground for criminals to that of Australia in the British Empire and New Caledonia for the French.<sup>17</sup> As the Trans-Siberian Railway had not yet been constructed, the Russian state in those years sent some of its prisoners to the furthest East of Asia by a sea route via Odessa, Suez, Ceylon, Singapore, and Osaka, before finally arriving in Vladivostok. At the outset of the journey they were shackled like slaves. The shackles were not removed until after they passed the Suez Canal. Such conditions were in itself a form of humiliating punishment.

Piłsudski, while a student in St. Petersburg, had been implicated in a plot to kill the Tsar, Alexander III. Initially sentenced to death, his sentence was commuted to fifteen years of hard labor on Sakhalin. His younger brother, Józef Piłsudski, was sentenced in the same trial to five years in Siberia. Another

16 Mieczysław Czuma, *Siódmy kontynent* [The seventh continent] (Rzeszów: Krajowa Agencja Wydawnicza, 1988), 149.

17 Chociłowski, *Bronisława Piłsudskiego pojedynek z losem*, 51.

protagonist of the plot, Alexander Ulyanov—the older brother of Vladimir Ulyanov (Lenin)—was sentenced to death and hanged.<sup>18</sup> After years in the Far East, Bronisław Piłsudski became a renowned researcher and advocate for the Ainu minority culture in Russia and Japan. After a spell in Tokyo, he eventually returned to Europe in 1906, settled first in Krakow, then Geneva and Paris where he worked for the Polish National Committee and died (probably by suicide) just a few months before Poland finally regained her independence in 1918. He was never reunited with his Ainu spouse and children.

Bronisław Piłsudski is not a well-known figure today and he is usually mentioned in the context of the historic role of his younger brother, Józef, who went on to become a leader of the Polish Socialist Party and then de facto father of the nation, an Atatürk-type figure of Poland in the interwar period. Only in recent years, a century since his tragic death, has Bronisław Piłsudski attracted more attention in his home country, for example, through exhibitions organized at the Manggha Museum of Japanese Art and Technology in Kraków (2018) and at the Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw (2021).<sup>19</sup> He did not succeed in joining academia during his lifetime. Nevertheless, Bronisław's serious legacy as an anthropologist and ethnographer must not be underestimated.

As a pioneer of modern research, Bronisław built a substantial collection of sound recordings documenting Ainu culture. A self-taught pioneer of the method of participant-observation, he did not just study the Ainu, he fully immersed himself in the community and its culture, which included marrying an Ainu woman. Piłsudski's approach to the Ainu (and the other indigenous peoples he encountered in East Asia) was characterized by a deep empathy and a radical commitment to their well-being and emancipation. A fellow exile and writer Waclaw Sieroszewski “recalled that his friend, Bronisław Piłsudski, was very fluent in the Ainu language and was very popular among the Ainu, whom he protected and cared for. Piłsudski was even jokingly referred to as ‘the king of the Ainu’.”<sup>20</sup>

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18 Philip Pomper, *Lenin's Brother. The Origins of the October Revolution* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010). Pomper argues the trauma of the trial and the hanging of Alexander Ulyanov had a profound impact on Lenin's subsequent revolutionary path—and thus on world history.

19 There has also been a number of new publications based on B. Piłsudski's work such as Alfred F. Majewicz, *Japonia późnych lat okresu Meiji oczyma Bronisława Piłsudskiego* [Japan in the late Meiji period through the eyes of Bronisław Piłsudski] (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2020). Piłsudski's legacy is known among Russian anthropologists, see e.g. *The World of the Ainu through the Eyes of Bronisław Piłsudski* (St. Petersburg: Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography Kunstkamera of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 2019).

20 Andrey Sokolov and Veronika Belyaeva Sachuk, “Bronisław Piłsudski—an Outstanding Polish Researcher of the Cultures of the Indigenous Peoples of the Russian Far East,” in *The World of the*

While in Japan, Piłsudski authored numerous articles with an optimistic view of the modernizing process leading towards democracy: “The times are changing. The old authorities are falling down. Japan is entering a new era, when the exercise of state power will pass into the hands of a generation brought up and educated in the ideals of a more democratic Europe.”<sup>21</sup> Clearly, the years spent in exile did not destroy his historical optimism and a universalistic outlook on Asia. A Japanese biographer of Bronisław Piłsudski, Kazuhiko Sawada, detailed numerous encounters, friendships, and cooperative endeavors established by Piłsudski with progressive intellectuals and activists from Japan and other Asian countries. His internationalist credo can be found in a dedication written on a photograph presented to Akira Kashima: “Let’s serve the great cause, which is unity and friendship with the nations and tribes who were previously considered to be hostile.”<sup>22</sup>

Upon his return to Europe, he shared his experiences with a young anthropologist from Krakow, Bronisław Malinowski, with whom he shared an interest in the highlanders’ culture of the Zakopane region in the Polish-Slovak borderland (Piłsudski was a co-founder of the regional folklore museum, applying his ethnographic skills to the study of the local culture of Zakopane).<sup>23</sup> Malinowski developed the participant-observation methodology in his later study of Polynesian cultures which earned him global fame as a founding father of modern social anthropology.

Interestingly, Bronisław Malinowski was later dubbed “the Conrad of anthropology.”<sup>24</sup> His groundbreaking works, such as *The Sexual Life of Savages in North-Western Melanesia* (1927), while influenced by the mental baggage of the time (as illustrated by the usage of the word “savages”), were instrumental in breaking with the Eurocentric paradigm in the social sciences and in enabling

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*Ainu through the Eyes of Bronisław Piłsudski* (St. Petersburg: Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography Kunstkamera of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 2019), 29.

21 Majewicz, *Japonia późnych lat okresu Meiji oczyma Bronisława Piłsudskiego*, 278.

22 Kazuhiko Sawada, *Opowieść o Bronisławie Piłsudskim. Polak nazwany Królem Ajnów* [The story of Bronisław Piłsudski. A Pole named king of the Ainu] (Sulejówku: Muzeum Józefa Piłsudskiego w Sulejówku), 212.

23 Lesław Dall, “Zakopiańskie lata Bronisława Piłsudskiego (1906-1914)” [The Zakopane years of Bronisław Piłsudski (1906-1914)], in Antoni Kuczyński, *Kochany Wujaszku. Listy Bronisława Piłsudskiego do Stanisława Witkiewicza* [Dear uncle. Letters of Bronisław Piłsudski to Stanisław Witkiewicz] (Zakopane-Sulejówku: Muzeum Tatrzańskie w Zakopanem, Muzeum Józefa Piłsudskiego w Sulejówku, 2016), 125. Cf. Bronisław Malinowski, *Dziennik w ścisłym znaczeniu tego wyrazu* [A journal in the strict sense of the word] (Cracow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2007).

24 Marek Pacukiewicz, “Conrad and Malinowski,” *Yearbook of Conrad Studies (Poland)* 3 (2007): 131-139. Pacukiewicz asks that if Malinowski was the Conrad of anthropology, was Conrad perhaps the Malinowski of literature?

inter-cultural empathy in Western academia and beyond. According to Xin Liu in *The Making of Anthropology in East and Southeast Asia*,<sup>25</sup> Malinowski's influence was subsequently important for the emergence of anthropology in Asia as well. Another of Piłsudski's intellectual acquaintances upon his return from East Asia was none other than Franz Boas, the founder of the Chicago school of anthropology, with whom the Polish ex-prisoner corresponded and even planned a joint expedition to the Far East (the plan was never implemented).<sup>26</sup>

Understandably, Piłsudski's 1887 sojourn in Singapore was brief and he had little or no interaction with the local environment, but he did manage to send a letter to his family back in Poland while in the port. On his way back to Europe as a free man in 1906 he took a different route: from Tokyo he sailed to Seattle and crossed the US.

Piłsudski was transported from Odessa to Singapore and further on to Osaka and Vladivostok on board the Russian ship *Nizhny Novgorod*. It was his first sea travel. He spent his time during the voyage educating fellow prisoners who, unlike himself, were criminals and not political prisoners: thanks to the imprisoned Polish revolutionary they learned to read.

The prisoners were crowded under the deck, with little ventilation and in conditions of unbearable heat. Drinking water was available only through a straw from a locked tank, with no possibility for the prisoners to wash their clothes or bodies. After a month's journey, Piłsudski wrote in his letter from Singapore that "the stench was unbearable."<sup>27</sup> Conditions improved somewhat when the ship entered the Indian Ocean as occasional baths were allowed, and in Colombo for the first time the prisoners even received white bread. Then, conditions worsened again and the journey took a physical and psychological toll on Bronisław. Upon reaching the final port, Piłsudski wrote to his father:

I am finally in the place of exile. God knows how long I'm going to be here. Strange as it may seem, I couldn't wait to reach Sakhalin and *katorga* [penal labour in the Russian Empire—R.P.]. Anyone in my shoes on this steamboat would not be surprised. The voyage, under difficult conditions, was terribly burdensome, especially at the end. Dirt, terribly stale air, damp, hard-

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25 Xin Liu, "Past and Present. Two Moments in the History of Chinese Anthropology," in *The Making of Anthropology in East and Southeast Asia*, ed. Shinji Yamashita, Joseph Bosco, and J. S. Eades (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004).

26 Krystyna Piątkowska, "Od Bronisława Piłsudskiego do przestrzeni Urzędu Pracy. Meandry refleksji antropologa" [From Bronisław Piłsudski to the space of the Labor Office. The meanders of an anthropologist's reflection], *Etnografia Nowa* 6 (2014), 85-86.

27 Chociłowski, *Bronisława Piłsudskiego pojedynek z losem*, 58.

tack and sour cabbage, poor-quality water, abscesses and indigestion, and strong rocking in the Sea of Japan causing water to flow everywhere, flooding the floor, plank beds, and personal belongings –these were the main reasons why I wanted the tiresome journey to come to an end.<sup>28</sup>

Edmund Płuski, another Polish political prisoner condemned for revolutionary activities, travelled the same route one year before Piłsudski and later wrote a detailed account which confirms the conditions described by Piłsudski. As Płuski wrote in his memoir, “in the ports where the ship stopped, Colombo and Singapore, southern fruits were bought for the prisoners.... They were meant to prevent scurvy. A big sensation was the distribution of soap with a pineapple flavor, some prisoners ate it.”<sup>29</sup>

The acclaimed Polish socialist writer Stefan Żeromski portrayed Bronisław Piłsudski (as Gustaw Bezmian) in his 1912 novel *Uroda życia* (The Beauty of Life). It is notable that Żeromski belonged to the relatively numerous group of mutual acquaintances of Piłsudski and Conrad Korzeniowski. Żeromski described a prisoners’ rebellion on board a prison-ship, organized by Bezmian and suppressed by Russian guards. In reality no such rebellion took place and the prisoners were delivered to their destination as planned. It is difficult to establish the precise date of Piłsudski’s stay in Singapore, but it is known that he started his journey from Odessa on June 8, 1887 and reached his final destination of Sakhalin on August 3, 1887.

Given the similarity in the social backgrounds of Piłsudski and Conrad Korzeniowski, the contrast in their position while both of them found themselves in Singapore was indeed striking: one was a prisoner of a European imperial power (Russia), while the other was a functionary of the colonial trade mechanism of another European imperial power (Britain). The latter’s status as a member of an occupied nation serving the occupiers of other nations stood in direct contradiction to the nineteenth century Polish Romantic motto which emphasized the internationalism of the then Polish patriots: “For your freedom and ours.”

While Piłsudski was being transported to Singapore, Conrad Korzeniowski was about to join the crew of the trade ship *Vidar* which regularly commuted between Singapore and the smaller ports on the eastern shores of Borneo. He started his service sailing out from Singapore on August 22, 1887 as

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28 Sokolov and Belyaeva Sachuk, “Bronisław Piłsudski—an Outstanding Polish Researcher, 19.

29 Chociłowski, *Bronistawa Piłsudskiego pojedynek z losem*, 62.



the first officer of the *Vidar*. By then he was a naturalized British citizen and held a captain's license. He spent four and a half months on the ship and—as Maya Jasanoff notes—those months arguably had a greater impact on his future creative work than any other period in his life. This was when Józef Korzeniowski started to become Joseph Conrad.<sup>30</sup>

### Conrad as the Anti-Kipling of Southeast Asia

Reportedly Conrad started writing his prose around that time and eventually became a full-time author in the 1890s. International audiences appreciated his creative genius, but it took many decades before Conrad's biographers began to identify details of the reality which inspired his novels: it transpired that his books were often based on real, rather than fictional, characters and events experienced by Conrad and/or his fellow sailors operating in Southeast Asia. To be sure, Conrad's work belongs to fiction, but it is undoubtedly informed by the writer's biography. The imagery and mental frames of reference in his novels were the direct fruit of Conrad's life and travels in the colonial world.

The names of real people and places were often changed but the novels frequently contain an almost photographic reflection of the maritime and colonial realities of the region. For example, Singapore was referred to as “the eastern port” rather than by its actual name, but the descriptions of the shore and the emerging city are in fact detailed and accurate. Many of the stories subsequently included in Conrad's novels had been heard by the future author in the Charles Emerson Breakfast Rooms, one of Conrad's favorite spots in Singapore, in the course of the 1880s.

Jerry Allen and Norman Sherry provided numerous facts regarding Conrad's life on the sea and in Southeast Asia, respectively.<sup>31</sup> It was established that the literary character Lord Jim had been based on the real biographies of the British-born sailor Podmore Williams (who, together with other members of the crew had escaped from the *Jedah*, a ship carrying Muslim pilgrims, and lived

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30 Maya Jasanoff, *The Dawn Watch: Joseph Conrad in a Global World* (London: William Collins, 2017). The Polish edition: Maya Jasanoff, *Joseph Conrad i narodziny globalnego świata* (Poznan: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2018).

31 Jerry Allen, *The Sea Years of Joseph Conrad* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1965); Norman Sherry, *Conrad's Eastern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966). I used the Polish editions: Jerry Allen, *Morskie lata Conrada* [Conrad's sea years] (Gdansk: Wydawnictwo Morskie, 1971); Norman Sherry, *Wschodni świat Conrada* [Conrad's eastern world] (Gdansk: Wydawnictwo Morskie, 1972).

in Singapore when Conrad was there) as well as other real-life figures such as William Lingard (aka Rajah Laut), an English merchant and protector of the Malay in the area of the Berau river in east Borneo. Conrad probably met Lingard at the Emerson Breakfast Rooms in 1883 and later included him as a character in several novels.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, Lord Jim's character has echoes of at least one other real person. William Lingard's son, Jim, had been a trader based in Berau, who exported local goods through Conrad's ship, the *Vidar*. His local nickname, Tuan Jim, gave the famous novel its title.

Jasanoff's book on Conrad was published almost a century after the great writer's death, but it finally shed some light on an aspect usually absent from previous biographies of the former sailor: at the time of Conrad's service on the ship, the *Vidar* was singled out by the Dutch consul for its alleged conspicuous role in smuggling arms and transporting slaves from Donggala (on the island of Celebes or Sulawesi). Conrad, as the first officer, was responsible for the loading and unloading of passengers and cargo on the vessel. In his future writings he admitted to playing a role in the arms trade on Borneo, but never directly alluded to his own role in the slave trade. According to Jasanoff, there are enough hints in Conrad's writings to suggest he was at least aware of it.<sup>33</sup> To be sure, slavery was outlawed by both the British and the Dutch colonizers, but it continued, not least because the competing colonial powers did not yet exercise full control over the territories, and slavery was in fact frequently tolerated for the sake of profit. While he never spoke openly of his role in transporting enslaved human beings, the awareness that there were slaves on his ship may have been too heavy a burden for the Polish officer. Upon returning to the home port of Singapore after one of the regular voyages, he unexpectedly terminated his employment on the ship, a scene vividly described in one of his future masterpieces, the autobiographical short novel *The Shadow Line*.

Douglas Kammen reminds us that the main cargo on Conrad's ship was in fact of a different type:

But what were Conrad and the ship on which he briefly served as first mate doing 34 miles upriver in this "God-forsaken hole"? The answer is coal—a commodity to be bought or appropriated by legal means or by outright force, and also one requiring labor that, likewise, could either be "free" or coerced.<sup>34</sup>

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32 Allen, *Morskie lata Conrada*, 305.

33 Jasanoff, *Joseph Conrad i narodziny globalnego świata*, 134.

34 Douglas Kammen, "Conrad and Coal," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, December 11, 2019.

At best, Conrad's role was morally equivocal. After all, as Jasanoff notes, as a white officer in Asia, he belonged to a privileged minority on the basis of his race and religion.<sup>35</sup> A child of freedom fighters, raised in the spirit of resistance against imperialism and injustice, as a European in colonial Southeast Asia he himself navigated the imperialist system of exploitation in another part of the world. His subsequent writings earned him the moniker of "the Kipling of the Malay archipelago," even though he did not praise "the white man's burden."<sup>36</sup>

Judging by his own words, he truly enjoyed being a sailor and he became fascinated by the world of the East. Arguably, it satisfied his Romantic urges (after all, even while at sea, he remained an enthusiast of Polish Romantic poetry). Nevertheless, for various reasons, he also felt increasingly uncomfortable about serving the system. One can argue that the growing awareness of the moral ambiguity of his position vis-à-vis the colonial system can be at least partly related to Conrad's Polish identity.

It took some more years and experiences before Conrad could speak out openly against the cruelty of colonial exploitation in *The Heart of Darkness*, another autobiographical novel written in the wake of the author's experience in the Congo, but one can discern elements of an emerging critique of European colonialism on the pages of his "Asian" novels as well. To be sure, Conrad was not an overtly political writer (if anything, his orientation can probably be best described as "small c" conservatism), but he had a special sensitivity to the plight of the outcast, the marginalized, and the uprooted. In many of his works, one may identify traces of empathy with the people of Southeast Asia (and other non-whites) and of contempt for the mechanism of European colonization.

Conrad was not a soldier, but a civilian sailor. He sailed on vessels flying the British flag, but he was not in Her Majesty's Navy. Ostensibly, his role was not to unleash violence or discipline colonial subjects, but to facilitate and conduct trade. Nevertheless, numerous utterances in his books express the author's dislike of greed, the instrumentalization of human relations, and the hypocrisy of the free trade ideology underpinning the unequal, exploitative colonial economy. It is known that Conrad made little money in his job and was reluctant to accept lucrative trade opportunities that were available to him in his later (brief) role as a ship captain, as he somewhat ironically noted in *A Smile of Fortune*, another short autobiographical novel. Conrad noted dryly: "Ah! These commercial interests—spoiling the finest life under the sun. Why must the sea

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35 Jasanoff, *Joseph Conrad i narodziny globalnego świata*, 131.

36 Jasanoff, *Joseph Conrad i narodziny globalnego świata*, 142.

be used for trade—and for war as well? Why kill and traffic on it, pursuing selfish aims of no great importance after all?”<sup>37</sup>

His aloofness vis-à-vis commerce and material self-interest can be at least partly related to his early socialization, i.e. his Polish Romantic upbringing and the Polish nobility’s ethos which notoriously frowned upon mercantilism and utilitarian materialism. In the course of the nineteenth century, the impoverished nobility of Poland’s East transformed itself into the country’s intelligentsia, maintaining the noblesse oblige values of the social strata, emphasizing the sense of moral duty to society at the expense of personal enrichment. Many of the representatives of the intelligentsia devoted their lives to progressive social causes.<sup>38</sup>

Unlike Piłsudski, Conrad could not and did not immerse himself fully into the indigenous culture of Asia. As Jasanoff writes, he knew more about the Anglo-Dutch rivalry and the lives of European merchants and sailors than about topics such as the Islamic faith or Dayak communities in Borneo.<sup>39</sup> The narrators and main characters of his books were usually Europeans in Asia rather than Asians themselves, although complex, independent Asian characters also appear in his novels. At the same time, he can hardly be accused of an ignorant Eurocentric perspective. As one of very few Poles who had mastered a command of the Malay language at the time, he was able to communicate with Asian sailors on his boat. He studied the language further with the help of dictionaries upon his return to Europe. He took care to back up his own observations and other sailors’ accounts of Malay culture by reading broadly the available literature on the subject. It is apparent that upon his return to Europe, Conrad repeatedly suffered from long bouts of depression, and perhaps writing about Southeast Asian landscapes was also a self-therapeutic exercise, rooted in personal memories and nostalgia.

Conrad’s books often dwell on the fascinating interface between European and Asian identities, and the interplay and interaction of cultures, values, and civilizations. It is not accidental that so many characters in his books (often women) live at the crossroads of cultures; many of them have multiple identities and backgrounds, and in many cases they are of mixed race and ethnicity. Numerous characters in Conrad’s novels set in Southeast Asia belong to the space in-between cultures, having mixed loyalties and uncertain identities.

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37 Joseph Conrad, “A Smile of Fortune,” *The London Magazine* 25 (1911): 699.

38 Bohdan Cywiński, *Rodowody niepokornych* [Pedigrees of the rebellious] (Cracow: Znak, 1971) is a seminal work on the origins of the Polish progressive intelligentsia.

39 Jasanoff, *Joseph Conrad i narodziny globalnego świata*, 143.

Almost all of them are nomads, migrants, or members of dislocated diasporas. Conrad's world is the world of the borderland—the space of cultural diffusion, diversity, co-existence as well as confrontation. In this sense the Polish-British writer could be seen as a precursor to contemporary postcolonial and intercultural discourses.

### The Burden of Polishness

Of course, Conrad could relate to those of mixed or multiple identities—as well as to outcasts and loners—so well not least of all thanks to his own status and life experience. He came from the multicultural town of Berdyczów in the east of Poland (now in Ukraine), where Polish, Jewish, Ukrainian, and Russian cultures confronted each other and intermingled.<sup>40</sup> In the words of Stefan Zabierowski: “Conrad’s birthplace was exactly the space where many cultures blended together, and such coexistence and mutual understanding of different cultures is a distinguishing feature in Conrad—which he derived from home.”<sup>41</sup>

Having been brought up in a fiercely patriotic Polish spirit, as a child he went with his parents into forced exile into the depths of Russia (a form of punishment for his father’s revolutionary activities), an early experience of being an alien in a strange land. Having lost both parents, he came of age in Kraków, in the Polish part of the multinational Austro-Hungarian Empire. At the age of seventeen he embarked on a sailor’s career, first in France, then in England. Throughout his life on the sea, he was always the only Pole among the crew. It should not be surprising he was often referred to as a Russian, and until 1888 he was in fact a Russian citizen before taking up British citizenship. In Southeast Asia he was not only a European, but a stranger among the Western Europeans. He was a British subject, proud to be sailing on and commanding British ships, but he remained somewhat Polish at heart too. In the words of Michał Komar, “it is sometimes claimed that from a political or ideological viewpoint, Conrad remained a Polish nobleman until the end of his life.”<sup>42</sup> One of the greatest masters of English literature, he did not learn his adopted language until he was in his twenties and occasionally spoke of

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40 On the multicultural sites of Conrad’s youth in the Polish-Ukrainian borderlands, see for example Agnieszka Rybak and Anna Smółka, *Kresy—Ars moriendi* (Cracow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2020), 204, 214.

41 Stefan Zabierowski, “Conrad’s Lord Jim in Poland,” *Yearbook of Conrad Studies (Poland)* 2 (2006): 112.

42 Michał Komar, *Piekło Conrada* [Conrad’s hell] (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1978), 122.

the difficulty in writing his prose in a non-native language (interestingly, he switched from English to French whenever he had a choice in a conversation).

An important thread in Conrad's novels is the longing for a community, for a sense of belonging. He frequently portrayed the ship crew as a community for which he felt the most affection. The crew members he wrote about, based on his experiences, were typically multinational, multicultural, and multiracial, composed of individuals of diverse class backgrounds. Conrad identified with the sailor's ethos, with the camaraderie, the bond, and the spirit that united the community on the ship in the often hard and dangerous work on the Indian Ocean and in the waters of Southeast Asia. His British maritime career up to the rank of captain was remarkable. As a writer he won fame and acclaim as one of the towering figures in the history of English literature. According to numerous accounts, he felt attached to his adopted country, its symbols and virtues.

At the same time, Conrad's novels revolve around the fate of the outsider, the outcast, the black sheep, such as the only Black man in the crew of the *Narcissus*, or Lord Jim, who unsuccessfully attempts to find his peace of mind and a sense of harmony through repeatedly relocating in the space between Burma and Borneo while being haunted by the ghosts of his past. Arguably, that was the way Conrad could have felt himself as the lone Polish sailor in the cosmopolitan environment of the Southeast Asian ship business. He stood out due to his national and class origin and he was sometimes, perhaps mockingly, referred to as "the Russian count" by his fellow sailors. Paul Langlois, a sugar trader from Mauritius, who had known Conrad in the late 1880s, wrote in a letter in 1931: "He [Conrad] was not too popular with his colleagues [ship captains in the Indian Ocean – R.P.] who ironically called him a 'Russian count'"<sup>43</sup>

It is through his interest in, and a high degree of identification with, the "other," the uprooted, and the defeated that he finds his empathy with the underdog, the colonized, and the exploited. Yet despite all his empathy with the colonized world and criticism of imperialist colonialist exploitation, he did not join or endorse any anti-colonial organizations or liberation movements. On the contrary, he expressed scepticism about political activity and radical groups. This stance might also be related to his traumatic personal past, the past of the Korzeniowski family, and the then fate of Poland. His father had

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43 Quoted in Allen, *Morskie lata Conrada*, 374. There is no doubt that Conrad himself did not identify or present himself as a Russian and he renounced his Russian passport in 1886. Cf. Christiane Maria Binder, "Cosas de Russia: Joseph Conrad's Confessions about Russia and Russians," *Практики и интерпретации: журнал филологических, образовательных и культурных исследований* 2, no. 2 (2017): 55–90.

been an ardent revolutionary conspirator and a Romantic poet. The failure of the 1863 uprising against the Russian Empire resulted in the family's forced exile and subsequent poverty and ill health leading to the deaths of both parents of the young Józef. As an orphan, he was acutely aware of the collapse of the hopes of the Polish independence movement and the widespread disillusionment after its defeat. A new wave of intellectuals and writers championed "positivism," i.e. the renunciation of armed struggle and political radicalism, and concentrated on everyday economic and cultural activity instead. Conrad's lack of faith in anti-colonial activism arguably echoed the lack of faith in the Polish national liberation efforts.

The "heroism" of Conrad's characters lay not in subversive engagement but rather in simply living out one's everyday duties and obligations towards others against the odds. This stance was often met with criticism. A leading Polish Marxist literary critic, Jan Kott, criticized it in 1946 as "the heroism of slaves."<sup>44</sup> Previously, the famous Polish novelist, Eliza Orzeszkowa, accused Conrad of betraying his native language and homeland, a charge Conrad took exceptionally badly.<sup>45</sup>

Bronisław Piłsudski (who also experienced personal and family misfortune as a bitter result of radical political engagement) also strayed away from direct revolutionary activity for the next years and decades. Even upon his return to Poland he did not actively re-join the Polish independence movement led by his brother Józef. Bronisław remained an independent intellectual and researcher.

In both cases, the outbreak of the First World War between the European imperialist powers spelled the restoration of hopes for Poland's freedom and the reignition of political engagement. In the first months of the war, Conrad and his family were stuck in Galicia, the Polish part of the Austro-Hungarian empire. He had travelled to Poland in the company of Józef Rettinger, a Polish-born top-level international political operator of the twentieth century. He spent the bulk of the time in Zakopane, the place where Bronisław Piłsudski and Malinowski had met just a few years earlier. During that period he met and discussed current events with numerous members of the Polish cultural and political elites.<sup>46</sup> Evacuated to London via Vienna and Genoa, he authored

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44 Stefan Zabierowski, "He was one of us.' The Polish reception of the work of Joseph Conrad Korzeniowski," *Yearbook of Conrad Studies (Poland)* 10 (2015), 171.

45 Stefan Zabierowski, *Polska misja Conrada* [Conrad's Polish mission] (Katowice: Krajowa Agencja Wydawnicza, 1984), 31; Kocówna, *Polskość Conrada*, 120.

46 Stefan Zabierowski, *Polska misja Conrada*, (Zabierowski devoted the whole book to describing the episode).

a memorandum to the British government outlining the possibility for Polish independence, the most political act of his life. Piłsudski, too, became politically active during the war, most notably as a member of the Paris-based Polish National Committee.

It is said that in spite of the lack of any overtly patriotic themes in Conrad's novels, they became a major source of inspiration for the next generations of those who wanted to fight for Poland, including members of the resistance during the Nazi occupation. Apparently Conrad's principles, such as "duty" and "honor," hardened during his sailor's career in Southeast Asia, resonated with the new generations of readers in his Eastern European country of origin. It should also be noted that the world's top authority on Conrad's life and work, Zdzisław Najder, became a leader of the clandestine Polish Independence Movement (Polskie Porozumienie Niepodległościowe) in the 1970s, later a political exile and head of the Polish section of Radio Free Europe, sentenced to death in absentia in 1983 by a martial law court of the regime subjugated by the Soviet Union. Polish history, burdened with its cycles of anti-imperial liberation struggle and repression, seemingly made a full circle since the years of Conrad's youth. Even more dots can be connected when we note that Najder was the co-editor of a collection of writings by Józef Piłsudski (Bronisław's brother and national hero).<sup>47</sup>

Many Polish critics interpreted the "jumping ship" moment in *Lord Jim* as a metaphor for Conrad's own "jumping ship," i.e. leaving his country suffering foreign occupation, not participating in the Polish émigré world of patriotic networks, abandoning his patriotic duties, not writing in Polish, and leaving behind completely his previous Polish identity. In other words, it was a subtle reflection of the author's own bad conscience,<sup>48</sup> one which underpinned his sense of loss and deprivation. In fact, there is little or no evidence to support this Polonocentric interpretation. Conrad did compare a country to a ship—in the *Heart of Darkness* and *The Nigger of the Narcissus*—but the metaphor was explicitly about Britain. The nature of Jim's original sin, based on the real story of a crew abandoning a ship carrying hundreds of Muslim pilgrims from Singapore on their Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca), was a betrayal of the sailor's ethics and of one's human duty to another, even to those of a different creed or culture.

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47 Roman Kuźniar and Zdzisław Najder, eds., *Piłsudski do czytania* [Reading Piłsudski] (Cracow: Znak Horyzont, 2016).

48 This interpretation was first suggested by Wiktor Gomulicki in 1905. See Kocówna, *Polskość Conrada*, 134.



Overall, it seems that for over a century, Conrad studies have suffered from a misguided Polonocentrism (among Polish authors)<sup>49</sup> on the one hand, and from a frequent marginalization of discernible Polish threads in Conrad's life and oeuvre (among non-Polish authors) on the other.

There is another theme in *Lord Jim* which might be somewhat more justifiably prone to analyzing through the prism of interplay between Conrad's Polish background and his experiences of Southeast Asia in the late 1880s. This concerns Patusan, an imaginary country located on the island of Borneo. Patusan was long thought of as a product of Conrad's imagination, an amalgamation of fictional characters and locations. Half a century after the publication of *Lord Jim*, and decades after the author's death, Conrad's biographers discovered that part of the novel was also largely based on real characters and locations, apparently in the Tanjung Redeb area of Borneo.

On another level, though, Patusan can be read as an imaginary country with features not just of a nineteenth century sultanate but also of the author's own country of origin, Poland. Proud of its glorious past, inhabited by an ethnically mixed people notable for their kindness, hospitality, and sense of honor, it nevertheless suffers from foreign interference and manipulations, invasions as well as internal strife, disorganization, strategic blunders, and betrayals. Of course, these features could be identified in any country's history, but it seems they have been a particularly omnipresent component of Poland's history (and self-critical national historical consciousness) ever since the seventeenth century (as depicted in the popular novels that shaped modern Polish identity written by Nobel Prize winner Henryk Sienkiewicz, Conrad's contemporary). Lord Jim, a foreigner, becomes the country's de facto leader and effects a degree of modernization and self-organization in the community's interest, but he too makes a fatal mistake and is rejected. Throughout the centuries many of the elected kings of Poland were foreigners with modernizing ambitions. Few of them succeeded, having been faced with rejection, domestic intrigue, and foreign intervention, leading up to the collapse of the state and full-scale foreign occupation in the late eighteenth century (and lasting well into the twentieth).

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49 For example, the esteemed Polish writer Stefan Żeromski claimed in 1925: "Because only we can understand him [Conrad - R.P.] completely, feel what he says openly and what he hides, what he conceals and covers with symbols. We alone, because he is also a Polish writer, although he wrote in English" (quoted in: Stefan Zabierowski, "Conrad's Lord Jim in Poland," 100-101. Ironically, Conrad was championed on the pages of *Morze* (The Sea), a magazine published by the infamous Maritime and Colonial League throughout the 1920s and 1930s as a supposed symbol of the Polish colonialist spirit (I am thankful to Marta Grzechnik for providing me with the information about *Morze*, together with detailed documentation).

The same fate awaited Patusan (as well as the really existing state formations of Southeast Asia) barely a hundred years later, as chronicled in the fictional account authored by the Polish nobleman-sailor who had travelled along the shores of Borneo.

Although he rarely talked about it (and on occasion denied it), Conrad himself also experienced more or less subtle forms of ethnic discrimination. Despite passing the ladder of examinations, and eventually achieving the formal level of captain, he found it difficult to obtain employment on par with his qualifications and spent months looking for a position in between jobs. In total he served as captain for one year only, in 1888, commanding the *Otago*, which he led from Bangkok to Singapore in dramatic circumstances (as described in *The Shadow Line*). In most cases, however, he usually worked in positions below his level of qualifications, e.g. he was the first officer rather than the captain on the *Vidar*.

At the same time, there are many other accounts suggesting he never fully assimilated into British society, or, perhaps, was never considered fully British by his social environment—the “native” Britons—either in his onshore or offshore life. During the time spent on the *Vicar* moving along the shores of Borneo, he struck a socially distant figure, often seen alone reading a book or writing in his cabin. Characteristically, on his distant journeys he held on to his books of Polish Romantic poetry, the hallmark of the nineteenth century Polish national identity.

In between commissions, Conrad had lengthy periods of unemployment, even after obtaining high-level qualifications as a result of British seaboard examinations. Such obstacles, as well as his deteriorating health, eventually forced him to abandon his maritime career. Additionally, he often had to accept jobs below the level of his qualifications. Jassanoff attributed this situation to an oversupply of sailors in the Southeast Asian job market at the time.<sup>50</sup> This may be true, but apparently a British-born captain in Singapore had a better chance to find a position in line with his rank than a Polish-born British citizen with similar qualifications. Such discrimination was in fact commonplace.

As a writer too—even though he managed to strike a chord with the British audience through his stories of Southeast Asia and the seaman’s life—he believed he would have been more successful commercially if not for his baggage as a Polish-born outsider. Despite his masterly command of the adopted language combined with his exceptional talent, for much of his subsequent

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50 Jassanoff, *Joseph Conrad i narodziny globalnego świata*, 129.

literary career Conrad felt a sense of alienation from the mainstream literary audience in Britain. He attributed it both to his origins and to a degree of xenophobia in the British literary milieu. Conrad's later rejection of honorary doctorates from Oxford and Cambridge as well as of a knighthood illustrates a long-term detachment from the mainstream institutions of British society.

Symbolically, Conrad's status as a semi-outsider, a semi-stranger on British ships and in British society, was confirmed upon his death. In an obituary, while noting the writer's achievements, Virginia Woolf once again alluded to his position as "the other" among native Britons, calling him "a guest" rather than "one of us":

Suddenly, without giving us time to arrange our thoughts or prepare our phrases, our guest has left us; and his withdrawal without farewell or ceremony is in keeping with his mysterious arrival, long years ago, to take up his lodging in this country. For there was always an air of mystery about him. It was partly his Polish birth, partly his memorable appearance, partly his preference for living in the depths of the country, out of ear-shot of gossips, beyond reach of hostesses, so that for news of him one had to depend upon the evidence of simple visitors with a habit of ringing door-bells who reported of their unknown host that he had the most perfect manners, the brightest eyes, and spoke English with a strong foreign accent.<sup>51</sup>

Conrad has been one of the most recognized—and perhaps, at the same time, most misunderstood—writers of his generation. Recognizing the place of Conrad in the Western literary canon, Ania Loomba asks: "do we need to use Joseph Conrad, whom Achebe called a 'bloody racist,' to challenge colonialism? To the extent that Shakespeare and Conrad are still taught and still read in the postcolonial world, why not?"<sup>52</sup> His Polishness has been variously overstated and understated. It might be useful to stress his special position at an unlikely interface of cultures, with both his Polishness and love for Southeast Asia as producing a unique blend of artistic and ethical perspectives.

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51 Virginia Woolf, "Joseph Conrad," in *The Common Reader* (London: Hogarth Press, 1925), available online: <https://www.literature-no-trouble.com/joseph-conrad-an-essay-by-virginia-woolf/>.

52 Ania Loomba, *Colonialism and Postcolonialism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 81.

## Conclusion

According to Douglas Kammen's thought-provoking commentary during the "Escaping Kakania" workshop,<sup>53</sup> had Piłsudski and Conrad met in Singapore in 1887, their conversations would likely have centered on the plight of their Eastern European homeland, Poland, as a victim of foreign occupation. Had they met in London in 1910, their conversation would have been different and much broader in scope. They might have additionally touched upon global issues of imperialism, their life-altering experiences in Southeast and East Asia, and overcoming cultural (and "racial") differences within humankind.

Apparently, the contrast in the life situations and social circumstances of Korzeniowski and Piłsudski in 1887 (and in later years) could hardly have been more stark, as one was a colonial ship captain and the other a political prisoner chained under the deck. However, they both entered history as pioneering, dissenting intellectuals who transgressed the global hierarchies of caste, race, and subjugation, championing an interconnected, holistic, and humanistic approach to "travel writing." Arguably, in both cases it was enabled by a combination of the experience of colonial Asia and the rootedness in Polish history and identity, especially the Polish Romantic ethos.

The breadth and ambiguity of the discursive space drawing from both perspectives (Eastern European and global), as well as their potential interconnectedness, is, arguably, an inspiring trope for the future of (post) colonial studies with a Polish tinge.

The Polish historical experience contains a spectrum of positionalities: with roles ranging from the victimizer to the victimized (and everything in between). It may assist in problematizing simplistic binaries and false dichotomies in cultural representations and historical narratives, while also offering a potential source of inspiration for the construction of intercultural empathy and an appreciation of the complexity of human experiences in the colonial and post-colonial era.

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53 "Escaping Kakania: Eastern European Travels in Colonial Southeast Asia" workshop hosted online by the National University of Singapore on March 4, 2021.



# THE FATE OF THE BIRDS OF PARADISE

## Enrique Stanko Vráz in Southeast Asia

Iveta Nakládalová\*



He also gave us for the King of Spain two most beautiful dead birds. These birds are as large as thrushes; they have small heads, long beaks, legs slender like a writing pen, and a span in length; they have no wings, but instead of them long feathers of different colours, like plumes: their tail is like that of the thrush. All the feathers, except those of the wings, are of a dark colour; they never fly, except when the wind blows. They told us that these birds come from the terrestrial Paradise, and they call them “*bolon dinata*,” that is divine birds.<sup>1</sup>

Antonio Pigafetta, *Primo viaggio intorno al globo terracqueo*  
(*First Voyage Round the World by Magellan*), first edition 1524.

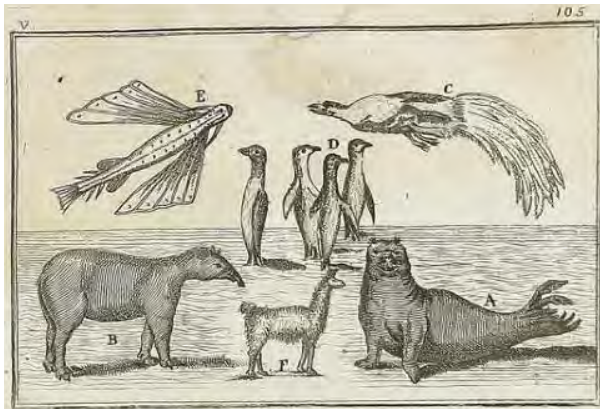


Figure 6.1. Bird of paradise (c), from Pigafetta. *Primo viaggio intorno al globo*, 105.

\* The research for this article has received support from the European Regional Development Fund. Project “Sinophone Borderlands—Interaction at the Edges,” CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16\_019/0000791.

1 Antonio Pigafetta and Henry Edward John Stanley, eds., *First Voyage Round the World by Magellan: Translated from the Accounts of Pigafetta and Other Contemporary Writers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 143.

What happens to a boy who was once captivated by a powerful desire to visit the distant countries of the world and to observe animals and flowers that had never been seen before by a European eye? This study aims to reveal the doings and undoings of one individual destiny—a destiny bound to *Kakania*—but also to reflect on the use of postcolonial studies in travel narratives. It examines the texts of Enrique Stanko Vráz (1860–1932), a Czech explorer, writer, lecturer, and photographer, focusing on his accounts of Southeast Asia, namely, Siam (modern Thailand), Borneo, and New Guinea, in which he describes the encounter of the “civilized” Western world with these yet unknown lands in the far remote corners of the Earth. His travelogues are fascinating because they exhibit a subtle balance between the attempt at an “objective” narrative (in the ethnographic description of the habits and practices of the local population) and a subjective interpretation of what he sees and experiences. Although postcolonial criticism might seem to provide an adequate framework for this kind of account, in my view it tends to focus too much on collective symbols and voices. I argue that certain texts use singular rather than collective poetic representations to access and perceive the world and the Other, representations that should be related to the complexities of the individual psyche of their writers. Moreover, I suggest that these images are capable of conveying ambiguities that resist the sometimes unambiguous or univocal postcolonial readings of the travel narrative in the imperial period. My aim is not to call into question the validity of postcolonial premises, but rather to present a text in which they should be applied with subtlety and caution.

In general terms, the critical panorama regarding the travel narrative in the “long nineteenth century” has been focused on two important questions. Firstly, it addresses the role of the travel narrative in the genesis, development, and tasks of modern Western ethnography (and cultural anthropology), viewing it as a place in which the essentials of “ethnographic rhetoric” were articulated. “The history of ethnography in travel writing,” asserts Joan Pau Rubiés, “can [...] be written as the history of the emergence of a basic set of analytical categories, expressed in different genres and languages, and of the changes in emphasis and assumptions within those languages.”<sup>2</sup> This ethnographic bias can be seen in many nineteenth century travelogues, as they pay attention to certain categories of knowledge or topics in their description of foreign lands, such as:

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2 Joan-Pau Rubiés, “Travel Writing and Ethnography,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 251.

political order, including kingship, aristocracies, warfare, and justice; national, or racial, temperaments; economic activities, including (when applicable) cities and trade; religion, in particular the more exoteric aspects (rituals, festivals, idols and temples, religious élites); marriage, women, and sexuality; dress, or nudity, and ornamentation; habits of eating and hygiene; language and oral rhetoric; literature and science; technology, navigation, and other arts.<sup>3</sup>

One of the key problems in analyzing the birth of modern ethnography and anthropology in the nineteenth century is its Eurocentric paradigm, which also governs to a great extent the contemporary travelogues, and is therefore relevant for an analysis of Vráz's texts. In order to fully comprehend the influence of this paradigm, modern scholarship has focused on the processes of *representation*, on the *discursive creation* of the world beyond Europe for European readers, and the reciprocity between the collective imagery and the discourse that feeds it. As a matter of fact, the travel narrative shapes the shared imagination, while at the same time the collective preconceptions and overall cultural models condition the very way in which the travelogues are written. In other words, we only see what our mindset allows us to see; and this psychological and cultural framework, in constant evolution, is fed by the imagery to which the travel narrative—as a literary genre, a cultural agent, and a discourse—contributes significantly.<sup>4</sup>

The recent attention paid to the travel narrative is bound to the profound shifts in engaged theory and criticism which have been taking place ever since the emergence of postcolonial theory and the study of imperial history. This body of criticism focuses on the factors that determine (and are in themselves determined by) travel writing—such as gender, racial, and national identity, economic status, and privilege—and contextualizes travel narratives within the extensive framework of imperialism, European (or Western) expansionism, and the colonial legacy.<sup>5</sup> They are, therefore, intimately bound to the concept

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3 Rubiés, "Travel Writing and Ethnography," 251.

4 One of the seminal books in the analysis of representation in travel writing (and on the fundamental fictionality of all representation) is Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

5 See, for example: Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund, eds., *Postcolonial Travel Writing: Critical Explorations* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Laura Franey, *Victorian Travel Writing and Imperial Violence: British Writing of Africa 1855-1902* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Sara Mills, *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991); Peter Hulme and Russell McDougall, eds., *Writing, Travel and Empire: Colonial Narratives of Other Cultures* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007); Carla Manfredi, *Robert Louis Stevenson's Pacific Impressions: Photography and Travel Writing, 1888-1894* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).



of power, be it in immediate, political ways, or in subtler workings of cultural and spiritual appropriation. This approach is grounded in the assumption that:

the genre of travel writing [...] was the cultural by-product of imperialism, often written by those actively involved in the expansion or maintenance of empire (explorers, soldiers, administrators, missionaries, journalists), and dependent upon the support of the institutions of imperialism in order to facilitate the writers' travels.<sup>6</sup>

The perspective of *power* (in all its multiple historical, political, ideological, symbolic, and even spiritual implications) seems to be dominant in countries and cultural and linguistic areas (Anglophone, Francophone, and Hispanic) related somehow to imperial history and to imperialist discourse. Czech (and Slovak) scholarship, on the other hand, as representative of a country with no imperial history (and as representative of territories, including *Kakania's* Eastern Europe and the Balkans, previously neglected in travel writing studies),<sup>7</sup> puts the emphasis on other factors, namely, on the "nation-building" capacity of the genre and its role in Czech-Slovak mutuality<sup>8</sup> and national identity creation,<sup>9</sup> on the exploration of travelogues as instances of Othering,<sup>10</sup> and as *egodocuments* (*Ego-Dokumente*), a term coined in German literary theory to refer to texts that convey the self-perception and representation of a historical subject in its environment. Even though this last perception is controversial, it bears witness to the unique character of the travel narrative: written often

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6 Douglas Ivison's statement, quoted in Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund, "Introduction: Reading Postcolonial Travel Writing," in *Postcolonial Travel Writing: Critical Explorations*, ed. Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 1.

7 For a recent contribution in this area, see, for example: Wendy Bracewell and Alex Drace-Francis, eds., *Under Eastern Eyes: A Comparative Introduction to East European Travel Writing on Europe* (Budapest, New York: Central European University Press, 2008).

8 See, for example, Jana Pátková's studies on the travelogues related to the Czech National Revival in the 1830s and 1840s and their role in Czech-Slovak mutuality in the late nineteenth century.

9 See, for example, Marianna Kolióvá, *Cestopisné obrazy v premenách času: reprezentácia Tatier a Váhu v cestopisoch prvej polovice 19. storočia* [Travel pictures in the transformations of time: The representation of the Tatras and the Váh in travel books of the first half of the nineteenth century] (Bratislava: Univerzita Komenského v Bratislave, 2019).

10 See, for example, Jan M. Heller, *Obraz druhého v českém cestopise 19. století* [The image of the other in nineteenth century Czech travelogues] (Praha: Fakulta humanitních studií Univerzity Karlovy, 2020). This study is particularly interesting because it maps the creation of Czech national identity "from below" and through *Otherness*, that is, through the encounter among Czech "našinec" ("fellow countryman") and the *Other* (Austrian, Slav, German, and Italian, as well as Jew, Muslim, Catholic, Protestant, etc.). See also Veronika Faktorová, *Mezi poznáním a imaginací: podoby obrozenského cestopisu* [Between knowledge and imagination: Travelogues in the literature of the Czech revival period] (Praha: ARSCI, 2012).

as an “objective” report on an unknown territory, it also reveals the subjective, inner self of the author. Be that as it may, I think it is safe to posit that nineteenth century travel narratives, as accounts of transcultural encounters, attend to a certain set of images, and that one central imagery concerns the multiple manifestations of *Empire*, of the imperialist and colonial power structures (as embodied in relations of control, hierarchy, privilege, and authority).

What I would like to emphasize here is that scholars tend to analyze the *imagery of the Empire* as, to a great extent, universal and codified in conventional metaphors (e.g. body metaphors), stereotypes, allegories, and, especially, dichotomies which serve as agents of alienation, separating *the primitive* from *the civilized*, *barbarism* from *civilization*, and *chaos* from *order*.<sup>11</sup> I would argue, however, that some travelogues, often of uncommon literary quality, prefer to convey the complexity of transcultural encounters using rather personal rhetorical and poetical tools which endow their texts with extraordinary richness. Such is the case of Enrique Stanko Vráz, whose openness to unorthodox poetical devices makes his writings accessible to more symbolic interpretation. This methodology can undoubtedly be related to the so-called *linguistic turn* within anthropology, with its exploration of a set of codified and *collective* linguistic and rhetorical devices.<sup>12</sup> In my view, however, Vráz’s poetical and symbolic language is unconventional or atypical in the sense that it is *not* universal; it cannot be extended to other texts, and can only be interpreted in relation to and in the context of the given author. It is bound to his individuality and his personal experience, and it reveals important aspects of his inner life and his understanding of the world. Strangely enough, many of these images do not *stand out*; they are not particularly enhanced rhetorically and they could be easily missed by an inattentive reader. Still, they are like a fine thread that runs all the way through his work and endows it with a unique symbolic meaning. This perspective is, indeed, particularly relevant here, in a collective volume inspired by the idea of *Kakania*, in itself an extremely complex icon,

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11 See, among others: Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). Cf. Mary Baine Campbell, “Travel Writing and Its Theory,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 267.

12 Regarding the question of representation as inscribed in language, that is, in linguistic and rhetorical devices (such as allegories and metaphors), cf. Campbell, “Travel Writing and Its Theory,” 273: “The very fact that rhetorical tropes and allegorical structures can be uncovered or simply pointed out in ethnographic texts has revealed to two generations of scholars and social scientists that ethnographic writing was a kind of representation as wedded to an inherited medium and the associative rip tides of the unconscious as is poetry or political propaganda.” Cf. also David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing and Imperial Administration* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

impregnated with historical, political, national, and, last but not least, symbolic connotations.<sup>13</sup>

So far, I have mentioned the “poetical images” in Vráz’s narrative: I would characterize them, with more accuracy, as *topoi*, a term best known from the seminal work *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* by the German comparatist E. R. Curtius. Curtius adopted the term “*topos*” (a “commonplace”) from Classical rhetoric and dialectics, without ever defining it exactly. Despite the uncertainty in the definition, *topos* must undoubtedly be referred back to its rhetorical and dialectical use as a *locus communis*, that is, as a common topic, image, narratological structure, or literary motif. It is important to understand that the *topoi* invoke some underlying common, collective model, but they re-elaborate and re-enact it in a unique and individual way. *Topos* is a singular manifestation of an archetypal blueprint, so to speak, and that is exactly the frame through which I intend to assess the nature of the poetical images in Vráz’s accounts. Some of the metaphors he employs are common, almost banal; when perceived together, however, as an idiosyncratic *symbolon*, they provide a glimpse into his narrative and into his thought. And even though they are not directly applicable (as I mentioned earlier) on a wider scale, I hope that my approach may be useful in examining the nature of the East-West transcultural encounter in imperial times and in disclosing some of its central problems and dilemmas.

Enrique Stanko Vráz was a Czech traveler, naturalist, explorer, entrepreneur, writer, lecturer, and photographer (he employed the contemporary technique of photography on glass plates).<sup>14</sup> One of the most important purposes of his many journeys was to collect ethnographical, botanical, and zoological

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13 There is a glimpse of this immense symbolic richness of *Kakania*, for example, in the following passage: “All in all, how many remarkable things might be said about that vanished *Kakania*! For instance, it was *kaiserlich-königlich* (Imperial-Royal) and it was *kaiserlich und königlich* (Imperial and Royal); one of the two abbreviations, k.k. or k.&k., applied to everything and person, but esoteric lore was nevertheless required in order to be sure of distinguishing which institutions and persons were to be referred to as k.k. and which as k.&k. On paper it called itself the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy; in speaking, however, one referred to it as Austria, that is to say, it was known by a name that it had, as a State, solemnly renounced by oath, while preserving it in all matters of sentiment, as a sign that feelings are just as important as constitutional law and that regulations are not the really serious thing in life.” Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 19.

14 For information on his life, works, and travels, see Jiřina Todorovová, *Enrique Stanko Vráz. Záhadný cestovatel fotograf* [Enrique Stanko Vráz. A mysterious traveler-photographer] (Prague: Národní muzeum, 2006), 1–20; and Jiřina Todorovová, “Enrique Stanko Vráz: a Mysterious Man and His Photographs,” in *Seoul roku 1901 objektivem E. St. Vráze a jak viděli Koreu další čeští cestovatelé—1901 Photographs of Seoul by Enrique Stanko Vráz and Other Early Czech Traveller’s Views of Korea*, ed. Kang Hong-bin and J. Olša, Jr. (Seoul: Seoul Museum of History, 2011), 12–30.

material. He travelled on various occasions to Africa, Latin America, and Asia, and published several travelogues based on these journeys. The present study focuses on the accounts of his visits to Borneo and New Guinea in 1896 and to Siam (modern Thailand)<sup>15</sup> in 1897, published in Prague in 1901 as *V Siamu, v zemi bílého slona* [In Siam, the land of the white elephant].

The following passage in Musil's novel conveys beautifully the positivist attitude at the end of the nineteenth century, and as such it might help us understand the basic conceptual framework in which Vráz conceived his own scientific endeavors:

If one asks oneself in an unprejudiced way how science came to have its present-day aspect ... According to credible traditions it was in the sixteenth century, an age of very intense spiritual emotions, that people gradually ceased trying, as they had been trying all through two thousand years of religious and philosophic speculation, to penetrate into the secrets of Nature, and instead contented themselves, in a way that can only be called superficial, with investigations of its surface. The great Galileo, who is always the first to be mentioned in this connection, did away with the problem, for instance, of the intrinsic reasons why Nature abhors a vacuum, so that it will cause a falling body to enter into and occupy space after space until it finally comes to rest on solid ground, and contented himself with a much more general observation: he simply established the speed at which such a body falls, what course it takes, what time it takes, and what its rate of acceleration is. The Catholic Church made a grave mistake in threatening this man with death and forcing him to recant, instead of exterminating him without more ado. For from his way of looking at things, and that of those whose outlook was similar, there sprang—in almost no time at all, if one applies historical measurements—railway time-tables, factory machines, physiological psychology, and the moral ruin of the present age, against which the Church no longer stands a chance.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, Vráz postulates himself as an objective observer, a positivist scientist, and he is, without question, indebted to the nineteenth century conventions of travel writing and its ethnographic bias; he offers his readers numer-

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15 In order to maintain consistency with Vráz's original text, I will use the word "Siam" both as a substantive (to designate the country) and as an adjective (because "Siamese" refers only to one single ethnic group in central Thailand, while Vráz refers to the kingdom's people as a whole).

16 Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, 235.

ous details about the geography and history of the country, about the daily life of the local people, their habits, their “nature” (psychological traits), and their religious practices. There are specific terms for this kind of information, *místopis* and *lidopis*—lexical forms that are in disuse in contemporary Czech and which are both related to the Czech National Revival Movement of the nineteenth century. They could be loosely translated in the sense of “localgraphy” and “peoplegraphy,” and they entail an important didactic and nationalistic function. Vráz, for example, states that in his description of New Guinea he addresses the “geographical and *peoplegraphical*” questions in order to expose them at home, using the “style of popularization” in travelogues or travel vignettes (that is, adapting the style for a popular audience). His intention to “educate the nation” is testimony to the nation-building character of travel writing in Central Europe and to the emancipation efforts of Kakania’s minor nations (and to the Pan-Slavism movement as a whole).<sup>17</sup> The *místopis* and *lidopis* seem to constitute a specific ethnographic subgenre with its own conventions, even though it is possible that many affinities among Czech nineteenth century travelogues can be ascribed to their mutual influence and even imitation; for instance, if we compare Vráz’s text with the travelogue of one of his best friends, Josef Kořenský,<sup>18</sup> who visited Siam a few years later, we find very similar descriptions of the local funeral rites, the same explanation of popular habits (the *postřižiny*, the ritual act of cutting the hair of children as a rite of passage into adulthood),<sup>19</sup> an equal appreciation concerning the attitude of the monarch towards “progress” (that is, European technology and cultural novelties), and the same element highlighted in their visit to the royal palace—the white elephants. It is worth mentioning, however, that Kořenský’s narrative is much more Eurocentric, and he frequently voices categorical judgments towards, for example, the Buddhist cult and its inferiority. His style is awkwardly patronizing to the ears of modern readers: Buddhist art is nothing but “the work of a dauber,”<sup>20</sup> and he compares the *talapoins*, the Buddhist monks, with their

17 Enrique Stanko Vráz, *V dálavách světů. Výbor z cestopisů* [Beyond worlds: A selection of travel books], ed. Ola Svejková (Toronto: Sixty-Eight Publishers, 1983), 333.

18 On the friendship between Vráz and Kořenský, see Jiřina Todorovová and Jan Chovaneček, *Kolem světa: Sběrka fotografií z cest Josefa Kořenského v Náprstkově museu asijských, afrických a amerických kultur* [Around the world. A collection of photographs from Josef Kořenský’s travels in the Náprstkov Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures] (Prague: Národní muzeum, 2011), 46.

19 Josef Kořenský, *V Siamu a Číně. Mládeži vypravuje Josef Kořenský* [In Siam and China. Josef Kořenský narrates to the youth] (Prague: J. Otto, 1909), 32; Enrique Stanko Vráz, *V Siamu, zemi bílého slona: Cestopisné črty* [In Siam, land of the white elephant. Travel accounts], in *Cesty světem* [Travels around the world], vol. 2 (Prague: Bursík a Kohout, 1901), 120.

20 Kořenský, *V Siamu a Číně*, 51.

“shaved heads” and “waggish looks,” to “spiritual vagabonds and blackmailers” and to “sly foxes ... waiting for their prey.”<sup>21</sup>

In contrast, Vráz’s strong positivist spirit<sup>22</sup> does not convert him into a self-proclaimed bearer of civilization. As I have tried to show elsewhere, he often questions European values and the progress presumably inherent in Western culture, and despite his Eurocentric position, he is able to maintain a high degree of receptiveness towards *Otherness*.<sup>23</sup> It is the nature of Vráz’s sensibilities—his talent for paradox, his ability to see the dark side in presumably the best human endeavors, and his awareness of the enormous complexity of the world—that make him into one of the most remarkable Czech travel writers at the onset of the twentieth century.

There are certainly moments in which he is not able to transcend his European ethical inhibitions, such as when he describes the rite of *Patha Pidibu*—the funeral practice of dismembering a corpse (of the poorest, those who could not afford the cremation), so it can be devoured by hungry vultures and dogs.<sup>24</sup> He depicts the scene with utter horror, as a manifestation of pure barbarism. Eurocentricity tends to be labelled as a failure, as the inability to be open to *Otherness*, but I think we should also consider that, in certain situations, overcoming our own moral bias is extremely difficult. In other cases, Vráz is more than willing to transcend his Eurocentrism, to set the *Us* and the *Other* against each other, and to consider his own culture with no favorable preconceptions. When he criticizes (not without humor) the extreme servility of the Siam people, he is immediately ready to acknowledge that Europeans, for their part, are also full of curiosities that are equally eccentric:

Humility—in words and gestures—in the presence of persons of higher rank is, so to speak, innate to Siam people of inferior position; the superiors, on

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21 Kořenský, *V Siamu a Číně*, 6.

22 These strong positivist standpoints can be observed, for example, in his frequent criticisms of superstition. An example of his invectives against the presumably superstitious practices of the Buddhist monks is quoted below.

23 See Iveta Nakládalová, “*Bestia triumphans*: Enrique Stanko Vráz in Beijing in 1901,” *Annals of the Náprstek Museum* 42, no. 1 (2021): 3–28.

24 For Thai funeral practices, see Paul S. Williams and Patrice Ladwig, *Buddhist Funeral Cultures of Southeast Asia and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), Chapter 4. Unfortunately, I was not able to identify the exact ritual Vráz is describing, but B. J. Terwiel lists several earlier travellers who describe Thai funerals with vultures. They all claim that this ritual is reserved for the extremely poor who cannot afford cremation. Terwiel (p. 426) also mentions that the active role of vultures during funeral rituals was common in other parts of Southeast Asia. See B. J. Terwiel “Tai Funeral Customs: Towards a Reconstruction of Archaic-Tai Ceremonies,” *Anthropos* 74, no. 3–4 (1979): 393–432.

the other hand, are so used to demanding it that in the beginning the European teachers of the Siam princes were asked to address their pupils according to the local custom in the following way: “Magnificent Sir, my benefactor and father, I am the dust of your shoe sole!” The Europeans, however, should not laugh at these excesses of Siam servility; they have plenty of them under their own roof, and they are no less funny!<sup>25</sup>

What are, then, the predominant symbolic images in Vráz’s Southeast Asia travelogues? The *topos* I would first like to refer to is *desire*. It is omnipresent in his texts, and it personifies the central impulse of his actions. He travels in order to satisfy it, but it is not a romantic longing for distant lands and adventures—or at least not only. His is the urge of a naturalist, of a reader of Brehm’s *Life of Animals*, and he even specifies the exact place and moment in which this profound calling was born:

Twenty years ago, when I was walking through the halls of the Dresden Court Museum,<sup>26</sup> I suddenly stopped, as in a reverie, in front of a cabinet full of beautiful birds. What was so enchanting about them were their rich, warm, metallic, and shining colors and also their bold, unexpected forms. It was as if human hands, partly on a whim, partly on purpose, glued together feathers and materials of different origin into a creation full of wonder. There was a label on the cabinet, written in bold letters, that read: “birds of paradise.” I had already seen some badly stuffed specimens before, and I had devoured Brehm’s *Life of Animals*; the reality has, however, surpassed my imagination (and by then, my imagination was so unrestrained that it often eclipsed reality). How incredible I felt! Immersed in a dream, I went on further, only to return to the cabinet; I paid no attention to other visitors and their comments. Nothing could rouse me from my infatuation, until a kind, deep voice uttered: “I beg your pardon, the museum is going to close soon!” ... I made an oath to myself never to stop, never to give up until I see the paradise, the land of those wonderful birds, the land of the most beautiful butterflies.<sup>27</sup>

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25 Vráz, *V Siamu, zemi bílého slona*, 159. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are mine.

26 He is probably referring to The Senckenberg Natural History Collections of Dresden, whose museums of mineralogy, geology, and zoology are among the world’s oldest natural history museums.

27 Vráz, *V dálavách světa*, 315. Rachel Poliquin (*The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing*, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012) connects taxidermy explicitly with longing, namely, with the enduring human desire to find meaning in the natural world. It is worth mentioning, with respect to Vráz’s comment on “badly stuffed animals,” that in the

Then, when he finally sets foot on the island of Borneo, he cries out, “one of my biggest wishes is fulfilled,” and he feels “some kind of strange, sweet bliss that was overflowing my body,” explaining this feeling away with his typical humor blended with a positivist attitude: “probably, my blood, agitated by the sea trip [he travelled from Singapore] changed its course of circulation.”<sup>28</sup>

Vráz’s immense desire is, therefore, no mere *wanderlust*, or passion for travel: it is fueled, first and foremost, by scientific interest in nature and, particularly, in collecting fauna and flora specimens. The birds of paradise, together with other *naturalia*, are for him “diamonds in the jungle”<sup>29</sup> which make up for all the difficulties of the expedition. Paradoxically, the most fascinating jewels of nature, the birds with the most outstanding beauty, are to be found in the most “barbaric” lands, in the deepest parts of New Guinea: “There in nature, observing those feathered gems of the jungle, I could exclaim with Wallace<sup>30</sup> ...: ‘Wonderful creatures, when I see you, I forget all the hardship and perils of the troublesome journey’ .... The inhabitants are savages ... but it is precisely in this country with this people that the most incredible creatures are to be found!”<sup>31</sup>

Despite his scientific concerns, Vráz is also not immune to the collective, “unscientific” imagination sparked by the myths and fairy tales of exotic lands. After his poetical description of Siam’s incredible landscape (“in the distance, out of sight, I can see the golden river .... Above the panorama, there hangs the celestial canopy of Heaven like an immense blue sail”), he asks himself whether his “oriental calling” was being satisfied: “Letting myself be absorbed by the nostalgic evening mood, I asked my deepest self whether I was satiated by what I could see around me, and whether there was anything missing from the ‘Fairy Tale of Oriental Lands and the City of Pagodas’ that was luring me so powerfully into the world.”<sup>32</sup>

In addition to having a naturalist’s interest and a poet’s fascination, there is one more component to Vráz’s passion: when he recapitulates his journey to New Guinea, he recalls not only the “wonderful, otherworldly birds in their

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case of exotic species, taxidermists very often worked without the actual knowledge of what these animals looked like. This brings us back to the opening quotation of the present study: Antonio Pigafetta becomes acquainted with the birds of paradise only in their mutilated form, without legs and wings, which in turn gives rise to the legend about them flying using their feathers exclusively and only when the wind blows.

28 Vráz, *V dálavách světů*, 274.

29 Vráz, *V dálavách světů*, 317.

30 He is likely referring to Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913), British naturalist, geographer, explorer, and anthropologist.

31 Vráz, *V dálavách světů*, 317.

32 Vráz, *V Siamu, zemi bílého slona*, 34.



homeland,” but also the fact that he was “marching on roads that had never before been walked down by a European,”<sup>33</sup> pointing towards one common motif in the nineteenth century travel narrative: the obsession with being a pioneer and a pathfinder.

In fact, Vráz describes New Guinea as a *terra ignota* or an undiscovered land, echoing thus, still at the eve of the twentieth century, the old, human eagerness to explore the unknown and the unfamiliar. This is a very powerful *topos*, one which dates back to the Renaissance rediscovery (in 1409) of Ptolemy’s *Cosmographia* which, after being lost to the West for more than a thousand years, provided a very important impetus for the fifteenth century voyages of discovery, for the urge to fill in the blank spaces on the map of the world.<sup>34</sup> This *topos* is related, naturally, to the legendary *hic sunt leones* (or alternatively, *dracones*: here be lions or dragons) on medieval maps, and it opens up an immense symbolic space of discovery, a territory which, paradoxically, is anticipated on the map and yet remains unacknowledged. It also relates to cultural representations, dreams, and fantasies, characteristic of European (or Western) thought, which are projected onto unknown regions. The *terra ignota* is at the same time both fictional and real, and this ambiguity only adds to further processes of projection; moreover, it also implies turning something foreign into something recognizable, mapped, and bounded, and is thus related to the processes of colonization and conquest.

What happens to this boundless desire of our traveler, an extremely complex mixture of emotions, dreams, and ambitions of a scientist, pioneer, and poet? What happens to the childish fantasy of a small Czech boy who wants to see the world? We find the first hint of the future outcome in the very same passage in which Vráz further elaborates on his *rite of initiation* in the Dresden museum: “I finally made it, albeit via a little detour through four continents of the world, to the land of the birds of paradise [New Guinea], where the desire of that little boy was finally fulfilled.”<sup>35</sup> Soon after this soothing image of a dream-come-true, the style changes abruptly: “I arrived on a small Dutch steamboat called the *Kamphuis* ... to one of the most interesting, but also most inhospitable lands: it gave me some goodness, but evil three times more. In fact, when I look back on my journey to New Guinea, I see that the losses, difficulties,

33 Vráz, *V dálavách světů*, 316.

34 Cf. the chapter “Terra incognita: Mapping the Uncertain and the Unknown,” in *Imagined Landscapes: Geovisualizing Australian Spatial Narratives*, ed. Jane Stadler, Peta Mitchell, and Stephen Carleton (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 161–94.

35 Vráz, *V dálavách světů*, 316.

anger, illnesses, and even moments of mortal danger do not in any case correspond with the benefit: [on the contrary], I ended up with a deficit! .... What a disappointment! ... The country promised much more than it has delivered.”<sup>36</sup>

This disillusionment seems to have been caused by the failure of Western civilization and its administration, seeing that Vráz denounces the inability of the Dutch government to exert any kind of influence on the local people: “When there is a small cannon boat standing in front of the long ... huts of the indigenous people, the smart [local tribes] promise the Earth; when the white, fire-spitting monster disappears, only the law of *adat* (the mores) of the natives and the law of the stronger reigns ... *È vero, è triste*. One finds here the same situation as in the time of Carteret’s and Bougainville’s<sup>37</sup> expedition (1767–1768).”<sup>38</sup>

Is Vráz’s disappointment really related to the fiasco of the colonization process? Does he actually posit the issue in terms of the local inhabitants resisting the enlightening enterprise of the Dutch administration? That would be a short-sighted explanation of the intricate diagnosis that Vráz offers to his readers in regards to the colonial efforts and the impact of Western civilization. We must turn to his account of Siam to re-examine this hypothesis. There is one feature that I consider essential in Vráz’s narrative—his emphasis on *authenticity*, seen when he claims to be in the “real” Siam, given the absence of all *things European*: “Not until I lost sight of the coast with European ships and the hotel, not until I found myself among ... the natives, among the first Bangkok dwellings built on stilts, non until I was immersed in the foreign element in all its picturesque diversity, was I finally able to fetch a sigh of relief and tell myself: ‘At last, I am in Siam!’”<sup>39</sup>

This search for authenticity can be detected in Vráz’s emphasis on the trustworthiness of his sources and in his ambition to acquire as much insider information about the country as possible,<sup>40</sup> in addition to pursuing his own photographic activity. While his friend Kořenský, as many other travellers of his time, wanted to *travel light* and purchased ready-made photos intended for

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36 Vráz, *V dálavách světů*, 316–18.

37 Louis-Antoine, Comte de Bougainville, the famous French explorer, visited New Guinea in 1768, during his circumnavigation. The largest eastern island of Papua New Guinea is named after him. Philip Carteret also visited New Guinea during his circumnavigation travel, in 1768.

38 Vráz, *V dálavách světů*, 319.

39 Vráz, *V Siamu, zemi bílého slona*, 13.

40 Cf. his comments on the constant reading of English books on Siam, published in Siam, necessary “to complement the knowledge acquired, by reading and studying, during the preparatory phase before the travel.” Vráz, *V Siamu, zemi bílého slona*, 40.

tourists along the way,<sup>41</sup> Vráz moves all around the globe with the extremely heavy and troublesome apparatus required for photographs developed on glass plates, and takes his own photos (whose artistic qualities, especially in portraits, bear testimony to his desire to express something of *true* human nature).

In the second place, authenticity finds its symbolic counterpart in the even more frequent motif of depravation and corruption. This is not surprising, since in the context of Vráz's positivist frame of mind, this *topos* surfaces every time he speaks about the superstitious practices of the common people. Thus, when he points out the opportunism of the Buddhist monks, he defines the "priestly caste" as "ignorant and ruined" and "exploiting the common people": "If, for example, the so-called 'Christianity' [quotation marks in original] in Abyssinia had incorporated all the fetishes of the West Africans, it still would not have misappropriated the doctrine of the Christian apostles to the extent that the Buddhism in Tibet and China has abused its [initial] sophistic principles, once declared by the royal son [Siddhartha Gautama]."<sup>42</sup>

This progressive depravation is condensed in a very telling image of the white elephant. Once a symbol of the glory of the kingdom of Siam and of the royal power of its monarch (any hunter fortunate enough to report a sighting of this albino animal—a rare occurrence—was provided with a high reward), it was supposed to be one of the highlights of Vráz's visit to the royal palace. What he finds, however, is disappointing. The "treasure box of the most precious jewel," that is, the stables of the white elephants, are inadequate: they are shabby, and "in the vicinity of the royal palace, they look even more pitiful and run-down." Vráz claims to be discouraged by the "true state of affairs" and he then connects this scene of lost splendor to the general condition of the kingdom:

The fact that in Siam, the importance once given to everything ancient and, yes, even sacred, is being lost, can be verified by the comparison between what has been registered by the traveller M. Bock nineteen years ago, on the one hand, and the contemporary situation, on the other. Bock, when describing the white elephant, reported that six servants were engaged in the meticulous care of the sacred animal, washing him with tamarind water, and approaching him, out of reverence, only on their knees and with their hands clasped.<sup>43</sup>

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41 Todorovová, *Kolem světa*, 52.

42 Vráz, *V Siamu, zemi bílého slona*, 58.

43 Vráz, *V Siamu, zemi bílého slona*, 123.

To make his point, Vráz refers to the travelogues of the recent past: “When we read, in the travel accounts about the golden stalls in which the Siam white elephants are being raised in plenty and with extraordinary cleanliness, where they are washed in waters scented with perfumes, where they enjoy respect or even deification proffered elsewhere only to the heavenly beings”<sup>44</sup>—well, he sighs nostalgically, these accounts are no longer accurate, and were pronounced by “travelers blessed with the opportunity to see the Siam of the past.”<sup>45</sup>

We should not let ourselves be misled by this reference to the bygone days. Vráz’s comment is not a lament for the lost glory of olden times; rather, he is pointing towards the disturbing amalgam of the traditional and the modern in which he found Siam immersed immediately upon his arrival. While entering the harbor, he sees two little fortresses and the residence of the Paknam governor. He cannot conceal his surprise at the mixture of old Buddhist Asia and modern European buildings: on one side, “the peaceful ... temples consecrated to tranquility and quietude, chapels decorated with brass ornaments, which produce a bell-like sound when touched by the slightest wind”; on the other, “the mouths of the death-bringing cannons”; on the one hand, the temple where the bonzes read “mystical phrases from long strips [of palm leaves] written in the sacred language of Pali”; on the other, “the telegraphic wire, which connects this world—until recently under lock and key—to the European civilization; lo! the gateway to Siam.”<sup>46</sup>

This passage can be found at the very beginning of Vráz’s account of Siam, and from this point on, the idea of the *mixture* of cultures is steadily re-elaborated into the image of *contamination*, like an unclear, misty fog out of which, if we come close enough, distinct forms and figures start to stand out. So, when Vráz criticizes the local craftsmanship, which he defines as lacking any artistic taste, his harsh judgment is pointed towards the degeneration of a formerly creative and artistically gifted nation: “The Siam is too indolent, he is not willing to think and invent—let others do that! ... That is why he welcomes foreign culture together with all the waste that comes with it.”<sup>47</sup>

This depiction of the shadowy parts of the transcultural encounter is further amplified into the disturbing image of the “perverted Asian copy” of the negative aspects of European bourgeois society:

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44 Vráz, *V Siamu, zemi bílého slona*, 124.

45 Vráz, *V Siamu, zemi bílého slona*, 124.

46 Vráz, *V Siamu, zemi bílého slona*, 6.

47 Vráz, *V Siamu, zemi bílého slona*, 28

While trying to head into a back alley, I had to cross the street, just in front of a carriage. [Inside there were] insolent and arrogant faces of two Chinese youngsters, distorted copies of their European originals—the infamous “lions of the boulevards”—just slightly clumsier. Only the monocle was missing in order to make this Asian imitation perfect. In Bangkok, too, one finds this kind of *nouveau riche* daddies, whose kin ... fits into the ... evolutionary gap between four-handed mammals and the homo sapiens species. I often saw these disgusting faces in Singapore ..., and often felt my fist rising up; but a well-travelled man shall not lose his temper so easily. Truly, all around the globe good people hate this kind of Chinese huckster, made rich in a European colony by means of a European loan, mental idlers and profiteer bounders, modeled after their “modernized” fathers and aping European plutocrats or bureaucrats.<sup>48</sup>

Slowly but surely, Vráz’s narrative unfolds this alarming portrait of distortion which permeates all aspects of society. He speaks, for instance, about the “corrupted historiography” when, in the local theatre, he witnesses a radical re-interpretation of modern Siam history:<sup>49</sup>

The plot of the last performance I came to see was focused on the recent conflict of Siam with France; unfortunately, in detriment of the truth and the real story, it was extensively embellished for the sake of Siam patriotism...; to our great joy and the extreme delight of the locals, the Frenchmen—at least on the stage—were being knocked into next week. The credulity of ill-advised people! Alas, how easy it is for a simple man to put up with the falsification of history!<sup>50</sup>

We are, indeed, gradually confronted with the idea that this perversion, devaluation, or betrayal of autochthonous values has actually been brought about by the encounter (or rather *mis-encounter*) with Western (or European) culture.<sup>51</sup> Vráz states it explicitly: forty years ago, Siam was still a “peculiar country that showed contempt for all things from abroad,” and many travelers depicted it

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48 Vráz, *V Siamu, zemi bílého slona*, 36.

49 On this episode of Thai modern history, see Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 58ss.

50 Vráz, *V Siamu, zemi bílého slona*, 152.

51 See, for example, his extensive description of “shoddy European lumber” to be found in the Buddhist temples, Vráz, *V Siamu, zemi bílého slona*, 75.

just before “the marvelous flower of the local cultures started, suddenly, to fall off.” He claims he himself “found it ... in retreat from European culture.”<sup>52</sup>

A similar image can also be traced in the description made by Vráz’s friend, Josef Kořenský, when he depicts the hunt for wild elephants intended for royal service; the most savage and resisting animals are finally defeated by the already domesticated elephants.<sup>53</sup> In comparison with Vráz, however, Kořenský does not employ the metaphor to convey his view on the “domestication” of the local culture; he does not intend it as an interpretative or even a rhetorical device.

A completely different story can be seen in Vráz’s texts, in which the *topoi* are used in a much more thoughtful and conscious way, with full awareness of their symbolic power, and with an intention that goes beyond a mere ethnographic report. In his case, the inquiry into the nature of the East-West encounter is located in the description of the natural wonders of New Guinea, and especially of the birds of paradise. The narrative, then, seems to return to the initial impetus of the whole adventure (and to a key moment in Vráz’s life): his visit to the Dresden museum, which set his childhood imagination and thirst for exploration on fire and which Vráz, the man, tries to quench all his adult life. Vráz reports on the first encounters of the Europeans with these extraordinary birds: it was the Dutch and the Portuguese who brought back to Europe “the first skins of the memorable birds of paradise, with no legs or wings.” In 1598, according to Vráz’s account, the creatures were named by the Dutch merchant and explorer Jan von Linschoten as “birds of paradise”;<sup>54</sup> then, in 1760, the Swedish botanist Carl von Linné labeled them as *Paradi-sea apoda*,<sup>55</sup> but it was not until the nineteenth century that the skins started

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52 Vráz, *V Siamu, zemi bílého slona*, 125.

53 Kořenský, *V Siamu a Číně*, 80.

54 Vráz is, therefore, unaware of Antonio Pigafetta’s description of the “birds that come from the terrestrial Paradise”—see note 1.

55 Literally, “birds of paradise with no legs,” due to the taxidermists’ mutilations. See note 27. Bernd Brunner, in his *Birdmania*, explains: “When the first birds of paradise arrived with Ferdinand Magellan’s ship *Victoria* in Seville harbor on September 8, 1522, along with a priceless cargo of spices, they looked nothing like their living counterparts. The specimens did not come close to conveying the living birds’ fascinating splendor. They were gossamer-light, dried skins wrapped around a stick. Nothing remained but long silky feathers, glossy and shimmering with color .... What no one wanted to believe, even though Pigafetta had hinted at the practice, was that while preserving the skins, the islanders removed not only the flesh and bones but also the feet and sometimes even the wings. The skins’ amazed recipients took that as proof that the birds never touched the ground but spent their lives floating on the breeze, and that they therefore deserved to be classified in their own separate order. Following this line of reasoning, one Bishop Simolus wrote in 1597: ‘As long as they live, they live the lives of angels, but when they die, they fall from the sky like the Devil, never to return. And so they are a symbol for sinners who, suddenly cast from God’s grace, tumble down into Hell.’” Bernd Brunner, *Birdmania: A Remarkable Passion for Birds* (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2017), 12.

to be traded, due to the mediation of the sultan of Tidore and the first missionaries. That is also the time when the homeland of the zoological family was identified as the northwest coast of new Guinea and the “pearl island of the Moluccas.”

The attention of European collectors, museums, and owners of curiosities was immediately drawn towards this coast, which “until then had been immersed in fairy-tale twilight,”<sup>56</sup> and “good men like Rosenberg, Wallace, and Allen, and the more fortunate d’Albertis and Beccari”<sup>57</sup> had the opportunity to observe the species directly, “with a scientific eye.”<sup>58</sup> Back in Europe, the demand for the birds’ skins grew steadily, and small groups of natives from the Moluccas penetrated into the Aru, Salavati, Misole, Sorong, and Waigeus islands in order to trade them. The moment when the “first *modiste* conceived the idea of using the entire skin or at least the most beautiful feathers instead of flowers” is when the way to New Guinea really opened up, since “wherever there is a chance to be on the make, there comes ... a Chinese, Arab, Indian, Bugis, Malay, or a Mohammedan from the Moluccas. Among them, there are mainly those who ... have their own reasons for avoiding civilized territories.”<sup>59</sup> Vráz’s depiction of European caprice, which, with the help of the locals, brings destruction and bloodshed, then turns into an abhorrent and haunting image:

Four years ago, a little, capricious Parisian, whose smile and charms can best be bought with jewelry, carriages, and houses ... had the idea not only to put the entire bird on her hat, but even to have her whole collar made out of the soft, side feathers, so that she could show off her golden hair with real *coquetterie* .... And that is when the carnage really started. ... As during the Gold Rush, attracted by high prices for the skins of these birds, thousands of colored rascals and adventure-seekers ... settled down here, with their trash, guns, gunpowder, and brandy ... and they acquired the precious birds thanks only to the help of the [local] savages, who were quick to familiarize themselves with firearms. They also made significant improvements in the preparation of the birds’ skins: there were no more missing wings .... Nor was it possible for any highly educated man ...

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56 Vráz, *V dálavách světů*, 322.

57 Vráz, *V dálavách světů*, 322. For more information on these naturalists, see J. L. Dowe, “Odoardo Beccari and Enrico D’Albertis in Australia and New Zealand, 1878: botanical and zoological collections,” *Papers and Proceedings of the Royal Society of Tasmania* 150, no. 2 (2016): 27–41.

58 Vráz, *V dálavách světů*, 322.

59 Vráz, *V dálavách světů*, 322.

to be tempted anymore by the poetical vision of the birds of the sun with no legs, floating in the air.<sup>60</sup>

This is a truly horrifying portrayal of the contact between Europe and the one-time *terra ignota*: a shocking representation of the meaningless acts of Western civilized culture. One might argue that Vráz focuses on the opportunism of other Asian nations who take advantage of the situation, and that his is a picture of the destructive power that dwells in all humans and cannot be limited to Western civilization alone. Yet, the initial stimulus for this act of barbarism comes from the Western, presumably “civilized,” world. What is more, in the context of Vráz’s poetical imagery, the metaphor of the birds with no legs and no wings, who end up on the hats of Parisian women, merges with the *topoi* of authenticity and primary purity, and can be interpreted along Christian lines as an icon of the profanation and desecration of original beauty and innocence as the ultimate loss of Eden (which is even more evident in English than in Czech, given the name of the species—“bird of paradise”).

In sum, the analogy of the *Paradisaeidae* family speaks to us about the predatory nature inherent in the very act of discovery and in every scientific endeavor, since the birds of paradise were hunted, in the beginning, for scientific purposes and in the interests of collectors and museums. Exploitation and massacre is brought upon the jungle by Western civilization, exemplified in the figure of the French fashion victim: “Glory to you, Parisian *demi-mondaine*. Alas, how deep and how propitious is the influence of your gratifying soft being! ... The numbers of the killed birds exported from New Guinea are extremely large, and not exactly flattering for the delicate feelings of certain fashion-aware ladies.”<sup>61</sup>

As a *symbolon*—the ultimate culmination of Vráz’s poetic imagination—the *topos* of the birds of paradise cannot be reduced to a single and straightforward meaning. In addition to the destructiveness inherent in imperialism and colonialism, it also speaks about a different kind of loss of Paradise, of things past and never to return. It therefore conveys the idea of fugacity, of the transient majesty devoured by inexorable time and the sometimes radical transformations of history, the same nostalgia for the past that can be perceived in Musil’s novel *The Man Without Qualities*. Just think of the scene in which Ulrich, the protagonist, collects the various proposals submitted for the public

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60 Vráz, *V dálavách světů*, 323.

61 Vráz, *V dálavách světů*, 326 and 329.



inquiry (on the unifying concept for the celebration of the seventieth anniversary of Emperor Franz Joseph's coronation) in two folders. The first one, labelled "Forward to..." comprises different plans for future utopias, whereas the second, labelled "Back to..." holds projects full of nostalgic yearning for the celebrated past.<sup>62</sup>

Furthermore, on a more personal level, the allegory of the massacred birds of paradise points to the profanation of Vráz's initial desire, now corrupted by the confrontation with the *power of Empire*. It displays Vráz's process of "becoming aware," which comes not without the loss of innocence: "Civilization is slowly but steadily penetrating into the most remote corner of the world. How distant are now my childish dreams about the birds of paradise, how far from the cold reality of Papua New Guinea."<sup>63</sup> Vráz is no more a dreamy child, full of fantasies about distant lands; he has turned into a mature traveler who has seen the world and holds no illusions about humankind: "laziness, extortionate prices, shortages of food, disease of Beriberi and small pox are all over the place—and here came the boy with the rest of his childish dreams about paradise and its winged inhabitants."<sup>64</sup> What an eloquent passage to express the complex nature of Vráz's thought and his attitude towards the impact of Western civilization. At the same time, it also constitutes an extraordinarily intense and intimate insight into his inner world. As with the birds of paradise in the taxidermists' mutilations, his desire has also become mutilated and crippled.

When I was doing research for the present study, I came across two books with rather revealing names. The first one, entitled *Be a Travel Writer, Live your Dreams, Sell your Features: Travel Writing Step by Step*, is advertised as a:

no nonsense guide to the competitive world of travel writing. In a compact succinct format, it covers every aspect of feature writing, from finding the right angle to selling your story. Packed with tips to help you get started and succeed in the best job in the world.

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62 The whole passage reads thus: "Apart from that," Ulrich went on, "I already have two files full of written proposals of a general nature, which I have not yet had an opportunity of returning to you. One of them I have headed: 'Back To —'. The fact is, there are a remarkably large number of people informing us that in earlier times the world was in a better way than it is now and all the Colateral Campaign need do is to lead it back to that stage. Putting aside the quite natural demand 'Back to Belief,' we are still left with 'Back to the Baroque,' 'to the Gothic,' 'to Nature,' 'to Goethe,' 'to old Germanic law,' 'to moral purity,' and quite a number of other things." Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, 181.

63 Vráz, *V dálavách světů*, 331.

64 Vráz, *V dálavách světů*, 326.

The title of the second book is even more intriguing: *How to Make Money from Travel Writing: Practical Advice on Turning the Dream into a Well-paid Reality*.<sup>65</sup> Enrique Stanko Vráz would probably have a word or two about this strange turn in the travel narrative, fuelled no more by childish dreams but rather by the desire for a “well-paid reality.” He would probably be anxious about the frivolity, loss of authenticity, lack of the spirit of exploration, and the missing ambition to truly *see* distant lands and *meet the Other* waiting at the end of the adventure. Strangely enough, these publications are, in one aspect, similar to Vráz’s narrative. There are no more blank gaps to be filled in, no more *terra ignota* on this planet to be explored. And yet, the contemporary concept of *tourism*, with its inherent materialistic and consumer spirit, reveals the same predatory instinct that has been portrayed so well more than a hundred years ago by the Czech traveler whose texts are at the same time an intimate expression of the loss of childish innocence, the manifestation of the irreparable nostalgia for (nonexistent) Paradise, and a profound meditation upon human nature and the *power of Empire*.

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65 Solange Hando, *Be a Travel Writer, Live Your Dreams, Sell Your Features: Travel Writing Step by Step* (Compass Books, 2014); Sarah Woods: *How to Make Money from Travel Writing: Practical Advice on Turning the Dream into a Well-Paid Reality* (How to Books, 2010).

## Photographic Appendix

All photographs come from the collection of the National Museum—Náprstek Museum of Asian, African, and American Cultures in Prague (Czech Republic) and are printed here with the permission of this institution (along with their reference numbers). They were taken during Vráz's travels to Borneo, New Guinea, and Siam, and provide an exceptional visual complement to Vráz's narrative. An extensive portion of this collection can be accessed at the virtual archive of the National Museum ([vademecum.nm.cz/nm/](http://vademecum.nm.cz/nm/)).



**Figure 6.2.** Vráz's label: "New Guinea, Mansinam-Doréh, where Vráz hunted birds of paradise and *Ornithoptery* butterflies." AO II 2085.



**Figure 6.3.** Vráz's label: "New Guinea, Hattam mountains, never before accessed by a white man," 1896. AO II 2088.



**Figure 6.4.** Vráz's label: "New Guinea, Hattamu mountains, where I hunted marvelous birds of paradise; a Papua chieftain's son," 1896. AO I 763 a,b. These portraits reveal the extraordinary artistic qualities of Vráz's photographs.



**Figure 6.5.** Elephants in the royal palace, Bangkok, 1897. As II 2045.



**Figure 6.6.** Vráz's label: "Siam on the river, the gateway to Bangkok," 1897. As II 4003.



**Figure 6.7.** Vráz with a group of women and children, Sarawak, Borneo, 1896. As II 2101 a,b,c.

# ETHNIC COMPARISONS IN TRAVELOGUES ABOUT SOUTHEAST ASIA BY POLES AND SERBS OF AUSTRO-HUNGARIAN BACKGROUND, 1869–1914

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*Tomasz Ewertowski*



## Introduction—why ethnic comparisons and how to approach them<sup>1</sup>

“This horrible (almost Slavic) sloppiness of the Siamese”<sup>2</sup>—with such an analogy, Prince Paweł Sapieha (1860–1934), a member of a Polish-Lithuanian aristocratic family that was part of the Austro-Hungarian upper class, commented on the Siamese<sup>3</sup> people after his trip around Asia in 1888–1889. In the same paragraph, he also mentioned that Siamese parents often did not want to send their children to school, which reminded him of his Galician relations. A similar expression of self-criticism through comparison can be noted in his account of British-controlled Hong Kong, where he voiced admiration for “English energy,” saying: “Why don’t we, the poor, have at least some of those riches, importance, reason, work, and perseverance that they have!”<sup>4</sup> This web of analogies and contrasts introduces a number of issues concerning representation and identity. One European writes that he actually has more in common with East Asians than with the English. The figure of the “sloppy native,” typical of colonial rhetoric, serves as a mirror image for “us,” although there is also the poignant question of who exactly is “us”: Slavs, Galician Poles, or subjects of Austro-Hungary? In the background, there is also a class issue. The Polish no-

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- 1 I would like to thank the organizer of the workshop, Jan Mrázek, and the two discussants, Muhammad Arafat Bin Mohammad and Nada Savković, for their valuable comments, which helped me improve my paper.
  - 2 Paweł Sapieha, *Podróż na wschód Azji* [Travel to the East of Asia] (Lwów: Księgarnia Gubrynowicza i Schmidta, 1899), 85.
  - 3 To preserve the spirit of the epoch I use the historical name “Siamese” instead of modern “Thai.”
  - 4 Sapieha, *Podróż*, 124.

bility in Galicia often perceived peasants in oriental terms, so one may wonder if Prince Sapieha, while writing about Slavic sloppiness, was thinking about himself or might have had his subjects in mind.<sup>5</sup>

During his trip around Asia, Sapieha crossed paths with another Polish aristocrat from the upper echelons of Austro-Hungarian society, Count Karol Lanckoroński (1848–1933). Lanckoroński also wrote a book about his travels and his account is full of comparisons; however, it seems that his “us” was understood differently than Sapieha’s “us.” For example, when describing the layout of houses in Sholen, a Chinese settlement near Saigon, the aristocrat remarked that the life of East Asians was much more similar to the life of the Ancient Greeks and Romans than to “our life,” despite “our” familiarity with classical antiquity.<sup>6</sup> Here, “us” denoted Europe understood as a cultural entity. However, when in Saigon, Lanckoroński visited a coffee shop where a Czech orchestra was performing; he commented that everywhere one can encounter such groups of “Austrian compatriots,” with the word “compatriots” suggesting Austro-Hungarian identity.<sup>7</sup>

Quotations from Sapieha and Lanckoroński allow us to frame a field of interpretive issues and indicate the main significance of this paper. Scholars scrutinizing Dutch writings about the Dutch East Indies emphasize that travel narratives were often based on binary oppositions and asymmetrical comparisons between the colonized and the colonizers, between “East” and “West,”<sup>8</sup> but this conventional opposition between “us” and “them” can be transformed into a multifarious discourse in which the European “us” and the Asian “them” are not monolithic structures. Therefore, this article presents a variety of voices about Southeast Asian peoples, moving beyond binary thinking in categories of “East” and “West.”

In this paper I would like to focus on ethnic comparisons, which in the context of Southeast Asia provides a useful lens to analyze travelogues. As indicated by Joep Leerssen, national comparisons are one of the most common methods

5 Klemens Kaps, “Kulturelle Differenzen des Ökonomischen: Galizische Entwicklungsdiskurse im Spannungsfeld räumlicher Funktionalisierung und sozialer Bruchlinien (1772–1848)” [Cultural differences in economics: Galician development discourses between spatial functionalisation and social divisions (1772–1848)], *Historyka. Studia Metodologiczne* XLII (2012): 110–11.

6 Karol Lanckoroński, *Na około Ziemi 1888–1889. Wrażenia i poglądy* [Around the world 1888–1889. Impressions and opinions] (Lwów: Gebethner i Spółka, 1893), 174.

7 Lanckoroński, *Na około Ziemi*, 173.

8 See *Travelling the Dutch East Indies: Historical Perspectives and Literary Representations*, ed. Doris Jedamski and Rick Honings (Hilversum: Verloren, 2023), especially the articles by Coen Veer, Rick Honings, and Nick Tomberge.

for formulating social and political judgments in literature.<sup>9</sup> Comparisons are also crucial for travel writing. In *Haunted Journeys: Desire and Transgression in European Travel Writing*, Dennis Porter remarks: “To travel through the world is to gather a series of impressions and to make a succession of more or less conscious notations on the superiority or inferiority of other societies, when compared with one’s own.”<sup>10</sup> One of the defining features of travel narratives is giving an account of foreign phenomena. When one encounters unfamiliar circumstances, comparisons provide a framework to describe them.<sup>11</sup> However, as the examples of Sapieha and Lanckoroński show, a comparison between “us” and “them” and between “home” and “abroad” can be complicated. Who is “us” for Sapieha and Lanckoroński: Slavs, Galicians, Franz Joseph’s subjects, Europeans, whites, Catholics, or males? Who are the ones designated as “them”? Milan Jovanović (1834–1896), a Serbian traveler who visited Southeast Asia as a ship doctor on Austrian Lloyd steamers in the period 1878–1882,<sup>12</sup> once remarked that in Singapore one could observe a white Englishman next to a Malay, a Chinese, and a Dutch sailor.<sup>13</sup> All of them were foreign to his readers, but of course, they cannot be easily reduced to a signal entity called “them.”

The focus of this article is on travel narratives about Southeast Asia written by Polish and Serbian travelers of Austro-Hungarian background in the period from the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, which completely transformed European travels to Asia, until the outbreak of the First World War. The aforementioned examples show that what Porter described as comparing other societies with one’s own is not a simple dichotomy of “us” and “them,” “superior” and “inferior,” but rather a complicated web of relations. Maria Noelle Ng, in her analysis of different representations of Southeast Asia, refers to Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* and argues that “because different material conditions of existence produce different forms of *habitus*, it follows logically that mem-

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9 Joep Leerssen, *National Thought in Europe: A Cultural History* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 57, 64.

10 Dennis Porter, *Haunted Journeys: Desire and Transgression in European Travel Writing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 28.

11 Cf. Albert Maier, “Travel writing,” in *Imagology: The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters. A Critical Survey*, ed. Manfred Beller and Joep Leerssen (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 446–50; Carl Thompson, *Travel Writing* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 66–67.

12 On Jovanović’s biography, see Snežana Veljković, *Gospodin koji nije znao sanskrit* [A man who did not know Sanskrit] (Beograd: Laguna, 2016). On his travel writing about Southeast Asia, see Nada Savković’s chapter in this volume and Tomasz Ewertowski, “The Image of the Chinese in the Southeast Asian Contact Zone. National Comparisons in the Travelogues of Milan Jovanović and Władysław Michał Zaleski,” *Imagologiya i komparativistika* 6, no. 2 (2016): 40–57

13 Milan Jovanović, *Tamo amo po istoku. Sveska druga* [Hither and yon in the East. Volume two] (Belgrade: Srpska književna zadruga, 1895), 127.



bers of different societies and cultures will develop their own sets of dispositions, preconceptions, and prejudices regarding other peoples and cultures.”<sup>14</sup> A Polish aristocrat from Austro-Hungary would perceive exotic reality differently from a Polish priest born in Lithuania or a Serbian doctor from Austro-Hungary. Moreover, different sets of dispositions will emerge in different situations: Lanckoroński, in a general discourse on cultural differences, spoke from the position of a European, while in a coffee house with a Czech music band, he voiced an Austro-Hungarian standpoint. Southeast Asian reality was also rich in stimuli for different comparisons. Michał Siedlecki (1873–1940), a Polish botanist who stayed for a few months in Java in 1907, wrote that at first glance one can see the local “Malay”<sup>15</sup> population, Chinese traders, and Europeans from different backgrounds. However, he remarks that after some time one can distinguish Sundanese, Javanese, and “proper Malay,” meet Tenggerese in East Java, and notice small but important Arab communities.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, ethnic comparisons in travel narratives about Southeast Asia present a captivating set of issues. In this chapter, I first introduce the corpus of travelogues I intend to use. Secondly, I discuss “who were the travelers” in order to deepen my understanding of their *habitus* and complex identities. Thirdly, general modes of constructing comparisons—analogy, contrast, and exaggeration—are discussed. The final step is an analysis of a few additional peculiar cases of comparisons.

### Corpus of travel writing

Attempts to define the basis of travel writing usually indicate that this type of writing is not one particular genre, but rather a constellation of diverse forms; at their core, is an authentic record of travel, undertaken by the author-narra-

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14 Maria Noëlle Ng, *Three Exotic Views of Southeast Asia: The Travel Narratives of Isabella Bird, Max Dauthendey, and Ai Wu, 1850–1930* (White Plains, NY: EastBridge, 2002), 11.

15 Travelers often used the word “Malay” to describe all the peoples of the Indonesian archipelago and Malay Peninsula.

16 Michał Siedlecki, *Jawa – przyroda i sztuka. Uwagi z podróży* [Java – nature and art: Notes from a journey] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo J. Mortkowicza, 1913), 197. On Siedlecki’s stay on Java, his writings, and his influence see Joanna Waclawek, “Latające żaby i batiki krakowskie. Jawajska podróż profesora Michała Siedleckiego i jej znaczenie dla poznania kultury i sztuki Indonezji w Polsce” [Flying frogs and Cracovian batik. Professor Siedlecki’s trip to the Duch East Indies and its meaning for Polish knowledge about Indonesia], in *Odcienie Indonezji* [Shades of Indonesia], ed. Renata Lesner-Szwarc (Toruń: Oficyna Wydawnicza Kucharski, 2014), 15–29; Przemysław Wiatrowski, “Profesora Michała Siedleckiego ‘Jawa – przyroda i sztuka. Uwagi z podróży’ okiem językoznawcy – w stulecie wydania” [Java – nature and art. Notes from a journey by Professor Michał Siedlecki as seen by a linguist – on the one hundredth anniversary of the first edition], in *Odcienie Indonezji*, 31–48.

tor.<sup>17</sup> Following this line of thought, I have analyzed the accounts of journeys written by authors who actually visited Southeast Asia, rather than the literary fiction composed by voyagers or the publications by “armchair” travelers. The corpus of travelogues used in this research includes works by the following authors: Serbs Milan Jovanović and Vlado Ivelić; and Poles Julian Fałat, Karol Lanckoroński, Bogumił Nowotny, Marian Raciborski, Paweł Sapięha, Czesław Petelenz, Michał Siedlecki, and Hugo Zapałowicz. All were born in the Austro-Hungarian empire and all traveled to Southeast Asia before 1914 as subjects of the Habsburg emperors. Last but not least, all were men (within the timespan of the research, Polish and Serbian female travelers seldom journeyed as far as this).<sup>18</sup> The corpus gives prominence to Polish writers, which reflects the fact that the Poles were more numerous than Serbs during the period in question.

During the First World War and the period that immediately followed, a large number of Poles and Serbs visited Southeast Asia, mostly on their way from Russia to Europe, some of whom later wrote travelogues (Slavko Diklić, Jovan Milanković, Vlada Stanojević, Kamil Giżycki, Przeclaw Smolik, Jerzy Bandrowski, and others), but traveling after 1914 was quite different, such that these authors are outside the scope of this article. Even within the given timespan (1869–1914), focusing on Austro-Hungary leaves some rather important Polish and Serbian narratives about Southeast Asia unaddressed, e.g. the travelogues written by Milorad Rajčević, Władysław Michał Zaleski, Władysław Jagniałkowski, and female traveler Jadwiga Marcinowska. However, thanks to such a delineation of the corpus and to a comparison of authors hailing from two different nations of the Danube Monarchy, we can clearly understand the phenomena linked with the complicated background of Austro-Hungarian travelers.

### **Travelers’ identities**

In his overview of Polish travel writings of the nineteenth century, Tadeusz Budrewicz asserts that Poles traveling within Europe wrote from their own national perspective, while in travels outside Europe, the prevailing point of view

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17 Cf. Jan Borm, “Defining Travel: On the Travel Book, Travel Writing and Terminology,” in *Perspectives on Travel Writing*, ed. Gleen Hopper and Tim Youngs (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 17; Grzegorz Moroz, *A Generic History of Travel Writing in Anglophone and Polish Literature* (Brill, 2020), 11–33.

18 On early Polish female travelers, see Dorota Wojda, *Polska Szeherazada. Swoje i obce z perspektywy postkolonialnej* [Polish Scheherazade: The same and the other from a postcolonial perspective] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2015), 100–105 and a special issue of the journal “Wiek XIX. Rocznik Towarzystwa Literackiego im. Adama Mickiewicza” 13 (2020).

was that of a white man, a European, a Christian, and a colonizer.<sup>19</sup> This general statement can be applied to both Polish and Serbian travelers in our corpus, even though detailed scrutiny of travelogues suggests that such a broad formulation does not fully reflect their complex identities. Travelers often used the words “Europe” and “European,” but how each of them understood and evaluated them is a complicated matter. As we have seen, Lanckoroński commented on Asian cultures from the perspective of a cultured European, using references to classical antiquity. Similarly, Milan Jovanović, while writing about Asia, referred to the European classical heritage: for example, he compared colonialism in Asia with the Roman conquest of Greece.<sup>20</sup> This traveler also remarked that as a European he felt ashamed of the behavior of drunken British sailors in Singapore, which shows how a Serb was able to identify himself with the British as fellow Europeans (something which Sapieha, at least partially, could not do), although from his perspective this affinity was not something to be proud of.<sup>21</sup> Sometimes references to one’s European identity have a casual character and are connected with material and sensual dimensions of traveling, as was the comment by Raciborski that in hot Java European clothes are unbearable<sup>22</sup> or the remark by Jovanović that Chinese eating habits are unusual for “us, Europeans.”<sup>23</sup> There are many other similar examples confirming Budrewicz’s statement, even though a detailed picture is much more complicated. As seen already in examples from Paweł Sapieha’s travelogue, sometimes he wrote from the perspective of a Galician Pole while also depreciating his own Slavic community as less valuable than the British, even identifying Slavs with Southeast Asians, albeit in such particular contexts as sloppiness and, as we will see later, hunting. In Bangkok, he met French Catholic missionaries and conversed with them about matters of faith as a Catholic.<sup>24</sup> There is yet another aspect of his writing: during his trip, he was officially a member of an Austro-Hungarian delegation to Siam and Japan, and also expressed great concerns about the future of Austria-Hungary after receiving news about Crown Prince Rudolf’s death. Last but not

19 Tadeusz Budrewicz, “Kodeks Polaka w podróży” [The Polish travel code], in *Od Galicji po Amerykę. Literackim tropem XIX-wiecznych podróży* [From Galicia to America: A literary trail of nineteenth-century journeys], ed. Tadeusz Budrewicz and Magdalena Sadlik (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UP, 2018), 112. Cf. Tomasz Ewertowski, *Images of China in Polish and Serbian Travel Writings* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 70–75.

20 Jovanović, *Tamo amo*, 195.

21 Jovanović, *Tamo amo*, 137.

22 Marian Raciborski, *Życie pod równikiem* [Life under the equator] (Lwów: Polskie Towarzystwo Przyrodników im. Kopernika, 1924), 4–5.

23 Jovanović, *Tamo amo*, 104–5.

24 Sapieha, *Podróż*, 85–88.

least, class should also be taken into account. Sapieha favorably commented on Siamese servants' respect towards their masters, seeing etiquette as an essential aspect of "Eastern" culture. Their "good manners" were compared to a lack thereof among "us" in Europe, which he saw as the effect of both the American and French revolutions.<sup>25</sup> In such moments, Sapieha writes not as a Galician Pole or a Catholic, but as an aristocrat.

Milan Jovanović, as we have seen, wrote as a European; nevertheless, several times he warmly praised the Dalmatian crew of the Austrian Lloyd steamers, in a way that reveals his Southern Slavic affinity. Vlado Ivelić, himself an officer and later a captain in Austrian Lloyd service, hailed from Boka Kotorska.<sup>26</sup> Despite serving for many years in an Austro-Hungarian company, in his memoirs, written already after the First World War when living in the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, he expressed some anti-Austrian sentiments and identified himself with the Southern Slavs.<sup>27</sup> Yet it should be noted that such statements were not uttered in those scant parts of the memoirs which depict Southeast Asia. There, however, an interesting point is made in his remarks on "English fashion," which was introduced on Lloyd steamships. Ivelić adapts a quasi-ethnographic mode of writing, one of the typical features of "exotic" European travel writing, to write about a Western European nation.<sup>28</sup> Similar remarks about strange English customs are made by Czesław Petelenz, who in 1899–1901 was a junior officer of the crew on an Austro-Hungarian vessel. Petelenz sometimes writes from the perspective of a European, sometimes the Austro-Hungarian standpoint is dominant (when he describes visits to Austro-Hungarian consulates), and sometimes a Polish angle takes precedence (for example, when quoting the Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz). Bogumił Nowotny, another officer in the Austro-Hungarian navy, declared that he was neither a real Pole nor a real Austrian, but a person without roots.<sup>29</sup>

Finally, in attempting to answer the question of who were these travelers, we should also remember their professional identity. Julian Fałat was one of

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25 Sapieha, *Podróż*, 68.

26 On Ivelić, see Olivera Doklešić, "Posljednji Ivelić, kroz pomorstvo i poeziju" [The last Ivelić through sailing and poetry], *Boka. Zbornik radova iz nauke, kulture i umjetnosti* 24 (2004): 425–47.

27 Vlado Ivelić, *Uspomene iz pomorskog života* [Memoirs from a sea life] (Split: Jadranska straža, 1933), 7, 157, 166, 168–69.

28 Ivelić, *Uspomene*, 95. On a similar theme in Czech travel writings about Southeast Asia, see J. Mrázek, "Returns to the Wide World: Errant Bohemian Images of Race and Colonialism," *Studies in Travel Writing* 21, no. 2 (2017): 141.

29 Bogumił Nowotny, *Wspomnienia* [Recollections], ed. Sławomir Kudela, Walter Pater, and Józef Wąsiewski (Gdańsk: Finna, 2006), 197–98.

the most famous Polish painters at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>30</sup> His artistic background is evident in the following comparison regarding the Singaporean population: “I often see how a group of small Chinese scruffs enjoys themselves eating a pineapple, lifting it with their fingers to their mouths, bit by bit; it is reminiscent of Murillo.”<sup>31</sup> Milan Jovanović, a doctor and an author of publications on hygiene, favorably compared Chinese habits and clothing to European ones from the perspective of sanitation. Michał Siedlecki and Marian Raciborski, both professors of biology, devoted a great deal of their travelogues to Java’s fauna and flora. Still, in the case of the latter, he did not forget Polish patriotism in his professional activity and so he named newly discovered fungi after characters from Polish romantic literature.<sup>32</sup>

This short characterization of the travelers’ backgrounds and writing perspectives leads us to a sense of hybridity and palimpsest. Travelers did not write from a monolithic European (Polish, Serbian) perspective, but various aspects of their habitus gain prominence in different parts of their palimpsestic travelogues.

### General modes of writing—analogy, contrast, exaggeration

In his overview of Serbian travel writings of the interwar period, Vladimir Gvozden writes about aestheticization in travelogues, referring to cultural codes used to shape the material experience of travel into a literary work.<sup>33</sup> The goal of this section is to analyze a few aspects of aestheticization in travel ac-

30 On Fałat’s trip around the world and the influence of East Asian art on his paintings, see Grzegorz Moroz’s chapter in this volume and Jerzy Malinowski, “Podróż Juliana Fałata do Chin i Japonii w 1885” [Julian Fałat’s journey to China and Japan in 1885], in *Orient w kulturze polskiej. Materiały z sesji jubileuszowej z okazji 25-lecia Muzeum Azji i Pacyfiku w Warszawie 15-16 października 1998* [The Orient in Polish culture. Proceedings of the jubilee session on the 25th anniversary of the Asia-Pacific Museum in Warsaw, October 15-16, 1998] (Warsaw: Dialog, 2000), 75–84.

31 Julian Fałat, *Pamiętniki* [Memoirs], ed. Anna Lubasiowa (Katowice: Śląski Instytut Naukowy, 1987), 119. Spanish Baroque painter Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1617–82) painted street scenes. Fałat studied in Munich where in the Alte Pinakothek he could see Murillo’s *Beggar Boys Eating Grapes and Melon*.

32 Piotr Köhler and Alicja Maria Zemanek, “Marian Raciborski – założyciel Instytutu Botaniki UJ. W stulecie śmierci” [Marian Raciborski – the founder of the Institute of Botany at the Jagiellonian University. On the centenary of his death], *Alma Mater* 199 (2018): 96. Cf. Szary [Antoni Chołoniewski], “Po powrocie z równika” [After returning from the Equator], *Życie i Sztuka. Ilustrowany dodatek “Kraju”* 39 (1901): 451.

33 Vladimir Gvozden, *Srpska putopisna kultura 1914–1940. Studija o hronotopičnosti susreta* [Serbian travel writing culture 1914–1940: A study in the chronotope of an encounter] (Beograd: Službeni glasnik), 171.

counts on Southeast Asia, focusing on the use of ethnic comparisons. At first, it should be noted that comparisons can have different forms. Albert Maier specifies that “otherness” is constructed in travel narratives by referencing to familiar concepts and facts by means of analogy, contrast and exaggeration.<sup>34</sup> Numerous examples of all such forms can be found in the corpus.

Using analogies is often interpreted as a “domestic filter” alleviating the shock of the new<sup>35</sup>; however, some other functions can also be indicated. Milan Jovanović makes a broad historical analogy, claiming that when the Portuguese arrived in Southeast Asia in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, they destroyed the Malay state, similar to their Spanish “brothers” destroying Montezuma’s state in America.<sup>36</sup> Here, analogy serves as a vehicle for critiquing European colonialism. Furthermore, Jovanović emphasizes statehood, which suggests that a single unified Malay state was destroyed by the Portuguese in a way similar to the fate of the Aztec empire in Central America. It can be seen how aestheticization is a distortion of the facts. While the comparison between the Aztec empire and the Malay world is problematic, Jovanović’s analogy is consistent with his staunch anti-colonial stance and belief in human fraternity. Furthermore, an analogy between two peoples, oppressed by Catholic monarchies, may also have additional value for an Orthodox Serb, born under the rule of the Catholic Habsburgs.<sup>37</sup> Nemanja Radulović is of the opinion that, despite Jovanović’s strong affinity for his European heritage, he belonged to the “other,” smaller Europe, which explains his critical attitude towards imperialism and colonialism.<sup>38</sup> Nonetheless, Radulović also claims that despite his anti-colonial stance, Jovanović still referred to widespread stereotypes in his account of India.<sup>39</sup> An analogy between Malays and Aztecs can also be perceived from this perspective. Jovanović wanted to show his appreciation of this Southeast Asian nation, but he did it using contemporary European categories (statehood as a criterion of value<sup>40</sup>) and distorted its history (the claim

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34 Maier, “Travel writing,” 446.

35 Sybille C. Fritzsche, *Narrating China: Western Travelers in the Middle Kingdom after the Opium War* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1995), 12–13.

36 Jovanović, *Tamo amo*, 111–12.

37 I followed the remarks made by Zoran Milutinović in a discussion during the workshop.

38 Nemanja Radulović, “Slika Indije u srpskoj književnosti 19. veka” [The image of India in Serbian nineteenth-century literature], *Dositejev vrt* 6 (2018): 65.

39 Radulović, “Slika Indije,” 64.

40 It was stated that the concept of a centralized, exclusive, territorial state was brought to the Indian Ocean by European colonizers, see Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 24; Sunil S. Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The Furies of Nature and the Fortunes of Migrants* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 43.

that independent Malay polities had already disappeared in the sixteenth century). There is also one more interesting analogy in Jovanović's travelogue which can be read in the context of Radulović's remarks. The Serbian traveler claims that Malays are well-built and the only difference between them and Caucasians is the color of their skin.<sup>41</sup> Jovanović rejects the opinion that Southeast Asians were physically inferior, by drawing an analogy between Asians and Europeans. However, he treated the "Caucasian race" as his model, thus his rejection of colonial stereotypes and his revaluation of non-Europeans are rooted in European nineteenth-century racial thought, which is of course understandable, considering when his travelogue was written. Despite those remarks, the Serbian traveler is still appealing to the modern reader thanks to his critical stance towards colonialism and positive views of Asians.

Another analogy which uses historical contexts is Lanckoroński's comparison of the British and the Romans. British officials in the courts of the Malay kingdoms are compared with Roman legates in the Eastern Mediterranean, while the British Empire is compared with the Roman Empire. Lanckoroński strengthens his analogy by using a quotation from a fifth-century Latin author, in this way displaying his erudition. Lanckoroński's travelogue is full of such sophisticated comparisons, through which his aristocratic-intellectual *habitus* is clearly manifested. Additionally, another analogy was used by Lanckoroński in a discourse on contemporary politics. After referring to the British Empire as Rome, he made a critical assessment of the current policies of the United Kingdom, calling it a Hamlet among nations.<sup>42</sup>

A telling example of contrast is found in Sapieha's travelogue, where he compared the Siamese to the Chinese. The Siamese are depicted as lazy, indolent, and effeminate, unable to progress due to the fact that they were "an old race" who have already gone past their age of activity. The languid Siamese are contrasted with the Chinese, who are seen as future rulers of Siam thanks to their industriousness and business-sense.<sup>43</sup> Sapieha's travel experience is structured into aesthetic writing by means of nineteenth-century colonial stereotypes. Attributing laziness and effeminacy to non-European ethnicities was one typical feature of the colonial rhetoric.<sup>44</sup> The notion of "an old race" echoes the nineteenth-century organic philosophy of history, which treated nations

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41 Jovanović, *Tamo amo*, 111.

42 Lanckoroński, *Na okolo Ziemi*, 165–166.

43 Sapieha, *Podróż*, 87–88.

44 Syed Hussain Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the Image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th Century and its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism*

as living organisms, experiencing youth, maturity, and old age. The stereotypical image of a “lazy native” returned later in Sapieha’s travelogue when he compared Malays to the Siamese, claiming that both peoples were unwilling to work hard.<sup>45</sup> In the colonial rhetoric, indolent locals were often contrasted with energetic Europeans, while in Sapieha’s account they are juxtaposed with the Chinese. In this context, the Polish traveler compared the situation in Siam with Chinese emigration to Australia and America, therefore the notion of the “yellow peril” can be seen in the background of the contrast he draws between the Chinese and Siamese.

The image of diligent, entrepreneurial Chinese is also at the basis of one contrastive comparison made by Milan Jovanović. While writing about the British colony of Penang, he commented that immigrants from the Middle Kingdom were displacing British businesses due to their superior personal traits:

In the tropics, the English are not the same as on their island. They do not go to work before 10 am—the Chinese are in their shops at dawn; an Englishman rests over dinner—a Chinese person works; after dinner, there is no trade for an Englishman—a Chinese person trades in the middle of the night; on Sunday, an Englishman does not leave his house—for a Chinese person, there is no Sunday or holidays; an Englishman wants to use a good part of his earnings for a living—for a Chinese person, a handful of rice and a small amount of greens are enough.<sup>46</sup>

Contrary to Sapieha’s apotheosis of the English quoted at the beginning of this article, for Jovanović Englishmen serve as a negative counterpart to Chinese diligence. Moreover, even when describing the fact that Europeans were “losing ground” in their colonial possession, Jovanović did not use any rhetoric linked with the “yellow peril.” This can be explained by his general critical views of European colonial actions and his idealization of Chinese culture. Malays were also described by Jovanović as hard-working and having a high level of craftsmanship: “a colored native—Malay, who is industrious and docile, spends his life working hard on the land and sea.”<sup>47</sup> Still, he was most enthusiastic about the Chinese, praising virtually all aspects of their culture,

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(London: Frank Cass, 1977). Cf. Victor R. Savage, *Western Impressions of Nature and Landscape in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1984), 109–13, 126–39, 170–75.

45 Sapieha, *Podróż*, 108.

46 Jovanović, *Tamo amo*, 94.

47 Jovanović, *Tamo amo*, 138.



and he saw them as a model for Europeans. The Serbian traveler, hailing from “the other Europe” and deeply interested in foreign and ancient cultures, was prone to look for ideals outside the contemporary West, especially taking into account his feelings of indignation from observing the effects of the opium trade or the behavior of British sailors.

In one interview, Raciborski uses a rhetoric of contrast to describe the complicated identity of a modern Javanese: “[The Javanese] is a curious creature, with one half engrossed in his own culture, very ancient and totally unlike ours, with the other half he freely and comfortably breathes Europeanism, like a born European.”<sup>48</sup> The obvious context here is Homi Bhabha’s notion of mimicry, although Raciborski’s appreciation of Javanese familiarity with modern technology and European-modeled institutions seems genuine. Furthermore, he also praised Javanese ancient culture, and did this despite emphasizing its otherness. After returning from Java he organized performances of Javanese theatre.<sup>49</sup> Maybe the most interesting point is that although Raciborski highlighted a contrast between the two sides of Javanese identity, he did not write about any internal conflict. It may also reflect the fact that applying practices of different origins in various spheres of life was something rather normal for Raciborski, who was a Pole from Austro-Hungary, educated for a time in Germany, and using numerous languages in his professional activity. This lack of conflict can also serve as an opening for a discussion on relations between Europeanization and modernization. Raciborski perceived the use of modern equipment as a sign of Europeanization, whereas from the perspective of the locals, it could have meant nothing more than modernization, because using new tools did not entail assuming a “half-European” identity.<sup>50</sup>

A much simpler image of the Javanese was presented by Raciborski in one of his letters, although there he employed a curious net of contrasts and analogies to express his thoughts about ethnic groups on Java. Writing privately, he used a blatant, ironic tone he would not allow himself in a text aimed for publication, so this excerpt deserves attention. According to Raciborski, on Java different peoples lived next to each other: Chinese traded, earning millions, Europeans also came to Java only to make money, Arabs were occupied with

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48 Szary, “Po powrocie z równika,” 451.

49 See Marianna Lis’s chapter in this volume.

50 Among certain members of the Javanese elite, European culture and modern technology were viewed as a means of strengthening Javanese identity, not as Europeanization, see M.C. Ricklefs, *Polarising Javanese Society: Islamic and other visions (c. 1830-1930)* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2007), 126-29, 158-59, 174-75.

missionary activity and usury, and the Javanese supported all these “parasites” and felt good with it. This is an example of an internal comparison, as different ethnic groups from Java are juxtaposed and contrasted with a single defining feature attributed to each of them. Due to the writing convention of a private letter, Raciborski probably wanted to write simply and wittily, thus he reproduced stereotypes of meek Javanese supporting “parasites” like the business-minded Chinese and the greedy Europeans. Interestingly, the punch line to this portrayal of the Javanese is an ironic external comparison with Polish society. Raciborski claimed that if Polish peasants had Javanese virtues there would be no anti-Semitism, no socialist movement, and only a genuine harmony between nobility and commoners.<sup>51</sup> Obviously, Raciborski wrote with tongue in cheek, but his comparison between the timid Javanese and the unruly Poles reveals an important mechanism of ethnic comparisons: authors tend to use exaggerated images of foreign groups in order to express critical thoughts about realities back home.

Regarding exaggeration, I would like to focus on Siedlecki. His book about Java distinguishes itself by its inquisitiveness, but even in his work, examples of exaggeration can be found. Siedlecki’s characterization of the different peoples of Java uses comparisons, and his vast knowledge of Javanese culture notwithstanding, in some situations his views are influenced by a stereotype of non-European peoples as living close to nature, unspoiled by civilization, thus retaining their primordial goodness and naivety. An additional distorting factor is the category of “the East” as a uniform cultural entity. This leads to some exaggerated and essentialist formulations concerning the “Malay” (in using this word Siedlecki referred also to the Javanese, Sundanese, and other groups) character. For example, Siedlecki praised the botanical garden in Bogor, saying that its development owed a lot to the Dutch, who had known horticulture for centuries, and to Malays, who are splendid gardeners by nature with an innate sense of wildlife.<sup>52</sup> When characterizing the religious beliefs of the local population, he claims that their Islam is superficial, such that their soul has remained “primeval, naïve, and good.”<sup>53</sup> In this context, Javanese Arabs are negatively compared with the indigenous population, and in villages where there is no mosque, people are usually “the best, primeval.”<sup>54</sup> This can

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51 Marian Raciborski to Alfred Albinowski, October 20, 1897. Marian Raciborski Papers, catalogue number Przyb. 810/76. Jagiellonian Library in Kraków.

52 Siedlecki, *Jawa*, 91.

53 Siedlecki, *Jawa*, 281.

54 Siedlecki, *Jawa*, 213.

be seen as a reverberation of what Ter Ellingson calls “the myth of the Golden Age,” which was one of the rhetorical strategies used to characterize peoples encountered on other continents, according to which non-Europeans preserved ancient virtues.<sup>55</sup> Here the “myth of the Noble Savage” can also be mentioned, an etiquette often applied to idealizations of non-Europeans in the context of their closeness to nature. According to Ellingson, this formula is a discursive construct which gained popularity after 1859 when it was used as a straw man by racist British anthropologists to debunk the concept that other races are “noble.” Siedlecki uses neither the words “Golden Age” nor “Noble Savage” and he truly appreciated the Malays; nevertheless, he exaggerates their primitiveness—they are good because they are primeval, while their skills are not the effects of culture but are innate. Such rhetoric diminishes their cultural achievements and serves as a tool to criticize Javanese Arabs.

Siedlecki approaches the Malay character from a different point of view when he describes them with reference to the category of “the East.”<sup>56</sup> While writing about the theatre, he contrasts “our” art with “the East.” In an exaggerated way, he emphasizes that in “the East” life is less worthy than in Europe, therefore tragedy could not have the death of the main character as the climax. He then gives an account of his visit to a theatre in Bombay as an example of a different attitude towards the dramatic arts “in the East.” Such grounds form the basis for his elaborate and informative description of Javanese theatrical traditions. Analogies between different Asian cultures are accompanied by a contrast between the uniform East and Europe.<sup>57</sup> The essentialist stereotype about the East also leads to an exaggerated claim that Malays are horribly vindictive “like all people of the East.... A Malay harbors a grudge, whether a real or imagined injustice, for a very long time and is ready to avenge it with severity.”<sup>58</sup> As can be seen here, Siedlecki’s comparisons, based on the ideas of a uniform East, its essential character, and the locals’ connection with nature, have resulted in exaggerated statements about the Malay personality despite the author’s profound knowledge and real affinity towards the inhabitants of Java.

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55 Ter Ellingson, *The Myth of the Noble Savage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 12, 25–26. In the context of Western travel writings regarding Southeast Asia, images of “carefree and happy” primeval locals were analyzed in Savage, *Western Impressions*, 113–121.

56 The comments in this paragraph on Siedlecki’s orientalist perspective are, of course, based on Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2003).

57 Siedlecki, *Jawa*, 249–50.

58 Siedlecki, *Jawa*, 200–201.

## Particular cases

Finally, I would like to examine a few distinctive cases of comparisons which would complement what we have discussed so far. The examples scrutinized below are to some extent atypical but worth mentioning due to their curious formulations.

In Siam, Sapieha was invited to see white elephants and while observing the animals, he had an interesting conversation with his hosts. “The Siamese forgot for a moment about their usually bored face, became more lively, and it was very curious. We felt good there, because some hunting-sport instincts moved similarly in our hearts; we understood each other.”<sup>59</sup> Here, the *tertium comparationis* is the shared affection for animals and hunting, while similar feelings allowed Sapieha to draw an analogy between himself and his Siamese hosts. In general, hunting is an important topic in travel writing. Mikko Toivanen shows that hunting scenes add a sense of adventure to otherwise orderly tourist narratives, while simultaneously distinguishing between masculine traveler-hunters and locals (even though the locals made the hunting trips possible).<sup>60</sup> However, in the case of Sapieha it may be useful to refer to a remark made by Jürgen Osterhammel that in the nineteenth century hunting was “a symbolic setting for the convergence in status” between different classes.<sup>61</sup> For Sapieha, it is a zone in which not only class, but also civilizational differences are minimized. Previously it was shown how Sapieha had drawn an analogy between Slavic and Siamese sloppiness, and here he sees another connection. It is an open question if the Siamese passion for elephants was really as close to Sapieha’s hunting instincts as he imagined; nevertheless, it is one example of ethnic self-identification.<sup>62</sup>

Another interesting case can be called twisted self-identification, that is, when a minority group in an observed society is compared to a minority group in the traveler’s own society. The “marginal trading minority”<sup>63</sup> role served as

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59 Sapieha, *Podróż*, 61.

60 Mikko Samuli Toivanen, “Colonial Tours: The Leisure and Anxiety of Empire in Travel Writing from Java, Ceylon and the Straits Settlements, 1840-1875” (PhD. thesis, European University Institute, 2019), 154–58, 236–37.

61 Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 382.

62 See Anna Kołos, “Imagining Yourself as the Other and Vice Versa: Ethnic Self-Identifications as Floating Images,” in *Wizerunek jako kategoria teorii komunikacji, antropologii kultury i semiotyki tekstu*, ed. Aleksander Kiklewicz (Olsztyn: Centrum Badań Europy Wschodniej, 2020), 319–30.

63 Jamie Mackie, “Introduction,” in *Sojourners and Settlers: Histories of Southeast Asia and the Chinese*, ed. Anthony Reid, 2nd ed. (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2001), xii.

the basis for Sapieha's comparisons between the Chinese and the Jews, such connections being a recurring image in European descriptions of the ethnic situation in Southeast Asia.<sup>64</sup> In a few places, Sapieha explicitly drew an analogy between East Asians and Semites,<sup>65</sup> and generally, he presented the Chinese as materialist money-makers, which echoes familiar anti-Semitic stereotypes about Jews, enhanced by Sapieha's aristocratic perspective on social groups involved in the market economy. A similar analogy was made by Raciborski in one of his letters.<sup>66</sup> Zapałowicz also made a comparison between the Chinese and the Jews, albeit within the context of the Americas.<sup>67</sup>

Many travelers wrote about how enchanting were the tropical fauna and flora, which is not surprising for people hailing from a temperate climate zone.<sup>68</sup> In the case of Raciborski and Siedlecki, we encounter two authors deeply interested in Java's natural environment from a professional standpoint, with wildlife also impressing both of them on an emotional level, albeit with a curious contrast. Raciborski, who stayed longer in Java, claimed that the island's omnipresent greenness was monotonous and that he missed the diversity of Europe to the extent that he considered autumn leaves more beautiful in terms of colors than anything he saw on the equator.<sup>69</sup> Although Siedlecki wrote that "our nature" is not worse than in the tropics, he still seemed more favorable towards the latter, for he marveled at the richness of the equatorial vegetation.<sup>70</sup> What is more important in view of the topic of this article is that in Siedlecki's case this is also linked

64 See Daniel Chirot and Anthony Reid, eds., *Essential Outsiders: Chinese and Jews in the Modern Transformation of Southeast Asia and Central Europe* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1997), especially the chapters by Daniel Chirot (3–32) and Anthony Reid (33–71).

65 Sapieha, *Podróż*, 120, 302.

66 Stanisław Kulczyński, "Korespondencja między Marianem Raciborskim a Władysławem Kulczyńskim z lat 1895–1917" [Correspondence between Marian Raciborski and Władysław Kulczyński, 1895–1917], *Studia i Materiały z Dziejów Nauki Polskiej. Seria B*, no. 27 (1977): 32.

67 Hugo Zapałowicz, *Jedna z podróży na około Ziemi* [One of trips around the world], vol. 1, 630; vol. 2, 23. Other Polish travelers who compared the Jews in Poland to the Chinese in Java were Henryk Sienkiewicz (1852–1936, a relative of a famous writer of the same name), *Wspomnienia sierżanta Legji Cudzoziemskiej* [Memoirs of a sergeant of the foreign legion] (Warsaw: Gebethner i Wolff, 1914), 127; and Lucjan Jurkiewicz, *Opis podróży i pobytu na Sachalinie* [A description of a journey and sojourn on Sakhalin] (Kórnik-Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskiego Towarzystwa Przyjaciół Nauk, 2014), 65. Since none of these travelers were born Austro-Hungary, they are not included in the corpus for this article. Remarks comparing Jews and Chinese can also be found in Polish and Serbian travelogues about China (see Ewertowski, *Images of China*, 149–50).

68 For images of the tropics in different geographical and national contexts, see, e.g. Savage, *Western Impressions*; David Arnold, *The Tropics and the Traveling Gaze: India, Landscape, and Science, 1800–1856* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2006); Jan Mrázek, "Czech Tropics," *Archipel* 86 (2013): 155–9. For Polish and Serbian travelers, see Tomasz Ewertowski, "The tropics and the East-Central European Gaze," *Waccana. Journal of the Humanities of Indonesia* 23, no. 1 (2022): 1–37.

69 Raciborski, *Życie pod równikiem*, 16.

70 Siedlecki, *Jawa*, V–VI.

to his outlook on the inhabitants of Java: “A man also belongs to nature; he who is in the Far East is no less different from us, people of the North, just as the nature of those sunny lands is different from ours. It is not easy to get to know him, to understand his soul; however, an opportunity to look at him closely, observe his colorful life—is incredibly tempting.”<sup>71</sup> Here we see another comparison based on a contrast between “us” and “them.” Even though Siedlecki also writes that the phenomenon of life is the same throughout the Earth, it is “othering” that remains dominant in his discourse. Siedlecki’s naturalist perspective leads him to the observation that the peoples of Java are as different from “us” as the tropics are from the temperate zones. Entrenching this comparison in a discourse on biology gives it the aura of objectivity. Siedlecki’s professional position should be also taken into account. The policy of inviting foreign scholars to Java was not a purely scientific endeavour; instead, it helped to legitimize Dutch colonial rule by creating an image of the island as a place where it was possible to do research at the highest possible level. In doing so, European scientists used the help of local experts, seldom acknowledging their importance.<sup>72</sup> Siedlecki himself was happy to pay a very low salary to his helper Nong-Nong, taking advantage of the exploitative system created by the Dutch, although he commented positively on his local helpers.<sup>73</sup> Thanks to Dutch colonial institutions and his status as a European scientist, Siedlecki could explore the tropical island and formulate conclusions not only in relation to its fauna and flora, but also in relation to its inhabitants. In this context, how the figure of a naturalist was interpreted by Mary Louise Pratt should be taken into account: “The naturalist naturalizes the bourgeois European’s own global presence and authority.”<sup>74</sup> Furthermore, according to David Kerr, the tropical jungle was often seen as antagonistic to modernity and civilization.<sup>75</sup> In Siedlecki’s writings, despite his knowledge of Javanese heritage, we also see “primeval, naïve, and good” locals living in the tropical forest, whose familiarity with nature is “innate.” “Tropical nature” is a people’s setting of life different from that of the Polish traveler who happens to represent modernity due to his scien-

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71 Siedlecki, *Jawa*, VI.

72 Andrew Goss, *The Floracrats: State-Sponsored Science and the Failure of the Enlightenment in Indonesia* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 59–75; Florian Wagner, *Colonial Internationalism and the Governmentality of Empire, 1893–1982* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 149–72.

73 Siedlecki, *Jawa*, 30.

74 Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge), 26.

75 Douglas Kerr, “Ruins in the Jungle: Nature and Narrative,” in *Asian Crossings: Travel Writing on China, Japan and Southeast Asia*, ed. Steve Clark and Paul Smethurst (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008), 132–33.

tific background. Othering discourse also results in the conviction that mutual understanding is somewhat impossible, while observing is presented as something alluring. This is an example of the “rhetoric of surveillance,” wherein the Western observer is in a privileged position to create representations of the other.<sup>76</sup>

However, it should also be emphasized that although in Siedlecki’s book some stereotypes and formulas typical of colonial rhetoric can be found, he did try nevertheless to understand the local population and had a good rapport with them (at least according to his own words). Moreover, he researched the cultural heritage of the Javanese and then popularized it in his native Poland, and was quite empathetic to their treatment by the Dutch colonizers.

The attitude of whites towards the indigenous peoples used to be downright appalling, especially when the whole island was under forced serfdom, sometimes for 2 to 3 days a week. The entire population was simply treated then as slaves.<sup>77</sup>

It has even been suggested that Siedlecki could understand the situation of Java’s peoples well because he came from a nation under foreign rule.<sup>78</sup> However, Siedlecki does not make such an analogy himself. Furthermore, the Polish historical experience did not always result in a deeper understanding of the conditions of colonized nations.<sup>79</sup> The complexity of Siedlecki’s book echoes what was suggested at the beginning of this paper: travelogues have a palimpsestic, hybrid nature.

## Conclusion

On the whole, Polish and Serbian travelers wrote about three distinctive groups of people: locals (Javanese, Malay, Siamese, and others.), Chinese, and Europeans. As we have seen above, some travelers were able to be more inquisitive and made remarks on different Southeast Asian ethnicities (e.g. Siedlecki), and

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76 David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), 13–27.

77 Siedlecki, *Jawa*, 215.

78 Waclawek, “Latające żaby i batiki krakowskie.” 20.

79 In this context, an interesting case study of the writings of another traveler of Austro-Hungarian background has been presented in Waclaw Forajter, *Kolonizator skolonizowany. Przypadek Sygurda Wiśniowskiego* [Colonized colonizer. The case of Sygurd Wiśniowski] (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2014).

there were also comments emphasizing differences even among Europeans (e.g. Ivelić's and Petelenz's notes on particular English customs). Nevertheless, the basis was a trichotomy: locals-Chinese-Europeans. Travelers could identify themselves with Europeans, although sometimes such self-identification was not fully made (Sapieha contrasting his community with the British and drawing an analogy between Siamese and Slavs) or was seen as something shameful (Jovanović).

Comparisons used to describe Southeast Asians can be roughly divided into internal and external. Internal comparisons juxtaposed local ethnicities with each other (Sapieha's lazy Siamese vs. hard-working Chinese), whereas external comparisons placed locals alongside a distant group (Jovanović's Malays and Aztecs). These two types often complement each other, as in Siedlecki's claim that Malays are as vindictive as other peoples of the East, which thus makes them different from Europeans. Travelers from our corpus sometimes took a particular position in this scheme, being Europeans but of a different kind.

Finally, ethnic comparisons not only illustrate intricate local conditions but also reveal the complex identity of travelers who carried there the luggage of their ethnic, Austro-Hungarian, and European heritage. Newly discovered Javanese fungi were named by Raciborski after characters from Polish romantic literature, while an Austro-Hungarian shipping company gave Serbs the occasion to visit faraway lands. Even within a single travelogue, different self-identifications could coexist, as shown by the example of Sapieha who wrote interchangeably from the position of a Galician Pole, an Austro-Hungarian aristocrat, a European, and even a Catholic. Therefore, it is difficult to suggest any generic difference(s) between Polish and Serbian travelers, and the fact that Serbs were much less represented in the corpus is not the only reason. Travel writing has a palimpsestic character in which some aspects of a text can be attributed to the author's nationality and others not. On the one hand, both Lanckoroński and Jovanović referred to their classical heritage when describing Asia, which reflects the role of classical education in nineteenth-century Europe. On the other hand, Jovanović's comments on Dalmatian sailors betray a Serbian perspective. In addition, there are also particular, individual tones: e.g. the biologist Siedlecki perceived the Javanese through the prism of nature and contrasted them with Europeans. By recognizing the complex *habitus* of travelers, we can gain an insight into the diverse perspectives that shaped Polish and Serbian travel writings and overcome the conventional opposition between "us" and "them" and the simplistic thinking about a monolithic "East" and "West." In this way, studying encounters between travelers and peoples of Southeast Asia enables us to see that terms like "Polish culture," "Serbian culture," or "Thai culture" describe not uniform entities but hybrid phenomena.





# THE POLISH BOTANIST MARIAN RACIBORSKI AND HIS 1901 WAYANG KULIT PERFORMANCE

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## Images and Encounters

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*Marianna Lis*



### Instead of an introduction

The first performance of a Javanese shadow puppet theater (*wayang kulit*) in Poland took place probably over a hundred and twenty years ago, in 1901, in Dublany near Lviv,<sup>1</sup> then in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, after Poland had been partitioned by three invading empires in the second half of the eighteenth century (today, Dublany is in Ukraine). The performance was organized by Marian Raciborski (1863–1917), a Polish botanist, who between 1896 and 1900 conducted research at the Botanical Garden in Buitenzorg (Bogor) in West Java. A review of this performance was written by the young geologist Mieczysław Limanowski, a later collaborator of Juliusz Osterwa and co-creator of the Reduta Theater, which has influenced the shape of theater in Poland in both the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Limanowski, who at that time was fascinated by oriental theater, especially the performances and artistry of the Japanese actress Sada Yacco, wrote in an obituary after Raciborski's death:

He showed his friends this theater moved the stylized figures to the rhythm of theatrical formulas. The lace-cut figures conjured up before the viewer a picture of hell and heaven, and that Malay purgatory, which is as heavy and dead as the surface of the Indian Ocean, without a single wave under a sky full of terrible heat that precedes the monsoons. Raciborski's stories opened the gates to the soul into which the soul of a European only rarely plunges.

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1 Zbigniew Osiński, *Polskie kontakty teatralne z Orientem w XX wieku. Część pierwsza: Kronika* [Polish theatrical contacts with the Orient in the twentieth century. Part one: Chronicle] (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo słowo/obraz terytoria, 2008), 12–13.

[...] sacred formulas, mysterious spells of primeval magic, strange gestures, symbols of dawn and resurrection—this is what charmed [the audience] together with singing and the movement of the intricately moved figures.<sup>2</sup>

What could Limanowski have seen? And what could Raciborski have seen in Java? What attracted his attention? What caught the attention of Limanowski and other viewers gathered in Dublany, who watched the *wayang* “filtered” and “interpreted” by Raciborski and his understanding of Java? How did the audience who had never been to Java understand this performance? What can we read today from and through the preserved notes, accounts, puppets, and poetic attempts to understand a distant culture?

The following text is divided into images. And it tells about images: about those seen by Raciborski in Java, those stored and recorded in his memories or brought in objects, and those that were created in Poland thanks to them and through them. I will attempt to reconstruct what he saw and heard, based on an analysis of writings and items brought from Java, as well as on the relations, memories, and fantasies that arose about them in the following decades. In doing so, I will attempt to find an answer to what was specific about Javanese culture for this particular traveler. Perhaps this attempt will end up closer to fantasy than to the truth. Nevertheless, I would like to try to find those places, images, and sounds that caught his attention, those details that he remembered and took with him to his homeland, and at the same time examine how his image of Javanese culture was perceived and understood by his contemporaries (and by subsequent generations of travelers and researchers of Javanese culture) after his return to his homeland.

My research, which lies somewhere in the middle between an effort to reconstruct the truth and fantasies derived from preserved fragments of memories, individual objects, and accounts, is at the same time an attempt to capture the encounter between two cultures. At the same time, however, this may be explored as a series of encounters—Raciborski with Java, the audience in Dublany with Raciborski’s interpretation of a *wayang* performance, and my own encounters with Javanese culture in Java and (through testimonies from over a century ago) in Poland. Many of these encounters are through storytelling, which is itself a kind of performance, a kind of creation, or interpretation. Therefore, in my text I will plunge into stories and ideas, thus creating my own

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2 Mieczysław Limanowski, “Marian Raciborski (Wspomnienie pośmiertne)” [Marian Raciborski (posthumous tribute)], *Echo Polskie* 118 (1917): 2.

story, my own performance through writing, trying to get to know my heroes and their testimonies, through theater and the stories that were created both about the performance and about them.

When conducting lectures or workshops in Poland devoted to the art and culture of Indonesia, including the art of Javanese *wayang kulit*, I always start by showing a map of the world on which the country I will be talking about is marked and by asking what the audience associates it with. Most people, regardless of age or education, have no associations with respect to Indonesia. Sometimes someone remembers that Bali is part of Indonesia, at other times someone mentions the eruption of the Krakatau volcano in the nineteenth century. Older listeners, especially those who remember the time of the Polish People's Republic, sometimes mention Sukarno and the communist chapter in the post-war history of Indonesia. However, Indonesia does not exist in the mass, social consciousness of present-day Poles.

This is (unfortunately) not a big surprise. Polish Indonesian studies, especially those focusing on Indonesian culture or art, do not have a rich tradition. The beginnings of Polish research in this region of the world are mainly related to the accounts of Polish specialists in the Dutch colonial service. And although the oldest preserved accounts come from the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,<sup>3</sup> interest in the Orient during the Enlightenment and Romanticism has not translated into an interest in the art of today's Indonesia. The Near and Middle East was then the Orient, and the routes of Polish travelers led mostly to Turkey, the Holy Land, Egypt, and both the Americas, and also through Russia and Siberia to China, but not to the distant islands of today's Indonesia.<sup>4</sup>

Poles who found themselves in the Dutch East Indies, specialists in various fields, including doctors, biologists, zoologists, botanists, engineers, geologists, and missionaries, staying longer or shorter in the territory of today's Indonesia, had certainly encountered the local art. However, they did not publish any articles, sketches, or materials about Indonesian culture in Polish, and the texts they left are primarily of a scientific nature and concern research conducted during their stay in the colony. If they brought any works of art or handicrafts

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3 In 1785–1793, Teodor Anzelm Dzwonkowski (1764–1850) stayed in Java, Sulawesi, and Borneo and left behind a diary from his travels to the Dutch East Indies. See Dariusz Kołodziejczyk's chapter in this volume.

4 One of the exceptions could be Adam Piotr Mierosławski (1815–1851), an independent traveler who dreamed of Polish colonies. In the years 1841–1843, he sailed around the world in the southern seas, and during his expedition he probably stayed in Bali many times. However, the accounts of his travels are unknown. See: Jerzy Pertek, "Mierosławski Adam Piotr," in *Polski Słownik Biograficzny* [Polish biographical dictionary], vol. XX (Kraków: Polska Akademia Nauk, 1975), 810–11.

from their travels, these mostly had the value of a single “travel souvenir.”<sup>5</sup> Doctor Jarosław Waszak, who travelled to Sumatra, Java, and the Philippines, did bring a collection of mainly batik fabrics, whose composition “proves that it was not a random collection of souvenirs from trips to exotic countries, but a well-thought-out, systematic collection documenting the material culture and technical knowledge of the islands visited”—but this was an exception.

### **Raciborski and his *wayang***

After Waszak, the first person to bring an extensive collection of Javanese puppets and other art to Poland was Marian Raciborski, the same person who organized the *wayang* performance in Dublany in 1901. During his stay in Java, apart from the botanical research he conducted in the Botanical Garden in Buitenzorg and in Kagok near Tegal, Raciborski traveled and visited many places, and his interests were not limited to research on flora. He was also interested in local customs, culture, and art. In one of the letters to his friend A. Albinowski, written in July 1898, he wrote:

I have traveled a lot recently, I have already explored all of Java and got to know it quite well. [...] I am entertaining myself with collecting old Javanese weapons, i.e. mainly daggers, of which I already have 50, one more rusty than the other, and I also collect puppets, and even I already have life-size figures made of wood. It is not Phidias’s work, but not the worst.<sup>6</sup>

Raciborski packed his vision of Java into twenty-five boxes. They contained not only herbariums documenting his research work,<sup>7</sup> but also everyday objects, a collection of over sixty kris, sixty-three *wayang golek* puppets, eleven *wayang kulit* puppets, and ten batiks. Before his death, Professor Raciborski donated them to the Ethnographic Museum in Kraków.<sup>8</sup> As noted by Polish researcher Maria Wrońska-Friend:

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5 Maria Wrońska-Friend, *Sztuka woskiem pisana. Batik w Indonezji i w Polsce* [Art drawn in wax. Batik in Indonesia and Poland] (Warsaw: Gondwana, 2008), 110.

6 Wrońska-Friend, *Sztuka woskiem pisana*, 109.

7 The botanical collection brought by Raciborski to Poland consisted of almost 1,300 specimens, including herbariums, dried fruit, and seeds. This collection is currently in the Institute of Botany of the Jagiellonian University and the Kraków Botanical Garden.

8 Raciborski’s Indonesian collection, which consists of items from Java, Sumatra, and Borneo, has over 200 items. The collection was researched by Eleonora Tenerowicz over a lengthy period of

A peculiar curiosity in Raciborski's collection is a dozen or so nineteenth-century portraits of Javanese people. After 1860, photographic studios were established in the larger cities of Java, in which, against the background of painted landscapes, among others, genre photos of the so-called Javanese types were taken. These portraits, imitating documentaries, often depicted the daily activities or entertainment of the Javanese people, such as dancing, cockfighting, opium houses, the wedding ceremony, idealized female characters, etc. Photographs of this kind, quite often brought as souvenirs from overseas travels, had a great impact on reinforcing stereotypical notions about inhabitants of distant countries.<sup>9</sup>

The *wayang* puppets and photographs brought by Raciborski have survived to this day. Apart from them, there is an obituary by Limanowski, cited at the beginning of this article, with a description of the *wayang* performance which interests me, an account of a visit to Raciborski's house in Dublany by Alfred Wysocki (fragments of which are attached to the text), as well as letters and a short sketch written by Raciborski and devoted to his stay in Java, published after his death and entitled *Życie pod równikiem* [Life under the equator].<sup>10</sup> Javanese culture and art never became the subject of his scientific research. Nevertheless, on the basis of the materials mentioned,<sup>11</sup> I will try to answer the questions: What did he see? What did he hear? What did he understand? What did he remember? What Java did he encounter and what did he want to introduce to his friends after returning from his trip? Finally, based on an analysis of a novel written for teenagers by Bolesław Mrówczyński titled *Dutur z rajskiego ogrodu* [Dutur from the Garden of Eden] from 1958 (published forty-one years after Raciborski's death!), which describes Raciborski's stay in Java in an extremely colorful and largely imaginative manner, I would like to answer the question whether and how Raciborski's Java has survived in the collective Polish imagination.

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time. See: Eleonora Tenerowicz, "Marionetki teatru wayang golek w zbiorach Muzeum Etnograficznego w Krakowie" [The puppets of the *wayang golek* theater at the Ethnographic Museum's collection in Kraków], in *Odcienie Indonezji* [Shades of Indonesia], ed. Renata Lesner-Szwarc (Toruń: Oficyna Wydawnicza Kucharski, 2014), 49–71.

9 Wrońska-Friend, *Sztuka woskiem pisana*, 116.

10 Marian Raciborski, *Życie pod równikiem* (Z teki pośmiertnej) [Life under the equator (from the posthumous portfolio)] (Lwów: Polskie Towarzystwo Przyrodników im. Kopernika, 1924).

11 The results of Raciborski's research conducted in Java include numerous scientific works comprising 40 papers and notes, 31 of which were created during his stay in the Dutch East Indies. However, since this paper does not focus on his professional career, I will not analyze his works in the field of botany.

Each performance of the Javanese *wayang kulit* opens with a large leaf-shaped puppet called a *kayon* or *gunungan* which appears in the center of the screen. This puppet represents the tree of life or the cosmic mountain and, while remaining in the center, symbolizes the harmony of life and the universe. Over time, during the performance, the *kayon* changes its position, tilting once to the right and then to the left. In the end, however, it returns to its central position, symbolizing a return to the harmony and balance restored by the *dalang* (puppeteer) in the universe. Its meaning can therefore change depending on the position or place taken during the performance, the moment in which it is used, and the context. *Kayon* can mark the beginning and end of a scene, but can also represent the forces of nature such as wind, rain, fog, and sunrise. *Kayon* is also the only *wayang* puppet that is perfectly symmetrical and does not represent any specific character. In its most common form, it is covered with a painting reflecting carving, on one side, and a drawing not related to carving, most often representing the large face of the demon *Batara Kala* (god of time), fire, or water, on the other.

The performance in Dublany was most likely shown by Raciborski himself. “He showed his friends this theater, moved the stylized figures to the rhythm of theatrical formulas,”<sup>12</sup> writes Limanowski. Wysocki, who probably described the same performance, wrote “*Dalang*’s familiar head leans out in a white turban and acknowledges the applause with a smile”<sup>13</sup> (I will return to Raciborski as a *dalang* below). This performance may have also started with a *kayon*, as Raciborski later donated eleven shadow puppets, including a *kayon* from the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>14</sup> Eleonora Tenerowicz, describing Raciborski’s collection, wrote about the *kayon* he brought:

The puppet from Raciborski’s collection is a schematic figure in the form of a triangle with a trapezoidal base, openwork cut in buffalo hide, and colorful polychrome. In the trapezoidal part, water—a symbol of life—is marked with waves; the triangular part of the figure consists of openwork-cut branches with numerous twigs along with representations of various animals: monkeys, buffaloes, and birds. At the base of the tree, in the center, surrounded by a nimbus of flames, there is the face of the demon of time—

12 Limanowski, “Marian Raciborski (Wspomnienie pośmiertne)”.

13 Alfred Wysocki, “Jawański ‘Wajang’ w Dublanach” [Javanese ‘wayang’ in Dublany], *Ilustracja Polska* 11 (Nov. 1901), 244. An excerpt from this article is attached to the text.

14 The Tree of Life *Gunungan* – A *wayang kulit purwa* shadow theater figure from Indonesia in the collection of the Małopolska Virtual Museums, <http://muzea.malopolska.pl/obiekty/-/a/26822/1128045>.

*Kala*, representing the destructive forces existing in the universe. [...] The “tree of life” from Raciborski’s collection is characterized by the same image on both sides.<sup>15</sup>

Tenerowicz claims that Raciborski could have bought this puppet in Kagok, near Tegal, where he stayed during the second part of his stay in Java.

Thus, the performance could have started in a traditional Javanese way, but what could have happened later? Both Limanowski and Wysocki maintained that the performance used a story brought by Raciborski from Java. We also know that the Raciborski collection, donated to the Ethnographic Museum in Kraków just before his death, consisted of only eleven shadow puppets—ten depicting specific characters and one representing a *kayon*—thus, there were not enough to perform a full play:

These puppets belong to the *purwa* cycle, based on the Hindu epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Among them are nine puppets which represent heroes from the *Mahabharata*, characters from the *Pandawa* prince kin, both, representing extremely refined characters like *Arjuna*, more vigorous and strong ones like *Bhima* and those representing aristocratic, but negative heroes of *Kaurawa* family, like *Karno*, *Jayadratha* and others. There is only one woman represented in the set. It is *Banowati*—a wife of *Duryodhana* (king of *Hastinapura*). [...] There is only one puppet figure from the *Ramayana* epic, depicting a giant called *Kumbhakarno*—a brother of *Rawana*, a demonic king of Lanka.<sup>16</sup>

Having only nine characters from the *Mahabharata* at his disposal, including only one puppet representing a woman, Raciborski could not have shown the performance described by Wysocki, i.e. the story of Pregoniwa and Pregoniwati, Arjuna’s daughters, for the hand of one of whom Leksmana fights, and their subsequent marriages to Gatotkaca and Pancawala.

So what did Raciborski show and where did Wysocki’s description come from? There are several possibilities. Raciborski could have shown a perfor-

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15 Tenerowicz, “Marionetki teatru wayang golek w zbiorach Muzeum Etnograficznego w Krakowie,” 57.

16 Eleonora Tenerowicz, “The Art and Craft of Java in the Krakow Ethnographic Collections of Polish Investigators and Travelers, Jarosław Waszak, Marian Raciborski and Michał Siedlecki, at the Turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century,” in *South-East Asia. Studies in Art, Cultural Heritage and Relations with Europe*, ed. Izabela Kopania (Warsaw-Toruń: Polish Institute of World Art Studies & Tako Publishing House, 2012), 207-8.



mance in which he used *wayang kulit* puppets together with *wayang golek* puppets (wooden rod puppets), of which he had brought over sixty from Java. He could have shown a different story than the one mentioned by Wysocki, but in this case where did the rather detailed description of the *lakon* in what sounds like a performance review come from? Lastly, he could have shown the story of Pregiwa and Pregiwati using the shadow puppets he owned, hoping that the audience would not be able to recognize the puppets he was using (we do not know whether Raciborski recognized them himself—it is possible, but not certain).

Let's start with the last option.

I remember my first *wayang kulit*, seen in Surakarta, on the fourth day of my first stay in Indonesia. I came to Java for a one-year scholarship, during which I was to study at the Pedalangan Department of the Indonesian Art Institute in Surakarta, where I was to learn *wayang kulit* animation techniques, study their history, and learn about the repertoire used in performances. In Poland, at that time, I was in the last year of M.A. studies at the Theater Studies Department at the Theater Academy in Warsaw. Indonesia and Indonesian puppet theater did not appear in the study program (I only knew the basics of rod puppets called Javanese-puppet, or *jawajka* in Polish, animations which were created by Richard Teschner in Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century on the basis of *wayang golek* puppets). However, I remember that before leaving, I tried to learn as much as possible about the *wayang*, its history, puppets, repertoire, etc. I had read almost all (which meant not many) articles on this subject available in Polish, believing that they would help me understand the theater that I was going to study.

The first performance I watched showed me how far and how difficult the road was ahead of me. I had no idea what I was watching, what the *dalang* was talking about, or who the characters were appearing on the screen. I did not recognize the melodies played by the *gamelan*, which I also heard live for the first time in my life. I did not understand the language used by the *dalang* and I did not know Indonesian to be able to ask other viewers about anything. Everything was new for me, interesting, surprising, and difficult, even impossible to describe, to translate into the language of theater that I knew and used so far. More than twelve years have passed since that performance, twelve years during which I studied at the Pedalangan Department, acquired the basics of puppet animation, and learned how to make puppets by myself. Since then, I have also returned to Java many times and watched over 140 performances, read dozens of books devoted to traditional and contemporary *wayang* (and more broadly, the culture and art of Java and Indonesia), and played

several dozen concerts and a dozen performances as *dalang* with the Warsaw Gamelan Group. Moreover, I have written a book about contemporary *wayang* and still, every day, I learn to understand this theater.

So I am not surprised when, during my workshops, people who see *wayang* puppets for the first time in their lives are unable to say what type of character a given puppet represents, and also are unable to determine its gender. The thin lips of the refined and noble *halus* figures look like a mustache for most people, while the curls forming the beard in male figures are interpreted as ornaments or jewelry. Other anatomical details of these figures are inscrutable. *Wayang* puppets are characterized by their distorted proportions: the head and shoulders are the largest, the arms are supernaturally long, and the hands are the size of the feet, with the length of the eyebrows of the *halus* characters being greater than the width at the waist. The distorted scale draws the viewer's attention to those parts that are the most important, introducing the hierarchy. Each puppet is made as visible as possible. The face is shown in profile, but the eye looks straight ahead. The arms are also shown straight ahead, while the chest is shown both in profile and straight ahead simultaneously. It should be remembered that the puppets were intended to be seen from a considerable distance, hence the need to emphasize those elements determining the character's ability to be recognized by the audience.

A person brought up in European culture seeing such puppet for the first time in their life is not aware of all this. Therefore, I believe that Raciborski could have used the puppets he had to tell any story he wished with them. Viewers seeing the *wayang kulit* performance for the first time in their lives would not have been able to recognize the characters appearing on the screen. Moreover, Raciborski probably did not precede his performance with a long introduction which would have explained the differences in the appearance of individual types of characters (there is no information that such a lecture took place), which is perhaps unsurprising since *wayang* was never a subject of his study. Thus, the viewers were rather unaware that each puppet represented one specific character, whose character traits affected its shape.

The question regarding what story Raciborski presented may also have a completely different, very prosaic solution—he could have presented the history of Pergiwa and Pergiwati using puppets he owned, which could have been puppets that actually represented Pergiwa, Pergiwati, Gatotkaca, Pancawala, or Leksmana. Raciborski's collection in 1901 could have been much more extensive than what he donated to the Ethnographic Museum in Kraków just before his death. Some of the puppets could have been destroyed over the years

(during World War I, for example), disappeared during his various moves from Dublany, to nearby Lviv, and finally to Kraków, or simply given away to some of his friends.

What about the other options? The first of them, the use of *wayang kulit* and *wayang golek* puppets in Raciborski's sole performance, seems unlikely to me. During his stay in Bogor and wanderings in the western part of Java, and during his stay in Kagok near Tegal, Raciborski most probably watched *wayang golek* performances (which are much more popular in those parts of Java than the shadow *wayang kulit*). More than sixty *wayang golek* puppets that Raciborski brought have survived to the present day, and he probably bought them in Bogor or its vicinity. However, neither Limanowski nor Wysocki mentioned anything in their reports about three-dimensional wooden puppets being used during the performance. Quite the opposite—Limanowski uses the term “the lace-cut figures”<sup>17</sup> when talking about the puppets, while Wysocki writes about “puppets carved by the master's hand from buffalo hide, shining through with openwork patterns and gold adorning their costumes.”<sup>18</sup> It seems unlikely that either of them would have recognized the use of other types of puppets in this one performance, especially since they are aesthetically very distant and, again, for an audience unfamiliar with the *wayang*, it would have been difficult to spot the similarities between *kulit* and *golek* puppets (even those representing the same character).

However, let us pause to consider the *golek* puppets brought by Raciborski. On the one hand, he perceived both *wayang* puppets and other objects, such as kris, batiks, or photographs, as examples of “Malayan folk art”;<sup>19</sup> on the other hand, he saw in them not only originality but also beauty, and he returned to them in conversations with friends for the rest of his life. Thus, it can be assumed that none of the imported puppets was an item brought by accident. The collection of *golek* puppets, much more numerous than the *kulit* puppets, seems to have been composed in a thoughtful way. It includes puppets representing the most important heroes of the *Mahabharata*, such as Arjuna, Bima, and Draupadi, the most important heroes of *Ramayana*, such as Rahwana and Hanuman, comic characters (*punakawan*), and puppets from the repertoire devoted to the prince of Panji and Amir Hamza. Such a diverse collection was not created with the idea of staging performances, but rather to show this type of

17 Limanowski, “Marian Raciborski (Wspomnienie pośmiertne),” 2.

18 Wysocki, “Jawański ‘Wajang’ w Dublanach,” 243.

19 Józef Rostafiński, “Maryan Raciborski,” *Czas Krakowski* 142 (March 1917): 1, in Tenerowicz, “Marionetki teatru wayang golek w zbiorach Muzeum Etnograficznego w Krakowie,” 50.

theater to the Polish audience in the fullest possible way. It also demonstrates quite extensive knowledge and awareness on the part of Raciborski (or the people who helped him in selecting the puppets for his collection, although his letters suggest that he selected items for the collections on his own). Not only did he have to know the main characters of the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, and the stories of Panji and Amir Hamza, but he also had to be able to recognize them.

He also probably knew the basic stories that make up the *wayang* repertoire. The latter conclusion is confirmed not only by the performance he staged in Dublany, in which he certainly used the stories he had learned in Java, but also by the account written by Wysocki. The latter's fairly detailed *lakon* description did not necessarily have to be an account of the show he watched. It could as well have been the description of a story told to him by Raciborski and illustrated by one (or more) of the photographs Raciborski brought from Java which I mentioned earlier. How did I come to this conclusion?

Wysocki's extremely detailed description includes several details that are hard to imagine that they could relate to the performance staged in Dublany. The very first sentence already raises doubts: "A dozen or so *Wayang Kulit* were stuck into a soft bamboo trunk which went round the front of the porch."<sup>20</sup> Three elements are puzzling here. First, Wysocki's review was published at the end of November 1901, while in the text the author says that it was already autumn when he visited Dublany. The performance could, therefore, be held either in November or October. It is hard to imagine that someone would stage a performance in the open air under such conditions.<sup>21</sup> The second interesting detail is the information about "a dozen or so" puppets; this would either indicate that the collection brought by Raciborski did not have eleven, but several dozen *kulit* puppets (which, as I indicated earlier, is possible), or that the author in fact describes not the actual performance, but rather a photograph showing the performance staged in Java.<sup>22</sup> The latter possibility seems to be confirmed by the third puzzling detail—the "soft bamboo trunk," into which the puppets were to be stuck. During the performances in Java, it is not hard bamboo that is used, but much softer banana trunks into which the puppets are placed. However, neither bamboo nor banana trees can be found in the forests

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20 Wysocki, "Jawański 'Wajang' w Dublanach," 243.

21 The vast majority of Javanese shadow theater performances are held in the open air in a *pendopo*, a traditional Javanese open pavilion.

22 In traditional performances, *wayang kulit* puppets that do not take part in the action during the performance are placed in two rows on the right (positive characters) and on the left (negative characters) of the screen. They are ranked in descending order, starting with the largest ones outside.

around Dublany, so it is difficult to believe that either could have been used by Raciborski during his performance. This statement raises several new questions: What technical solutions did Raciborski use in his performance? How was the space in which the performance took place built? Both Limanowski and Wysocki mentioned intricately cut puppets, but neither of them wrote about the shadows they cast—did the Dublany performance lack a screen and was the space built like in *wayang golek* performances, where the *dalang* is not separated from the audience by a screen, but only by a banana tree trunk into which he sticks three-dimensional wooden puppets? Raciborski, who was a botanist, certainly knew the difference between bamboo and banana trees, but Wysocki, who perhaps “watched” the *wayang* spectacle only through Raciborski’s words and photos, might not have.

The suspicion that Wysocki’s review is merely a description of Raciborski’s story illustrated with photos may also be confirmed by the fact that it flows smoothly from the performance into a description of photos showing *ronggeng*<sup>23</sup> dancers and *tandak*<sup>24</sup> dancers, and then culminates in a description of *rampokan*, which was a ritual in which armed participants fought with tigers or tigers fought with bulls/buffalos. Wysocki is aware of the symbolic meaning of this ritual, writing that the tiger is a European and the buffalo a Javanese.

Wysocki’s account is extremely vivid and the author even incorporates Malay terms and pays attention to the smallest details when talking about the appearance, costumes, and emotions of the people described. It is hard to believe when he writes at the end:

It was happening in my imagination. We settled down comfortably in the armchairs. Professor Raciborski and I. He was talking—I was listening. [...] One word, the second, the third was said, and finally a series of pictures, memories related to Java, habits and fleeting sketches, as colorful and vivid as reality, began to pass before my eyes...<sup>25</sup>

Thus, Wysocki’s account probably reflects Raciborski’s, who, probably, by showing photographs from his trip, tried to recall the images, sounds, and emotions

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23 *Ronggeng* is a traditional dance popular in Java, in which the dancer on stage is accompanied by a man selected by her from the audience. Dancing often takes the form of a flirtation, which makes it sometimes considered erotic. The term *ronggeng* is also used to describe female dancers.

24 *Tandak* is a dance popular mainly on the Riau Islands, in which the dance is combined with a rhymed song performed alternately by groups of women and men.

25 Wysocki, “Jawański ‘Wajang’ w Dublanach,” 245.

from his stay in Java. His story can be seen as a kind of performance with its dramaturgy, characters, narrator, and viewer (or viewers?). It opens up a new perspective in seeing the writing and storytelling of the traveller's experiences as a kind of performance.

However, one should not forget about the performance described by Limanowski, a performance that was most probably played out not only through words and photographs, but also through puppets. Was the show that Limanowski and Wysocki saw the same one? Was it a theater performance or a story illustrated with photos and puppets brought from a long journey? It is impossible to reconstruct definitively what the two saw and heard in Dublany. Their accounts, and especially Wysocki's, are another performance that deceives the reader, plays with his or her imagination, suggests false leads, and smuggles images of Java as seen through Raciborski's eyes. On its basis and on the basis of the items brought back by Raciborski, we can try to imagine what the Polish botanist saw, what he heard, what he understood, and what he remembered.

The question of whether and how Raciborski's Java survived in the Polish collective imagination is partially answered by the preserved collections, which are still an important part of the collection of the Ethnographic Museum in Kraków. However, in order to be able to fully see Raciborski's Java recorded in the collective Polish imagination, it is necessary to refer to Mrówczyński's book *Dutur from the Garden of Eden*.

This book was published in the Polish People's Republic in 1958, during a short period of relaxed censorship and political thaw. The Polish People's Republic recognized the independence of Indonesia as early as 1950, having previously been keenly interested in the struggle for independence that took place in 1945-1949.

Reports from the front appeared, inter alia, in the press or in the Polish Film Chronicle, and their authors unequivocally condemned the attempts to reconstruct the colonial order by the Dutch and their British allies. In 1955, the Polish People's Republic and the Republic of Indonesia established official diplomatic relations.<sup>26</sup>

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26 Dawid Martin, "Muzyczne kontakty między PRL i Republiką Indonezji w dobie rządów prezydenta Sukarno" [Musical contacts between the Polish People's Republic and the Republic of Indonesia in the era of president Sukarno], in *Sztuka Indonezji. Ciągłość, zmiana, inspiracje* [Art of Indonesia. Continuity, change, inspiration], ed. Rafał Beszterda, Renata Lesner-Szwarc, and Maria Szymańska-Ilnata (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2017), 49.

In the same year, the Bandung Conference in Indonesia and the 5<sup>th</sup> World Festival of Youth and Students in Warsaw were held. “The anti-colonial slogans of the festival fit perfectly into the program of the coalition of non-aligned countries, so it is no wonder that Indonesia decided to send its delegation to Warsaw.”<sup>27</sup> Two years later, another group presenting Indonesian dances and music came to Poland. One of the hits of those times was the Polish version of Ismail Marzuki’s *Rayuan Pulau Kelapa* [Solace on Coconut Island] song, entitled *Indonezja* [Indonesia].<sup>28</sup>

The readers of *Dutur from the Garden of Eden* most likely took the book in hand having some vision of Indonesia. Its author, who had never visited Asia, was the director of the League for the Fight Against Racism<sup>29</sup> immediately after the end of World War II.

The League for the Fight Against Racism, established in 1946, is designed to fight all manifestations of racist theories, and thus to fight for human rights and dignity, regardless of race, origin, and religion, by awakening mutual kindness between people, cooperating most closely with analogous social actions on a national and international scale.<sup>30</sup>

This is important because intolerance to racism (and all other forms of oppression, including colonial oppression and social injustice) is one of the most important characteristics of the characters in all his books. It was also an attitude characteristic of Raciborski, who in an interview with Antoni Chołoniewski in 1901, responded to the question, “The population is probably at a very low level of development?” by stating: “Definitely not. The Javanese has, above all, a very old and great culture [...], and again, he is a gifted person and assimilates the acquisitions of European civilization very easily.”<sup>31</sup> In the novel, Mrówczyński

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27 Martin, “Muzyczne kontakty między PRL i Republiką Indonezji w dobie rządów prezydenta Su-karno,” 50.

28 The piece was recorded in 1956 by Janusz Gniatkowski and the Górkiewicz Jazz Band. The Polish lyrics were written by Zygmunt Sztaba.

29 Barbara Marzęcka, “Mrówczyński Bolesław,” in *Współcześni polscy pisarze i badacze literatury* [Contemporary Polish writers and researchers of literature], ed. Jadwiga Czachowska and Alicja Szałağan (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Szkolne i Pedagogiczne, 1997), 502.

30 “W sprawie Ogólnopolskiej Ligi do Walki z Rasizmem oraz miesięcznika ‘Prawo Człowieka’” [On the Nationwide League for the Fight against Racism and the monthly magazine *Human Rights*], *Dziennik Urzędowy Kuratorjum Okręgu Szkolnego Pomorskiego* 11, no. 4 (1 May 1948): 110.

31 Szary [Antoni Chołoniewski], “Po powrocie z równika” [After returning from the equator], *Życie i sztuka. Ilustrowany dodatek do „Kraju”* 39 (28 September/11 October 1901): 451.

emphasized Raciborski's attitude even more emphatically, putting the following words into the narrator's mouth:

Then I realized one more truth that had been hidden until now: there was rebellion in Tuan Borski. He, a stranger here, a European, seemingly followed the customs that had been imposed on us for a long time. However, when he had the opportunity to come into direct contact with us, he immediately tore off the fetters imposed upon him. He had a deep sense of equality in his blood.<sup>32</sup>

The introduction already announces the unusual construction of *Dutur*. Here, the narrator, an older Javanese, who in his youth worked as Raciborski's assistant, invites the audience to a *wayang* performance in which he will play the role of *dalang*. The hero of the performance will be, as he announces, an extraordinary man, a Pole, predestined for great deeds. As the narrator relates, Arjuna appeared over his cradle in the childhood, from whom the hero of the performance received the gift of a sensitive heart, a broad outlook on the world, and a love for nature. At the same time, the tragic history of his lost homeland is written on his face—at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Poland, like Indonesia, did not exist on world maps. Partitioned in the eighteenth century between the Russian Empire, the Kingdom of Prussia, and Habsburg Austria, Poland regained its independence only in 1918.

The narrator-*dalang* sounds the gong three times, starting the performance of the *wayang kulit* and his story about Raciborski. His story recounts the figure of an extraordinary scientist who is not afraid of new challenges, a botanist who works without rest, preoccupied with the surrounding nature and his research, and an extraordinary man, on the one hand longing for his distant, lost homeland, and on the other supporting the Javanese people in their efforts to gain independence. Mrówczyński draws a parallel between the fate of the Poles and that of the Javanese people, between the imperial partitions of Poland and colonial power in Southeast Asia. The narrator, a Javanese, does not see Raciborski as a white representative of the Dutch government, but as a teacher and miracle worker, who not only teaches him to oppose the colonizers, but is also ready to leave everything to help the needy.

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32 Bolesław Mrówczyński, *Dutur z rajskiego ogrodu* [Dutur from the Garden of Eden] (Warsaw: Nasza Księgarnia, 1985), 39.



Raciborski, when he discovered new species of ferns and parasitic mushrooms, gave them names taken from the works of the leading Polish Romanticism writers—Adam Mickiewicz and Juliusz Słowacki. *Balladyna*, *Alina*, *Beniowski*, *Goplana*, *Kordian*, *Skierka*, and *Lelum*—these are some of the Polish names that Raciborski left in Java and which are forever associated with this island. He remarked upon this after returning from Java:

- However, I left some Polish in my studies in a different form. Many new species of plants that I discovered were given Polish names, using left and right... the titles of our poems and the names of their heroes. This occurred mostly with Javanese mushrooms. I designated them *Balladyna*, *Weneda*, *Skierka*, *Irydion*...
- And they remain in the scientific nomenclature?
- Obviously.<sup>33</sup>

For Mrówczyński, it is clear that Raciborski's longing for Polish culture came from the political situation of Poland under the partitions and he emphasizes Raciborski's desire to impart symbolic names strongly associated with Poland and the cherished idea of Polish Romantic identity upon the Javanese flora and fauna he discovered.

In Mrówczyński's novel, *wayang kulit* serves as a consolation for Raciborski, standing alongside his readings of Mickiewicz and Słowacki, Polish poets of the Romantic era. First, the performances are improvised by the narrator of the novel, who learns Polish by listening to Mickiewicz's works read by Raciborski, and then translates them into the language of *wayang*. Then, he teaches his master to be a *dalang*, who, in moments of particular longing, creates his own performances about Poland and its history. To say goodbye to Raciborski, his assistant prepares an all-night play about Poland and the struggle of the Poles for independence, of which Raciborski is one of the heroes. Hope is brought once again by Arjuna, who appears at the end of the performance (see the fragment attached to the text). The puppets used in that performance gain magical power and may be used only when a general revolt against the colonizers arises in Java, when the Javanese start the fight for independence.

Mrówczyński's vision is surprising. In 1958, *wayang kulit* was still a form of art unknown to most Polish readers. It took another twenty years to see the first *wayang* performance held in Poland, performed by the Javanese *dalang* Soetarno, who

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33 Szary [Antoni Chołoniewski], "Po powrocie z równika," 451.

presented fragments of the *Ramayana* accompanied by *gamelan* music recorded on tape. And it would be over fifty years before Polish audiences would see a performance by the late Ki Seno Nugroho and musicians from the group Warga Laras, who presented a very shortened version of the *Ramayana* in 2014, performed with quiet *gamelan* music and almost no dialogue. The audience, unaware of how far the performance diverged from what can be seen in Java, accepted Ki Seno Nugroho's interpretation with no less admiration than that which Limanowski and Wysocki gave to Raciborski's more than one hundred years earlier.

*Dutur from the Garden of Eden* was a success, with the latest reprint published in 1985. The vision of Raciborski as a *dalang*, and *wayang* used to relate the fight for Polish independence—all this must have been perceived as a kind of fantasy during the time of the Polish People's Republic. But despite the fact that Mrówczyński's novel is a literary fiction, it has surprisingly much in common with reality and perfectly reflects Raciborski's fascination with the culture and art of Java.

### Instead of a conclusion

At the beginning of this text, I wrote that it would be divided into images and it would tell about images. I pieced together fragments of various narratives and stories, extracting traces of memories stored in Mieczysław Limanowski's and Alfred Wysocki's descriptions, reconstructing images that could have been created with the help of puppets that Marian Raciborski brought back from Java, and finally looking for traces of Polish-Javanese encounters in Bolesław Mrówczyński's novel *Dutur from the Garden of Eden*, while adding my own experiences as a *wayang* researcher and *dalang*.

The images and narratives I have invoked formed other images and stories that I transformed and retold into a new performance in which facts are mixed with fantasies and truth with assumptions. Each encounter—starting with Raciborski and Java at the end of the nineteenth century—has become both an invitation and an introduction to the next. Therefore, instead of a conclusion, I would like to describe the last two encounters that took place in March 2021 during the workshop *Escaping Kakania: Eastern European Travels in Colonial Southeast Asia*. Meetings of my (this) text with two readers—professor Sumarsam, a Javanese musician, puppeteer, and scholar, who spent much of his life introducing Javanese arts to people overseas, and Preciosa Regina Ang de Joya, a Filipino philosopher and scholar of Southeast Asian thought:

Sumarsam: [In studying Javanese history, I have reached the conclusion that] it is impossible to arrive at absolute truth of the events in historical past. Marianna comes to the same conclusion. So perhaps what is exciting is not finding the truth, but how to go about finding the truth, or perhaps there is no single truth but multiple truths and multiple readings of the truth, or... "history is our myth."<sup>34</sup>

Preciosa de Joya: It was only on my third reading that the images started to appear, and I realized that your own retelling was itself, like Raciborski's performance of his collected *wayang* puppets, a curated presentation of your own collection of stories, excerpts, and ideas. But also, I felt that in reconstructing what you say what probably happened or could have happened, instead of what *did* happen, there was this consistent refusal to give in to the tyranny of facts or a single argument, and a refusal to secure, through a series of explanations, introduction, and conclusion, what readers ought to see as they travel through your text. So I was beginning to realize that the performance was not just a storytelling, but also, in flashing your collection of images, an invitation to the reader to construct her own retelling. [...] I think it betrays how decolonial theory has reduced the colonial to one single interpretation, burdened by the weight of a single truth. I think this is where the real force of Marianna's performance can be felt; how she disturbs this sedimentation or congealment of ideas, in how she describes encounters as colonial fantasies, where both the Polish and Javanese are invading each other's dreams.<sup>35</sup>

If we were to ask theater viewers, both those sitting silently in the darkness of a theater auditorium in Poland and those watching all-night *wayang* performances in Java and dividing their attention between the action taking place on the screen and a conversation with friends they met, to describe the spectacle they have been watching, probably we would not get two identical descriptions no matter in what conditions they watched their performances. The image of the spectacle does not depend on the conditions but on the sensitivity, knowledge, background etc. of the viewer. Researchers and historians of the theater who, from the very beginning of theater studies, have been trying to

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34 Sumarsam (March 5, 2021). This is an excerpt of Sumarsam's opinion of the author's article, as cited by Jan Mrázek during the final discussion of the workshop *Escaping Kakania*, March 6, 2021.

35 Preciosa Regina Ang de Joya, "Reflection on Marianna Lis's Paper" (March 5, 2021). This written version is courtesy of the author.

create tools that would make it possible to objectively record and analyze performances, are well aware of this. All those who, on the basis of preserved theater reviews, have ever tried to reconstruct the performances referred to in the reviews, are also conscious of this.

Therefore, my attempt to “watch” the performance in Dublany from over one hundred years ago was not—as my first readers rightly noticed and emphasized—an attempt to find one single truth. Instead, each word, each image, and each memory provoked more questions than it answered. Only one answer prevailed: there is no one single narration or interpretation.

### Fragments of texts by Wysocki and Mrówczyński

Translated by Marianna Lis.

Wysocki, Alfred. “Jawański ‘Wajang’ w Dublanach” [Javanese ‘Wayang’ in Dublany], *Ilustracja Polska* 11 (Nov. 1901): 243–245.

I saw something not usual. [...] A dozen or so *Wayang Kulit* were stuck into a soft bamboo trunk which went round the front of the porch.

They were to replace the actors (*Topeng*) whom the *Dalang* kept for the next day. They stood in front of us... soulless puppets carved by the master’s hand from buffalo hide, shining through with openwork patterns and gold adorning their costumes.

On the right, princes and gods, on the left, the mob.

The *Pagunungan* was finally set up to signal that everything was ready.

The *Pregiwa* character moved a little.

From behind *Dalang*’s<sup>36</sup> wailing metallic voice came:

“Here the team of *Poptia Wali* passes the road beautifully decorated with flowers and leads the young couple to their home. *Pregivati* leans flirtatiously on her lover’s shoulder. The strings of *Tjalempung* ring a silvery wedding song. There is spring all around, which is eternal, and happiness. But behind this solemn procession is the evil spirit of *Leksmana*.

Hell has pain and despair in its heart. Because he also loved *Pregivati*. He loved her velvety gazelle eyes and her hands softer than down and more brown than the shine of a shield. The curtains are closed behind the spouses, the second pair, *Gatoet-Katja* and *Pregiva* lies next to them, they are already in deep sleep... Silence... you can hear only tiger-like footsteps. *Leksmana* is getting closer. Revenge intoxicates him. He notices the dagger—tears it out of its scabbard and opens the curtain.

36 A reciter who sets the puppets into motion and tells the story of the drama.

*Tabang* (Tambourine) moans woefully, and the night birds flap their wings heavily and whine: *kolik – tekak – toehoe – tuhu!* The weapon flashes in the air and sinks into the rival's neck. Blood oozes from the wound and stains the bride's virginal clothes.

The desperate scream of the victim wakes the whole house. Here come: mother, *Ratoe*, and the sisters, followed by *Joedi-Stira*.

Having learned about the death of *Poptia-Wali*, they decide to die together "because *Pendawa* never die alone..."

This is how the first song of the drama ended.

The *dalang's* familiar head leans out in a white turban, and thanks for the applause with a smile.

He is about to shake the soul with a new story.

[...]

And it all happened yesterday.

*Kassi api* – pass me a light, slave! Let me light the truest *Tambako kadu* and forget about my homeland's foul weather. It happened yesterday. Not in *Sukabumi* or *Tjandur*, but a mile from Lviv... in Dublany...

It was happening in my imagination.

We settled down comfortably in our armchairs, Professor Raciborski and I. He was talking – I was listening. Black coffee stood beside us, and subtle lilac ribbons of smoke spilled out of *Tambako* and headed for the setting sun.

One word, the second, the third was said, and finally a series of pictures, memories related to Java, habits and fleeting sketches, as colorful and vivid as reality, began to pass before my eyes...

### **Mrówczyński, Bolesław. *Dutur z rajskiego ogrodu* [Dutur from the Garden of Eden].**

Warsaw: Nasza Księgarnia, 1985, p. 248–250

Finally, I leaned forward. A light flashed in front of the screen. A gong rang.

The *gamelan* hummed softly, as if carefully trying its power. Great masters played on it. They quickly attuned their instruments to the swoosh of the trees, ran their sticks over the bells, turned on the violin, while the *saron* played a longing, sweet melody. Then the tone began to soar up to the sky with greater and greater significance, the bells roared, the drum sounded the alarm. And suddenly everything went quiet. I opened my mouth, the words rolled out. They fell slowly, quietly at first:

– Far away, in the north, where snow covers the ground in winter, there is a country called: Poland...

I could feel the hundreds of eyes watching me intently, curious glances observing me. Even behind me, I heard short, quick breaths, because no one here had ever heard such words. Shadows began to move across the screen. An energetic and brave people appeared, demanding freedom in a loud voice. The enemy came forward, well-armed, innumerable, mighty. [...] The fields were covered with dead bodies, cemeteries grew, thousands of the best sons of a martyred nation were sent to the frosty polar lands...

Then something happened to me that I still do not understand to this day. Suddenly my heart beat faster, my cheeks and temples burned, I was almost unconscious. It was no longer me who spoke, but the homeland of *tuan* was speaking through my mouth. Mickiewicz supported me with his wonderful poetry. Słowacki added strength with the power of his feelings. The stories that I listened to so eagerly in Kagok and Wedi Koto, I put together, and now I presented the tragic story of a nation fighting in a heroic way. Generation after generation fought, blood sacrifices grew. They did not discourage others. For it was a brave and great nation. They preferred death to the torment of captivity.

The clouds parted. The moon and the stars lit up the listening faces with a soft, flickering glow. The *gamelan* softened its tone, the *wayang* calmed down, the last demons disappeared from the screen. Now a lonely wanderer appeared on it. He was poor, but he walked boldly through the world. He searched for wisdom and heart and finally he came to Java. He found everything here. So he deprived the demons of their power because he hated wickedness. He saved plants from loss, awakened life where it seemed to have died long ago. He was skillful and unsurpassed in his work. The evil forces lurking in our forests, mountains, fields, bushes, branches, and trunks fled before him.

The audience froze in silence; the Europeans did not go to sleep at all that night. The *gamelan* hummed louder. There were resonant, joyful tones, my words took on more tenderness. People understood it perfectly, they finally recognized this wonderful wanderer. Of course, it is him: the Great Dutur, Dutur from the Garden of Eden! Now he travels through Java in different directions, saves crops, wipes people's tears. Quiet, forcibly suppressed sighs could be heard all around. He teaches us to fight against the cruel Demons of Destruction, he extracts them from their secret hiding places, locks them in books, does everything to make them disappear forever. He brings joy all around him with his activity. He repays for the heart with his heart. The people bless him...

I sounded the gong again. The violin played tearfully, a groan was heard from the crowd. Unfortunately, the time had come – Dutur had to leave. He was going where his homeland was. He was just vanishing into the fog when everything turned upside down at once, some powerful force told me to end [my story] differently. Suddenly there was a terrible bang. His people were fighting once more. Blood was shed again, and graves

grew rapidly in the snowy fields of the north. Guns rang, cannons roared somberly, towns and villages were burning. But over all this, an increasingly intense glow began to emerge. Freedom slowly brightened the darkness...

Someone was sobbing behind me. People raised their heads. In the midst of the turmoil of war, the noble Arjuna appeared, all in silver armor, radiant and solemn. He took Dutur from the Garden of Eden's hand and led him away...

# THE IDENTITY OF THE STRANGE

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## The (Post)colonial Perspective in the Texts and Pictures of László Székely

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*G á b o r P u s z t a i*



In the rich history of the Dutch East Indies, we always meet foreigners, including non-Dutch Europeans. There were also hundreds of thousands of non-Dutch employees of the Dutch East India Company (1602–1799), mainly Germans, Danes, Swedes, and French, but also Czechs, Poles, and Hungarians. In the following, I focus on László Székely, a Hungarian traveller who first became known in the colonies thanks to his critical books, paintings, and caricatures, and who later gained international fame.<sup>1</sup>

### From Hungary to Sumatra

László Székely (1892–1946), the future writer, literary translator, and painter, was born in Ajak, a village in East Hungary, in the Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy. Life was difficult in this region of Hungary in the nineteenth century. The village was destroyed in a fire in 1845<sup>2</sup> and the population was decimated after two cholera epidemics in 1831 and 1873.<sup>3</sup> Half of the village's inhabitants failed to survive these disasters. The town had to be repopulated, so newcomers were welcomed. Among these newcomers were László Székely's fa-

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- 1 Anthony Reid, introduction to *Tropic Fever*, by Ladislao Székely (Singapore, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), x.
  - 2 E. Hunek, ed. *Nyíregyháza és Szabolcs vármegye községei* [Nyíregyháza and the villages of Szabolcs county] (Budapest: Magyar városok monográfiája, vol. 8, 1931), 325.
  - 3 S. Borovszky, ed. *Magyarország vármegyéi és városai. Szabolcs vármegye* [The counties and towns of Hungary. Szabolcs county] (Budapest: Apolló, 1900), 11.



ther and mother who moved to Ajak to begin a new life.<sup>4</sup> His father's name was not Székely at that time, but Lajos Sichermann. His mother's name was originally Kornélia Rothfeld, which was magyarized to Radnai. The Jewish couple had three sons: Pál Ábrahám was born on September 26, 1890, László Smiel on April 16, 1892, and Ferenc on June 29, 1897.<sup>5</sup> Their father was a farmer and later a land tenant.<sup>6</sup> In 1899, László's father changed his name from Sichermann to Székely.<sup>7</sup> The magyarization of his name was a sign of assimilation that was typical at this time for many Jewish families. Even though he and his family kept their Jewish faith, they were never particularly religious, and Judaism never appears as a theme in László Székely's letters or works. The slow assimilation of the family is also noticeable in the names of the sons. Whereas the first two still had Jewish names (Ábrahám and Smiel) alongside their Hungarian ones, the youngest son, Ferenc, had only a Hungarian first name. The family was not rich and in many ways they lived on the margins of Hungarian society: geographically speaking, they lived in a village in the east of the country, far away from the capital; in terms of social status, they were poor farmers; and confessionally, they belonged to the Jewish minority. This experience marked Székely for the rest of his life.

The boys went to school in Kisvárdá, a small town nearby. For further education László Székely went to Debrecen and was taught at the main Roman Catholic gymnasium starting in 1902. He was not a brilliant student. Only in the subjects of history and drawing did he have very good results. In November 1905, his mother died at age 44 from tuberculosis. The following year, in June 1906, he failed three subjects and left school.<sup>8</sup> The family then moved to Budapest. The future of the 14-year-old did not look bright. As a school dropout, he had no hope of going to a university or finding a good job. He was dependent on his family and lived the life of unemployed young men in the capital city. While in Budapest, Székely reconnected with his cousin István Radnai (1893–1940). Radnai was of the same age as Székely and in the same situation: no school, no education, no job, and no future. At the beginning of 1914, the two cousins decided to take their fate into their own hands. A letter from a

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4 Lajos Sichermann was born in the Hungarian city Nagyvárad (now Oradea in Romania).

5 Jewish birth register of Ajak IVB/425, Provincial Archives of Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg, Nyíregyháza.

6 Birth register of Ajak IVB/425, Provincial Archives of Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg, Nyíregyháza

7 Jewish birth register of Ajak IVB/425, Provincial Archives of Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg, Nyíregyháza.

8 A Debreceni Kegyes-Tanítórendi Római Katolikus Főgimnázium Értesítője az 1905–1906. tanévről [Yearbook of the Roman Catholic Gymnasium of Debrecen for the year 1905–1906], 1906.

friend's friend (a certain Andor Mészáros from Tebbing Tinggi in North Sumatra, where he was a planter) made them decide to become planters themselves and to leave for the Dutch colony, with the hope of earning a lot of money. As Székely wrote himself in his book *Tropic Fever*:

Two hundred guilders ... Land for nothing ... As much as you wanted ... Jungle and bungalow...! If only for these two things I must go! Yes, and then the topi...! I thanked Kálmán for having shown me the letter and went on my way staggering and somewhat dazed. Two hundred Dutch guilders, that was four hundred pengoes. Free quarters and bungalow ... the bungalow, in particular, was tempting ... and free postage. What was it all for? After five years four hundred guilders, that made eight hundred pengoes. Whoever got as much salary here at home? Uncle János had been with the State Railroad for thirty-two years and wasn't earning that much. And if all went well, I could get my own plantation. You got the ground for nothing anyway.<sup>9</sup>

The temptation of a tropical adventure was great. The unknown and the strange proved attractive. Opposed to that there was his own well-known, rather hopeless and drab life in Budapest anno 1914. He wrote:

If I went into a bank or some other business here as clerk, I might perhaps after thirty years become bookkeeper or manager. I couldn't embark on an academic career now, I'd missed that. All I could become was a bank or insurance clerk, and after thirty years head of the department. But wouldn't I die of boredom in the meantime, working in a dirty, airless office under the eye of a quarrelsome, pretentious boss? And I couldn't go back home to Tarizsa any more, for our estate had been put to the hammer.<sup>10</sup>

The farewell to their fatherland was difficult, but they wanted to go. Radnai wrote in his diary about Hungary as a "sweet and pitiless land of hate."<sup>11</sup> Their situation, the *own* and the familiar, was without perspective and oppressive to them, the *strange* and the unfamiliar marked a future of freedom and wealth.

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9 Ladislao Székely, *Tropic Fever. The Adventures of a Planter in Sumatra*, trans. Marion Sounders (Singapore, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 8–9.

10 Székely, *Tropic Fever*, 9.

11 István Radnai and László Székely, *Dit altijd alleen zijn. Verhalen over het leven van planters en koe-lies in Deli 1914–1930* [This always being alone. Stories about the life of planters and coolies in Deli 1914–1930], edited and transl. Gábor Pusztai and Gerard Termorshuizen (Leiden: KITLV, 2007), 7.

They left Budapest on April 12, 1914 and traveled by train through Fiume (now Rijeka in Croatia) and Venice to Genoa. There they embarked on the *Prinz Ludwig* of the Norddeutscher Lloyd and sailed via Port Said, Colombo, and Penang (where they transferred to a smaller ship, the *Malaya*) to Medan. They arrived at Deli's main city on May 7, 1914. Deli, on the north-eastern coast of Sumatra, was a planter's paradise at the end of the nineteenth century and the start of the twentieth. Here you could become rich in a short time, working in the tobacco industry and later in rubber. The life, however, was hard and rough. The climate was hard to bear for Europeans, tropical diseases abounded, the work on the plantations was gruelling and monotonous, the food and culture were unfamiliar, and the Chinese and Javanese coolies were not always friendly. The main language was Malay, which had to be learned by the newcomers (the *singkeh*, as they were called in Deli). The colonial government had little control over this area. The planters were in command and often took matters into their own hands. The absence of police and judicature often led to excessive violence, extortion, human trafficking, murder, and manslaughter. Most victims were coolies, but for the white planters there were almost no consequences.<sup>12</sup> Deli was like the Wild West, where the strongest was always right—and the strongest was usually the white planter. Székely and Radnai ended up in this world.

Things did not turn out as the two young Hungarians had imagined. They discovered that everything was very expensive, they fell ill, found no work, their money ran out, and they thought the local Europeans primitive and stupid, and the heat and climate unbearable. Their ideal of a land of promise collapsed in a matter of days. The hierarchy of the *strange* and the *own* had changed. The alluring *strange* had turned into a dangerous, threatening strange. Eighteen years later, Székely spoke about his situation in Medan during an interview for a Hungarian newspaper:

We knew neither the language nor the place where we were. Suddenly my cousin said, "It's like hearing the military band play on Margit Island in Budapest. I want to go home...." He was close to crying. I replied that we would get some money somehow and then he could go home. That was easier said than done. I eventually went to the notary of Medan from whom we received 11 guilders. That was enough for my cousin to start the journey home. I will never forget the moment when, as a young twenty-year-old abroad, I saw

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12 Jan Breman, *Koelies, planters en de koloniale politiek* [Coolies, planters, and colonial politics] (Leiden: KITLV, 1987), 168.

the ship leave. Then the last contact broke with my friends, my family, my past, and my fatherland.<sup>13</sup>

So Radnai gave up after five weeks and left with borrowed money to go back to Hungary via Singapore. He arrived in Budapest at the end of July 1914 and was immediately drafted. Radnai served on the Eastern Front, in the Carpathians, and in the Balkans. After the war, he returned to Budapest, where he married and worked as a civil servant. He died in 1940.<sup>14</sup>

### In Deli

There was no money left for Székely to go home. He had to stay in Sumatra and find a job. After a short while he was appointed as an assistant on a tobacco plantation. Early on, Székely trained himself as a visual artist. Already in January 1915, he took part in an exhibition of the Delische Kunstkring, a cultural association in Medan, submitting a number of drawings.<sup>15</sup> In the newspaper *De Sumatra Post*, Székely's caricatures were presented as "the cheerful note of the exhibition."<sup>16</sup> The *Weekblad voor Indië* was also very enthusiastic about the work of the young Hungarian: "Szekely, keep it up ... let us laugh in the East, because laughter is healthy and so is your art."<sup>17</sup>

Already at this first exhibition, in 1915, we find a theme in a number of Székely's watercolors, which would reappear also in his later work: the rickshaw coolie. For example, two paintings, actually a double watercolor, had the rickshaw coolie as their subject. The title of the first image was *Today*. It depicts a skinny Chinese rickshaw-coolie in a pair of shorts, pulling his carriage along. In the rickshaw, an old, fat planter of the old school sits, with a mustache, a

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13 "Húsz évi távollét után hazajött Sumatra szigetéről egy debreceni mérnök" [After an absence of twenty years, an engineer of Debrecen came home from the island of Sumatra], transl. Gábor Pusztai, *Debreczeni Újság*, August 14, 1932, 9.

14 His diary appeared in 2001 in the Netherlands. Fragments of it were published in 2004 in Dutch in *Acta Neerlandica*, and in 2007 in *Dit altijd alleen zijn*. The entire text was released in Hungarian in 2013. Radnai: Dagboek [Diary], transl. Gábor Pusztai, *Met vreemde ogen, Acta Neerlandica* 3 (2004): 137-164.; Radnai, *Dit altijd alleen zijn*; István Radnai, *Szumátrától az orosz frontig. Radnia István első világháborús naplója* [From Sumatra to the Russian Front. The First World War diary of István Radnai], edit. Gábor Pusztai (Debrecen: Print Art Press, 2013).

15 Gábor Pusztai, "Deli op z'n kop" [Deli upside down], *Beeldvorming, Acta Neerlandica* 9 (2012): 115-34.

16 "Amateur exhibition," *De Sumatra Post*, January 26, 1915, 8.

17 R, "De caricaturist Székely" [Székely the cartoonist], *Weekblad voor Indië* [12, no. 1 (April 18, 1915): 7-8.

*toetoe* coat, a pith helmet, and a big cigar in his mouth. In the background, a Bengali baker walks with a basket on his head. It was an everyday scene in Medan in 1915. Nonetheless, the painting faithfully depicts the colonial relations: the Chinese as a lean, muscular worker, toiling, poorly dressed, on the one hand, and the round planter in a white suit, as a passenger leaning back with crossed legs, on the other. The white upper class of the colony benefited from the work of the poor non-European population. The stereotypical representation of the colonial hierarchy is clearly visible in Székely's work.

But the other painting in the pair reverses this hierarchy: the Chinese sits in the carriage in a white suit, smoking a cigar, and the fat planter, half naked



Figure 9.1. László Székely: *Heden* [Today] (1915)

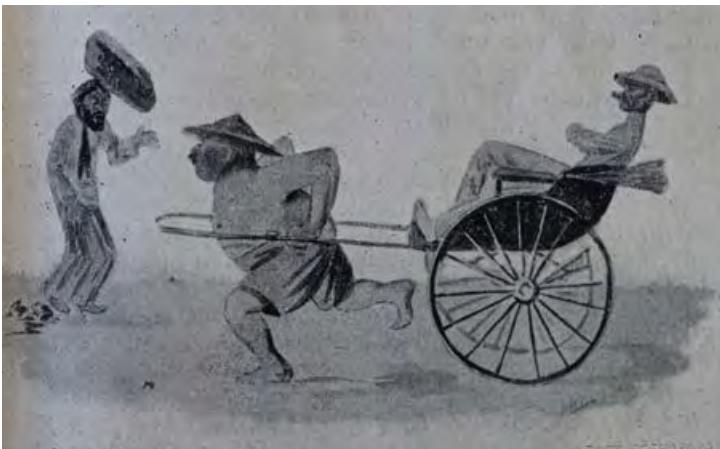


Figure 9.2. László Székely: *Toekomst* [Future] (1915)

in his meager covering, pulls the rickshaw. The title is *Future* in “2000 something.” Székely uses the Medan street as a contact zone where binary oppositions (gentlemen-servants, colonizer-colonized, rich-poor) meet. Székely deliberately shocked the viewer of this early double watercolor: the Chinese takes the place of the white man. The colonial order in the first painting is thus drastically disturbed by the reversal. The shock of this vision of the future is reflected in the reaction of the Bengali baker: the basket slips off his head, his mouth falls open, his eyes protrude, and he drops his bottle. The rickshaw coolie, who started out in the periphery of colonial society, had taken the place of the planter, who stood in the center of that same society. This reversal of hierarchy is typical of Székely’s view of the colonial world. Simultaneously, this is a future prediction of some sort, or rather a warning for the colonial rulers, which is muffled, however, by the caricature and comical nature of the image.

Székely also made use of the same subject nine years later when he was appointed as an illustrator for the weekly magazine *Sumatra*. On June 14, 1924, a drawing by László Székely appeared on page 8 in *Sumatra*, titled *Deli on its head* [Deli op z’n kop]. The drawing shows the same situation as *Future* from 1915. The 1924 drawing is, however, much less shocking to the contemporary viewer because of the title and the text accompanying the drawing, placed by the editors. The editors tried to take the rough edges off the caricature with a joke. Very likely it was the farcical and caricature-like nature of the drawings that made them acceptable to the editors. Criticism of the colony was hidden behind a smile. Below the drawing it read: “How we enjoy a Hongkong ride here



**Figure 9.3.** László Székely: *Deli op z'n kop* (1924)

in Sumatra. Drawing specially designed and executed to give the family in Holland an idea of how we live here and how the division of labor is between a Hongkong Chinese and our Blandas [Dutch/White people]. (We have not been able to determine whether the Chinese has the correct number of vertebrae.)”<sup>18</sup> The text deliberately tells an untruth, in order to cushion the shock of the reversal of the colonial hierarchy. Instead of criticism of colonial relations, which the drawing radiates, the reader laughs along with the editors who want to poke fun at the ignorant family members in Holland. In this way, the drawing *Future* from 1915, which had a clear message to and criticism of colonial society, becomes *Deli on its head* in 1924, a mediocre joke in the hands of the editors.

Another drawing from 1924 with a similar theme was *Deli of the future*.<sup>19</sup> In the rickshaw are two people. One is an older, fat planter in a white suit, legs and arms crossed, nose up, leaning back. He is the prototype of the planter who has made a lot of money in tobacco or rubber, and is probably an administrator, the representative of the colonial planter elite, aware of his status. Next to him is his wife, an equally fat elderly lady with a sour face and a conspicuously unsavory hat. The rickshaw is no longer pulled by the skinny Chinese, but by a motorbike on which the Chinese coolie sits with a broad grin that reveals his battered teeth. The text below the drawing reads: “How our illustrator envisions making the work of the man pulling the Hongkong a dignified existence. (The sweat cloth will be used as a cleaning cloth.)” The text and title don’t make the



reader look up. Figure 9.11, the *Search for a Basis in the Political and Economic Development* that was

18 “Deli op z’n kop” [Deli upside down], *Sumatra*, June 14, 1924, 8.

19 “Deli van de toekomst” [Deli of the future], *Sumatra*, August 2, 1924, 8.

extremely rapid in the first half of the twentieth century, and not on the critical view of the colony. More importantly, the drawing confirms the colonial power relations. The “man pulling the Hongkong” remains a rickshaw driver and the white planter and his wife sit in the carriage and let the Chinese pull them along. The binary opposition confirming the colonial hierarchy remains unchanged in this drawing. In this way, the old watercolor *Future* from 1915 is presented with a similar title but with a completely different content in 1924.

Székely painted not only everyday scenes, such as rickshaws on the street, but portraits too. He was inspired by his immediate environment on the plantation. Unlike some other European artists in the Indies, he avoided exotic themes such as half-naked Balinese women with flowers in their hair, cockfights, or female dancers. The rough world of the plantation rarely offered beautiful subjects and Székely clearly didn't want to make his models more beautiful on the canvas than they actually were. He was not looking for beauty, but for tough reality. Even so, his portraits are in some ways like caricatures, not worked out in detail, sometimes hastily finished, yet striking and tragic.

On May 5, 1923, the ‘Planters edition’ (number 18) of the weekly *De Zweep* was published in Weltevreden. The editor-in-chief was D. W. Beretty (1890–1934), the owner of Aneta (General News and Telegraph Agency), the first news agency in the Dutch East Indies. *De Zweep* was a controversial weekly magazine,



Figure 9.5. László Székely: *De mandoer* (1923)



often accused of pornography and antisemitism.<sup>20</sup> On page two of the “Planters issue” the reader found four watercolors titled “Types from Delian Kebon Life.” There were four portraits: *The Overseer*, *The Money Lender*, *The Gardener*, and *The Coolie Recruiter* [*De Mandoer*, *De Geldschieter*, *De Toekang-kebon*, *De Koeliewerver*].<sup>21</sup> Indigenous men were depicted in all four watercolors by the Hungarian painter. This choice of subject was not common at the time. Many artists focused solely on the Europeans, such as the German painter and illustrator Eberhard Carl Alfred Freiherr von Wechmar (1897–1934), who visited Deli in 1926–1927 to make a film documentary.<sup>22</sup> On this occasion he made a series of caricatures of local white potentates. Von Wechmar ridiculed the Europeans, being irritated by their arrogant behavior, yet he remained trapped in his white colonial world. He didn’t look over the fence to meet the other. None of his twenty drawings depict indigenous people. Of course, we find images of indigenous people by other artists, but they are often half-naked women, exoticized and eroticized.

When depicting indigenous men, which rarely happened, the same criteria usually applied: they are half-naked, exotic, unusual, strange, but often also terrifying and threatening (surly, muscular, and armed), such as in Willem Dooyewaard’s *Portrait of a Balinese man with kris* and Isaac Israels’s *Javanese dancer* or *Raden Mas Jodjana*. Székely didn’t depict his four native men in this way. He painted the men the same way Europeans were portrayed. Thus the unusual thing is that the Hungarian painter depicts the indigenous people in a European way. Yet, as the title suggests, Székely portrays types. In other words, he de-individualized his models through the titles of the watercolors. The indigenous men have no name, they are representatives of their group, the army of the coolies on a plantation. In these portraits one finds no exoticism, no erotic appeal, and no Eastern enchantment.

*De Mandoer* is the portrait of a Javanese overseer. The *mandur* were the foremen of the Javanese coolies. They reported to the European assistant about the coolies and about the work and occurrences in their squad. Thus, the *mandur* were the assistant’s confidants, but at the same time they were feared and respected by the coolies. In the portrait, one sees this position between both groups and the mimicry of sorts of the *mandur*: he wants to resemble the Eu-

20 Gerard Termorshuizen, *Realisten en reactionairen* [Realists and reactionaries] (Amsterdam/Leiden: Nijgh & Van Ditmar/KITLV, 2011), 197.

21 “De Zweep,” *De Sumatra Post*, May 9, 1923, 10.

22 M. A. Loderichts et al., *Medan, beeld van een stad* [Medan, image of a city] (Purmerend: Asia Major, 1997), 150.



Figure 9.6. László Székely: *De geldschieter* (1923)

ropeans, the ruling upper class, through his clothing, but he is and remains a Javanese. The *mandur* wears a white coat and a white pith helmet, the status symbol of the whites, but under his hat he wears a typical Javanese headscarf. His brown skin contrasts sharply with his white coat and hat. *The Money Lender* is the portrait of a Chinese. The title suggests that he must be a rich man, but this is offset by his half-naked body and missing teeth. The hard lines of his face reveal the tragedy of a hard life. *The Toekang-kebon* or the gardener is a Javanese with a neatly folded headscarf and an unbuttoned coat. He is no longer young, he is a coolie who knows the ropes. His terrified eyes and sad expression reflect the reality of the hard life on the plantation. *The Coolie Recruiter* is the portrait of a Javanese. He probably used to be a coolie, but he joined the plantation company after his contract expired and kept new coolies coming from the Java countryside to Deli. On the plantations in Sumatra, labor shortages were a constant problem. The indigenous people of North Sumatra, the Bataks, were not willing to work as coolies for the planters, so indigenous workers had to come from outside Sumatra.

Most plantation workers were transported to Deli, especially from China and Java. It was not always easy to persuade the young Javanese to leave their homeland and go to Deli. They were often lured with unrealistic promises about gold



Figure 9.7. László Székely: *Toekang-kebon* (1923)

and women, had to sign a contract they couldn't even read (hence their name: "orang contract"), and were stuck with a plantation company for years. How this went in practice was described in Székely's 1931 story *Pa roekie*,<sup>23</sup> which formed the basis for the famous novel *Coolie* (1932) by his wife Madelon Székely-Lulofs. The coolie recruiter was paid according to the number of potential coolies he could supply to the company. If necessary, he lied to or cheated the Javanese peasants. In the portrait, he wears a typical Javanese head covering called a *songkok* (also called a *peci* or *topi*), and a white closed coat known as a *toetoe* coat, which was typical for Europeans. The hybrid nature of his outfit is clear. His *songkok* was typical Javanese headgear that later became fashionable, especially because it would become associated with President Sukarno. On the other hand, the coolie recruiter wears a buttoned-up white coat, the status symbol of the Europeans, a sign of white power. The editorial team of *De Zweep* added a sentence to the drawing: "Pay attention to the Gazelle eyes." By this they meant the cool look of the coolie recruiter, which left no doubt about the incorrect methods with which he fooled the young Javanese. In all four portraits, the models were painted from close distance. Their face and facial expressions play the most important role. The painter was clearly interested in the person behind the model. Székely portrayed indigenous men who practiced typical pro-

23 Published in Radnai, *Dit altijd alleen zijn*, 107-14.



Figure 9.8. László Székely: *De koeliewerver* (1923)

fessions on the *kebon*. At the same time they were quite low on the social ladder. They were figures that people did not like to portray, because the white public, and especially the people in Europe, did not want to see the Dutch East Indies in this way. Of course, people did not want to be reminded of the shadowy sides of the colony, but only of the beautiful, exotic, erotic side of the Dutch East Indies.

Székely's art was different. He clearly did not want to pursue popular topics; he didn't want to stay on the surface but to drill deeper into colonial society and to show what people did not always like to see too. Székely's strength, in addition to his realism, was that he portrayed indigenous people from the periphery, from the lower classes of society who were normally only very rarely the subject of works of art. His models were outsiders, just like him, the Hungarian Jew among the white colonial elite, dominated by the Dutch. Székely as a painter was not a great talent, and except for the drawing classes in the gymnasium, he had had no artistic education. He was completely self-taught, a man who, in addition to his daily work as an assistant on the plantation, found time to paint and draw in his few spare hours. He did not have an eye for all the details. Nevertheless, with his Delian watercolors and drawings he made an important contribution to the art of the colony.

His only preserved painting which is not privately owned is titled: *A young European, frantically searching his shabby clothes for money, surrounded by his creditors*. It is part of the collection of the Royal Institute of Linguistics, Land,

and Ethnology (KITLV) in Leiden. Here Székely again shows the dark side of the colony: a marginal figure, the unwanted white person, who is rejected by his own community. The watercolor shows a young white man in disarray. He wears worn out old clothes, his white coat is open (against colonial etiquette), he is unkempt and looking in vain for money in his scanty, tattered pants with a desperate expression. Behind him are two excited white settlers shouting and gesturing. They make it clear that the young European is a disgrace to the white community. He damages the reputation of Europeans and in this way he threatens white prestige and therefore the colonial order. They, however, are immaculately dressed in their radiant white, buttoned-up suits and are therefore in sharp contrast to the central figure. The two whites are not concerned about the fact that a white person is in debt. That was very common in Deli. You got credit and at the end of the month, when your salary was paid, you paid the creditors.

The white men are probably excited because the young European cannot pay the native creditors, the three other indigenous figures in the painting. They are a Bengali baker, a Chinese, and an indigenous shoemaker. They are respectful of the battered *toewan*, but they want their money. The half-naked shoemaker on the right holds a receipt and makes it clear that the young European must pay the price for the new shoes.

Impoverished white men were a threat to the colonial order. The white community, as well as the colonial government, wanted at all costs to avoid confronting the indigenous population with poor, declining white people. In Székely's painting we see just such a figure: a pariah, a stain on the European image. Székely knew what poverty was. Not only did he come from a less well-off family in Hungary, he also had financial problems in Deli. He had been in so much debt that he was put on the shame list. In 1922, the Vereniging van de Detailhandel [Association of Retail Trade] announced in the *Sumatra Post* in a large, bold advertisement with a thick black frame which persons could not receive further credit in the shops: "De Vereniging v.d. Detailhandel advises its members not to grant credit to the persons below, before having made inquiries with the secretary of the Association."<sup>24</sup> On the list of 26 names, number 23 is L. Székely of the Beloeroe Company in Laboean Roekoe, where Székely was then working as an assistant.<sup>25</sup> In his novel *Rimboe*, Székely described in a

24 "De Vereniging v.d. Detailhandel," [The Retail Trade Association], *De Sumatra Post*, July 8, 1922, 11.

25 Kleian, *Adresboek van geheel Nederlands-Indie 1919* [Address book of the entire Dutch East Indies 1919] (Batavia: Kolff, 1919), 1020; Kleian, *Adresboek van geheel Nederlands-Indie 1921/22* [Address book of the entire Dutch East Indies 1921/22] (Batavia: Kolff, 1921), 1084.



9.9. László Székely: A young European, frantically searching his shabby clothes for money, surrounded by his creditors [HISDOC: m48]

very penetrating way how an impoverished European in the colony is treated, how he was ignored by other Europeans, and was despised even by the *Indos* (Euroasians). Here again his work shows the dark side of colonial life. His interest in social issues and in people on the periphery of colonial society, and his criticism of the center of colonial society, are clearly visible. His portraits of indigenous coolies, the rickshaw-coolie as a symbol of the colonial hierarchy, and the young European who slipped down the social ladder are all subjects that have been neglected in the art and literature of the colony.

From 1924 on, Székely became employed by the weekly magazine *Sumatra* as an illustrator, and his caricatures appeared there regularly. During this time, Madelon Lulofs (1899-1958) was also working for the weekly newspaper. She was born in Surabaya as the daughter of a colonial official. Her father,

Claas Lulofs, later became governor of New Guinea and committed suicide in 1922 over a sex scandal. The Lulofs family was forever scarred by this. In 1924, Madelon had already been the wife of the Dutch planter Hendrik Doffegnis for five years and the mother of two young children. The marriage was not a happy one. She felt lonely and abandoned on the plantation and was interested in culture and literature, but her husband was only happy when he could work outside on the *kebon* and looked down a little on the literary aspirations of his wife. She wrote short texts, travel sketches, and stories for *Sumatra*. Madelon and László began a relationship that ended in her divorcing Doffegnis. It was a scandal in Deli. After the divorce, Madelon and László traveled to Hungary on leave and were married in Budapest on September 10, 1926. In the following year they returned to Deli. This was a difficult period for the couple. They were rejected by the European community because of the scandals. In 1930 the couple made the decision to return to Europe with their now one-year-old daughter Cornelia Malvina (in the family called Kotjil, a variation of *ketjil*, meaning “little one” in Malay).

### **Back in Hungary**

The family settled in Hungary. After all the scandals in the family, they probably wanted to start a new life with a clean slate in an environment where no one knew them. The Hungary of 1930 was a country of many traumas: the lost world war in 1918, the communist revolution of 1919, the “red” and the “white” terror, the occupation of the country by foreign troops, the Trianon peace agreement in 1920, the loss of two-thirds of the territory, the millions of Hungarians living suddenly outside the borders, hundreds of thousands of refugees, the collapsed economy, hostile neighbors, and the political isolation of the country made life difficult. Anti-communism, the revival of neo-conservatism, the emerging anti-Semitism, revenge, frustration, and anger typified Hungarian society at the time. Enormous social tensions plagued society.

The world crisis in 1929–1933 with the collapse of the economy and an enormous number of unemployed made the differences between the rich and poor in society even greater. In this situation, at the beginning of the world crisis, the Székely-Lulofs family found a new home in Budapest. With the money they brought from Sumatra, they had a good life at first. They bought a big house on Andrásy street, in a chic neighborhood in Budapest; they bought a big car, rented a summer house in Mátyásföld outside Budapest, and hired staff. Székely



**Figure 9.10.** László Székely in Sumatra around 1925

wanted to make money quickly and invested a lot of money in a company that went bankrupt. They lost part of their capital and partly for this reason both began to earn a living in literature.

Lulofs wrote her most famous colonial works in the Hungarian capital, including *Rubber* [Rubber] in 1931, *Koelie* [Coolie] in 1932, *Emigranten* [Emigrants] in 1933, *De andere wereld* [The other world] in 1934, and *De hongertocht* [The hunger trek] in 1936. Her first two novels became a huge success and at the same time the books created scandals. In the right-wing Dutch colonial press, they were both vilified. Henri Carel Zentgraaff (1874–1940), the editor-in-chief of the newspaper *de Java-Bode* and a supporter of the conservative Vaderlandse Club and sympathizer of the NSB, particularly liked to criticize the young writer and her Hungarian husband.<sup>26</sup> Lulofs also had only moderate success with the

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26 Gerard Termorshuizen, “H.C. Zentgraaff contra het echtpaar Székely-Lulofs” [H. C. Zentgraaff



literary critics in the Netherlands. Intellectuals and literary critics such as Menno Ter Braak (1902–1940) and Edgar Du Perron (1899–1940) thought her works not good enough and ridiculed her in the press. But the books sold like hot cakes. Publishing house Elsevier was very satisfied with the sales success and also provided translations abroad. *Rubber* has been translated into eleven languages, adapted on stage, and also made into a film. The film *Rubber* (1936) was then regarded as the most expensive Dutch film up to that time, but lost much of the message of the original novel. In the film, the critical tone was changed to a hymn to the planter, and morality was brought to a conservative wavelength. Just like with Székely's drawings, the sharp edges of the novel were removed. Lulofs did not protest, and was even very satisfied with the film. Apparently, she didn't want any more scandals. In the 1930s, Lulofs was the most famous and most successful female author in the Netherlands, thanks to her colonial books.

### Literary work of László Székely

László Székely was also active in the field of literature. He wrote stories and articles about Sumatra in Hungarian newspapers and magazines, gave lectures, translated together with his wife numerous Hungarian literary works into Dutch and Dutch novels into Hungarian, and spoke about the Dutch colony on Hungarian radio.

His first novel *Őserdőktől-ültetvényekig* [From primeval forests to plantations] was published in Budapest in 1933 by Dante publishers. The reception was enthusiastic. However, no one in Hungary understood the criticism of colonial society. The critics in Budapest thought of it as a comical and intriguing adventure novel, set in a tropical backdrop.

With László Székely's book, a new genre was born ... among adventurous travel descriptions. His *Őserdőktől az ültetvényekig* can certainly compete with great classic globetrotters from Germany, England, or America, in terms of humor, talent for observation, and colorful descriptions.<sup>27</sup>

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versus the couple Székely-Lulofs], *Tropisch avontuur*, *Acta Neerlandica* 12 (2016): 133–43.

27 "Szervusz, apuskám, merre van Szumatra?" [Hi mate, where is Sumatra?], *Esti Kurir*, October 17, 1933, 9.

Other reviewers were also positive about Székely's book. The newspaper *Ujság* called Székely's work "one of the most successful travelogues ever in Hungarian."<sup>28</sup> Still others highlighted his energy, closeness to his homeland, and impressive descriptions, emphasizing that a similar social and economic description of Sumatra had never appeared in Hungarian.<sup>29</sup>

The book was translated into Italian in 1934 with the title *Sumatra*.<sup>30</sup> The German and the Dutch editions were published in 1935. In Germany, the book was marketed under the title *Tropenfieber* [Tropic fever], first by the publishing house Höger from Leipzig, and later by Carl Schünemann in Bremen. The book was reprinted six times in Germany (in 1935, 1939, 1940, 1950, 1960, and in 1979). In the Netherlands, the book was published by Elsevier under the literal translation of the Hungarian original: *Van oerwoud tot plantage* [From jungle to plantation].<sup>31</sup>

Székely's work was the most successful in the English language. The English edition was a translation of the German edition, *Tropenfieber*, and was therefore given the title *Tropic Fever*. Between 1936 and 1989, Székely's book was published in English ten times, from London to Singapore and from New York to Kuala Lumpur.<sup>32</sup>

*Tropic Fever* was first published by *Harper's Magazine* in three instalments between October and December 1936. There were clear differences in the English text compared to the Dutch edition. The descriptions of the working conditions on the plantation were especially very different. The English text read, for example:

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- 28 "Amíg egy magyar fiú eljut a szumátrai ültetvényekig" [Until a Hungarian boy reaches the plantations of Sumatra], *Ujság*, October 15, 1933, 8.
- 29 "László Székely, Őserdőktől az ültetvényekig" [László Székely, from jungle to plantations], *Magyar könyvbarátok diáriuma* 1-2 (1934): 22; "Új útirajzok" [New travel books], *Katolikus szemle* (1935): 181; "Székely László: Őserdőktől-ültetvényekig" [László Székely, from jungle to plantations], *Magyar Hírlap*, October 15, 1933, 6.
- 30 L. Székely, *Sumatra*. transl. Filippo Faber (Milan: Genio, 1934.)
- 31 L. Székely, *Van oerwoud tot plantage* [From jungle to plantations] (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1935.); L. Székely, *Van oerwoud tot plantage, verhaal van een plantersleven* [From jungle to plantations. The life story of a planter in Sumatra], introd. C. van den Wijngaard (Schoorl: Conserve, 1991).
- 32 L. Székely, "Tropic Fever," *Harper's Magazine*, October 1936, 459-469; November 1936, 651-662; December 1936, 67-71; L. Székely, *Tropic Fever: The Adventures of a Planter in Sumatra*, transl. Marion Saunders (London: H. Hamilton, [1936]); L. Székely, *Tropic Fever: The Adventures of a Planter in Sumatra* (New York/London: Harper & Brothers, 1937); L. Székely, *Tropic Fever: The Adventures of a Planter in Sumatra* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1939); L. Székely, *Tropic Fever*, introd. Anthony Reid (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1979-1984); L. Székely, *Tropic Fever* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1979); L. Székely, *Tropic Fever* (London: Oxford University Press, 1979); L. Székely, *Tropic Fever* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press Australia, 1980); L. Székely, *Tropic Fever*, Oxford in Asia Paperbacks, (Oxford University Press, 1982); L. Székely, *Tropic Fever*. Introd. Anthony Reid (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1984); L. Székely, *Tropic Fever* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1989).

Yet a European has five to six hundred coolies under him, five to six hundred contract workers, whose contract binds them for life. They may not run away from their work, for that is forbidden by their contract which the ignorant, misled coolies signed somewhere in Java or China. They are doing forced labor, or, if you like, they are slaves. The coolie slogs from morning till night, toiling and stooping; he has to stand up to the neck in stinking marshland, while greedy leeches suck his thin blood and malaria mosquitoes poison his sickly body. But he cannot run away: for the contract binds him. The “tjen-tengs,” the watchmen and constables of the firm, who have the strength of giants and are bestially cruel, track down the fugitive. When they catch him they give him a terrible hiding and lock him up, for the contract binds him.<sup>33</sup>

In the same passage of the Dutch edition words like “forced labor,” “slaves,” “bestially cruel,” and “terrible hiding” did not appear. But these made bells ring in the American press, and caused commotion at a political level in the Netherlands, and especially in the colony. In the Volksraad in Batavia it was debated on February 5, 1937 whether it was possible and desirable to prosecute László Székely for his “campaign of lying against Deli abroad.”<sup>34</sup> The response was very heated because since 1929 the US had banned the import of tobacco from countries where forced labor was used. Tobacco was the number one export product in Deli, and economic losses were feared as a direct result of the scandal surrounding Székely’s book. In the end there was no prosecution, but Székely gained a bad reputation in the colony.

The difference in the various texts in different languages was not caused by the translators or the publishers, but by Székely himself. The 1933 Hungarian edition was the original text. This was translated into German, and based on the German translation, the English edition was created. In the Hungarian original, one also finds the words “forced labour,” “slaves,” “bestially cruel,” and “terrible hiding” in the said passage.<sup>35</sup> These words are not found in the Dutch edition because Székely had reworked the text together with his wife. (No translator was mentioned in the Dutch edition, only the name of the author: László Székely.) Székely and his wife either deleted or rewrote the critical passages in the Dutch version, passages where the harsh colonial reality of

33 L. Székely, *Tropic Fever* (Singapore/Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 102-103.

34 “Handelingen van de Volksraad, 80ste vergadering” [Proceedings of the Volksraad, 80th meeting], February 5, 1937, 1984-1986.

35 L. Székely, *Őserdőkől-ültetvényekig. Tíz év Szumátra őserdeiben* [From jungle to plantations. Ten years in the jungle of Sumatra] (Budapest: Dante [1933]), 80.

life on the plantations became apparent.<sup>36</sup> They wanted to avoid another scandal, but they could only postpone it by two years.

The book became a commercial success. A second edition in Hungary was released in Budapest in 1942 under the title *Süt a nap Sumátrán* [The sun shines on Sumatra].<sup>37</sup> The book also performed well internationally. In addition to German, English, and Dutch, it was also published in Czech in 1946.<sup>38</sup> In French, the book appeared in Geneva in 2001 under the title *Délire des tropiques: les aventures d'un planteur à Sumatra*.<sup>39</sup>

Székely's other novel, *Rimbu*, published in 1942, was less successful.<sup>40</sup> The war probably played a role in this. People paid less attention to adventure novels and there was also less money to publish literature. The novel first appeared in instalments in a Hungarian newspaper, and later on in book form. To my knowledge, except for the Hungarian edition from 1942, the book was published in German and Dutch only after the war.<sup>41</sup>

Székely also wrote numerous stories in Hungarian, which appeared in the Hungarian press between 1931 and 1942. In these stories the contrast between the strange and the familiar plays a central role. In the stories *Intermezzo*, *Romance*, *Pa Roekie*, *Koelie*, and *The Career of Chaw A Hjong* (translated in this book), figures from the periphery of colonial society are central. Coolies are given a voice in the stories, they are individualized. The reader can get to know their opinions, their feelings, thoughts, cultural embedding, and religious world. Europeans are only marginal: They are de-individualized, have no voice, and are only extras. This reversal of the colonial hierarchy in literature was not common in the first half of the twentieth century. When one thinks of Delian authors such as Carry van Bruggen (1881–1932), Johanna Elisabeth Manders (1891–1982), Hendrik Gorter, Johannes Kleian, or H. Veersema, we see the confirmation of old colonial reflexes and a static structure of hierarchical pairs of binary opposition. These authors focus on the center of colonial society, the white elite, and in their works the indigenous people only

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36 Gábor Pusztai and Olf Praamstra, “‘Een lasterlijk geschrijf’ Kritiek en (zelf)censuur in de Nederlands-Indische literatuur” [‘A defamatory writing’ criticism and (self) censorship in the literature of the Dutch Indies], *Indische Letteren* 12, no. 3 (1997), 98–122.

37 László Székely, *Süt a nap Szumátran* [The sun shines on Sumatra] (Budapest: Dante, 1942).

38 L. Székely, *Veliky Tuvan* [The white lord] (Prague: Práce, 1946).

39 L. Székely, *Délire des tropiques: les aventures d'un planteur à Sumatra* [The delirium of the tropics: The adventures of a planter in Sumatra], transl. Georges Cousin, Collection Objectif terre (Genève: Olizane, 2001.)

40 László Székely, *Rimbu* [Jungle] (Budapest: Franklin, 1942)

41 L. Székely, *Rimboe* [Jungle] (Amsterdam: Wereldvenster, 1949); L. Székely, *Rimbu* [Jungle] (Bremen: Carl Schünemann, 1950).

appear in the margins. The unusual thing about Székely's work is that he focuses on the periphery.

In *Romance*, a young assistant witnesses a murder. Two coolies, Samidin and Jaloe, are fighting because Jaloe seduced Samidin's wife. Samidin eventually kills the other coolie and a lawsuit follows. The narrator shows that the situation is all clear to those present except for the white judge. The *orang blanda* doesn't know the culture and attitudes of the indigenous people and therefore asks ridiculous questions in the eyes of the coolies. The nameless white judge is portrayed as a dumb extra. For Samidin, the murderer, however, the author shows understanding: "What could one do to a man, other than what Samidin had done?"<sup>42</sup> *Intermezzo* is also about murder, where the coolie Bramsah stabs the Malay *krani* Alang Jahja because Bramsah lost at dice. The unnamed white assistant brutally beats the killer before sending the coolie to court. The coolie's senseless murder is just as incomprehensible as the brutal violence of the white planter. The focus is on indigenous culture and indigenous thinking. The other coolies understand Bramsah's act better than the senseless violence of the European. From the periphery, the center is looked at and in this way the differences between the strange and the familiar culture are made clear. The strange as a focus in the story makes the differences even more emphatic. We also read similar dramas in *Pa Roekie*, *Koelie*, and *The Career of Chaw A Hjong*, where violence, hierarchy, and cultural incomprehension play an important role.

In Székely's literary and visual works, the identity of the strange is a double identity. Colonial stereotypes and binary oppositions are both confirmed and disturbed. Chaw A Hjong, in the story translated in this volume, is a coolie from the periphery, but he exploits his fellow coolies and becomes rich in the process. He places himself as if he is outside of the white colonial society, but he is just as exploitative as his former bosses, the white planters. From the periphery he forces himself into the center, with fatal results. He gets murdered out of vengeance by his former Javanese wife, whom he had disowned. The rickshaw coolie in the watercolors is first subordinate, and then an important gentleman. The coolie Bramsah is a murderer, but the white man is no less violent when he nearly kills Bramsah.

Székely can clearly present this social sensitivity because he himself comes from the periphery. As a Hungarian Jew from what was then Austria-Hungary working in the Dutch colony, he is an outsider, a kind of stranger who looked at colonial relations with a critical, sober eye and denounced them. When Székely

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42 Radnai, *Dit altijd alleen zijn*, 83.

writes about the coolies or depicts them on the canvas, he writes about and depicts people like himself: outsiders and outcasts. However, he does it with humor and (self-)irony, and therefore his art was deemed acceptable for the conservative colonial society as well. Székely shuttled back and forth between jokes and serious criticism. As long as humor dominated, everything was fine, but when the commentary became too prominent, as for example in his novel *Tropic fever*, he was rejected. He became a pariah, just like the young European in his drawing.

### László Székely, “The Career of Chaw A Hjong.”

Translated from Hungarian by Zoltán Simon.

A new coolie overseer arrived at the plantation. He was a newcomer in the land, still young and imperious, not like the old one whose last drop of energy had already evaporated in the strong equatorial climate after ten years of service in the jungle. It would not be long before this new, vibrant energy would also fade away, dissipated by the sun (which shines here seven times as strong, as the elders say), gradually giving way to a slow, indifferent lethargy. But for the time being, the new overseer was still spirited, which meant that the coolies, who had been used to the dried-out energy of the old overseer, were faced with many unpleasant surprises. Above all, he demanded obedience, and also insisted that the coolies strictly observe the *adat*, the unwritten rules of politeness. On the afternoon of the first wage payment, for example, he yelled at the surprised coolies, used to a more relaxed formality, because they—as they were accustomed from before—started to gather up bare-chested.

“Get out of my sight, you bunch of scoundrels! How dare you appear before me naked on the afternoon of pay day?”, the imperious new overseer howled. “I will start the payments in five minutes, and whoever comes here without a coat will not get paid!”

The coolies looked at each other perplexed. Most of them did not possess a coat at all, and the few that did also left them at home in the coolie barracks, which was far away, a quarter of an hour’s walk from the overseer’s house. But the strict *tuwan* said he would start paying in five minutes, and whoever was not there or did not wear a coat would receive no wages!

This was the moment when the career of Chaw A Hjong started. Because he did not have a coat. It was a slightly worn out *kabaja* made up of two dirty pieces of white cloth patched together, but it was a coat of sorts. In the quick brain of Chaw A Hjong, an ingenious idea took shape.

"For ten cents, I will lend my coat to anyone," he said to his puzzled co-workers. "We will hide behind this bamboo hedge, and when the *tuwan* calls one of you, you will quickly put on the coat and go to him to take your pay. You will then hurry back here, return the coat, and the next one can come. What do you say?"

The coolies were indignant, thinking ten cents to be a too high price. But the five minutes passed quickly, and the *tuwan* was already calling out the first name.

"Lim Kui Seng!"

Lim Kui Seng yanked the *kabaja* out Chaw A Hjong's hands, quickly pulled it over his bare torso, and stepped in front of the *tuwan*'s table. He received his wages, a Singapore dollar and seventy-four cents, and disappeared again behind the bamboo hedge. He returned the *kabaja* to Chaw A. Hjong and paid ten cents. The next, and then the next one again, all forty-eight of them did exactly the same. With proud strides and with fifty ten-cent coins, as well as his own wages, a dollar and 89 cents, tied into the corner of his loincloth, Chaw A Hjong walked home to the coolie barracks, with a cheerful grin on his yellow face.

The huge amount he had earned quickly, however, soon started to itch in the corner of his loincloth. Chaw A Hjong was a new coolie; he had recently arrived from Hong Kong, where he lived with hundreds of thousands of his kind, like animals in human form, in a warren of rafts huddled together in the throat of the bay. Occasionally he had work; then he trotted sweaty and panting before a rickshaw for a day, pulling behind his countrymen born under a happier star or the rulers of the world, the whites. At the end of the day, he returned the rickshaw to its owner, the *lawtze*, gave him ninety percent of his earnings as rent, and with the few cents he had left he crawled back to the maze of rafts, or sat down on a street corner begging, sticking out his wound-covered, bandaged feet.

And now, suddenly, there were six dollars and eighty-nine cents tied into the corner of his loincloth! The entrepreneurial spirit of his race suddenly awoke in Chaw A Hjong. You can do a lot with six dollars and eighty-nine cents: you can spend it, you can buy opium with it, you can waste it on some greedy Malay whores, but you can also start a business with it.

Chaw A Hjong went to the Chinese *kedeh*, walked into a shop and bought two iron pans for two dollars, ginger for ten cents, dried fish for twenty cents, lombok peppers for twenty cents, some fatty pork from the Chinese butcher, some *ketjap manis* for twenty-five cents, and noodles for fifty cents. He then sat down in the yard of the coolie barracks and waited. The other coolies living in the barracks and those visiting from the neighboring plantation had already settled down on the ground and started to play dice. The dice rolled happily, the winners loudly expressed their cheerfulness, the losers hissed with dissatisfaction after every unsuccessful round, the flames in

the small oil lamps fired up in response to the breeze and cast capricious shadows on the yellow sand.

Chaw A Hjong had set up his occasional kitchen near the players: he had built tripod stands under the pans, threw in the pork he had cut up, added the spices, and started cooking. The hot air soon filled with mouth-watering fragrances, which mixed with the heavy smell from the sweaty coolies. Those who had won a round stood up sometimes and sniffed at the improvised kitchen of Chaw A Hjong. Money that comes easy also goes easy. The winners would not haggle: they ordered generous servings of juicy fatty pork with ginger, fish fried in coconut oil, or a portion of *bamie*. They quickly devoured the delicious food, and rushed back excitedly to occupy their places again among the other dice players.

When Chaw A Hjong counted his money the next morning, he had eleven dollars and twelve cents, plus the two pans and a quarter of the *ketjap* in the jar; he even had some meat and a little bit of dried fish left over. Chaw A Hjong started to think then. It was *hari besar*, a day off, and the dice players went to rest for a few hours. Chaw A Hjong also retreated to his room where he thought long and hard. After an hour and a half of thinking, he went to the butcher and bought five kilos of pork; from the grocer he bought spices, and then he returned to the barracks. The dice players were already busy playing on the mats. They continued until the next morning. Then they picked up their tools and left for work. None of them had any money. Chaw A Hjong, however, had twenty-four dollars and forty-two cents in his tin box. He buried the box with all his capital in it at the riverbank, under a big stone, and left it there until the next payday.

In the meantime, he thought long and hard, and he kept making plans. Fourteen days later, on the next payday, he shuffled home from work, pondering. He thought about how he could expand his business without giving any part of the profit to anyone. Exhausted, with the heavy pick mattock on his shoulder, he dragged on with difficulty. He felt dizzy and his stomach rattled with hunger, for Chaw A Hjong denied himself as much food as possible to reach his goal faster.

A Javanese coolie trudged ahead of him; she was also coming from work. His wandering gaze rested on the woman who walked ahead of him in tired, stumbling steps. Suddenly, he decided to walk faster and caught up with the woman. They walked side by side then. Chaw A Hjong was young. He did not know exactly what his age was, but he was still young and healthy. Ju-Imah was old, shrivelled, and worn out. Even the Malayan coolies didn't want her anymore, in spite of the fact that there were very few women and very many men in the barracks. By the time they reached the coolie barracks, they reached an agreement.

That same evening Ju-Imah moved in with Chaw A Hjong. From the barracks of the Javanese she took her things with her: a batik sarong, a teapot covered with rust



stains, a worn mattress, and a broken mirror no bigger than a palm, and she moved into the room of Chaw A Hjong. Ju-Imah knew that by this step she had irrevocably turned away from her own people, and that her countrymen, who worshipped another god, spoke a different language, and ate different dishes, would ruthlessly cast her out. But she was also aware that she was old and that she wouldn't be able to keep up the work of the coolies for long. Moreover, the Chinese respected women more than the men of her own people.

On the evening of the following payday, the two of them ran the business together. She cooked and Chaw A Hjong brought the fragrant dishes in beautiful green banana leaves to the customers.

The business prospered and Chaw A Hjong expanded it further and further. Not only did he sell fried meat and fish now, but also extended loans. After they lost their last cent in dice and were in a tight spot, players knocked on Chaw A Hjong's door for a small loan. Chaw A Hjong was always willing to lend them money, but gave at most one dollar, which was to be repaid as one dollar and fifty cents on the next payday. These debts were always paid on time, because in business the word of a Chinese is as sacred as the honor of an officer in our part of the world. Coolies sometimes ruthlessly robbed each other, some would not even flinch at murdering for money, but debts were always paid back with interest on time. Borrowing money is a business transaction, and therefore a matter of honor. Therefore, Chaw A Hjong never had a loss from these loans, except for one case, but that was at the beginning of his career as a banker, when he did not have sufficient experience yet. He lent five dollars to a coolie because he trusted him to win back his lost money. However, this coolie was dogged by ill fortune, and he lost the five dollars also. On the following payday, the debtor only received two dollars and twenty cents in wages, and thus could not pay off his debt. Even though he hanged himself out of shame, this did not help Chaw A Hjong in recovering his five dollars. He learnt his lesson from this incident, and from then on, he would not lend anyone more than one dollar. Gradually everyone owed him money, but Chaw A Hjong never wrote down the debtors' names or the amounts they borrowed. The entire bookkeeping was stored in his head: every item, sum borrowed, interest earned, as well as the expiry date. And Chaw A Hjong was never mistaken. Thus, he became a wealthy and substantial man: he no longer kept his money in a tin cigarette box, but bought gold coins, and hung them on the chest of Ju-Imah's silk *baju*. When he had so many gold coins that they could no longer be attached to Ju-Imah's clothes, he once again had to find a reliable investment. He was lucky again: the chief *tandil*, the Chinese head overseer, who kept all coolies under control with his impenetrable power and mysterious practices, needed money. The man, who was of course well aware of the wealth that Chaw A Hjong had acquired in the meantime, gave the honor to the coolie—because Chaw A Hjong was

still just a coolie after all, with his contract only expiring a year later—of asking him for a loan. Bending reverently, Chaw A Hjong listened as the message of the great *towkay* was conveyed, for things were nowhere near that Lim A Bak, the high *tandil*, would personally turn to a common coolie. With quick and deep bows, wringing his hands, Chaw A Hjong expressed thanks in a long speech for the confidence that the chief *tandil* had placed in him, with which the great *towkay* would honour him, the worthless and miserable coolie, and thereby elevate him to his own height. At this point, the *krani* held up his hand in rejection, which gesture meant that, indeed, the great *towkay* did honor you, nameless coolie, but to elevate you to his height...? No, that would be exaggerated to say the least...

Just then, Chaw A Hjong also realized this, and continued his speech differently:

"*Krani*, I have five hundred dollars, please tell the great *towkay* that this whole amount, which includes all my earthly possessions, is at his disposal. At the end of the month, of course, the chief *tandil* will honor me by paying back seven hundred and fifty dollars."

The *krani* nodded his head disdainfully: "Of course he will. You will bring him the money today." With these words, he turned and walked away.

That same evening, Chaw A Hjong removed all but three gold coins from Ju-lmah's chest and took them to the chief *tandil*'s house. From that moment on, his career really took off. At the end of the month, the chief *tandil* paid him back the seven hundred and fifty dollars, and at the beginning of the following month borrowed the seven hundred and fifty dollars again. A month later, he paid back one thousand and one hundred. At that time, the chief *tandil* also invited Chaw A Hjong for a game of dice. Chaw A Hjong was distressed by this honor: both his hands and his feet were trembling. He put on the latest additions to his wardrobe: a beautiful white suit and a pair of orange shoes. With staggering knees and walking pigeon-toed because he was wearing shoes for the first time, he went to the house of the great *towkay*. The pot-bellied gentlemen with their long nails were already playing dice frantically. The chief *tandil* received Chaw A Hjong kindly, and offered him a large bowl of *toddy*.<sup>43</sup> Then he invited him to sit at the table and kindly urged him to join the game. Chaw A Hjong had never drunk spirits before and also played dice for the first time in his life. Suddenly he was sitting between those arrogant big *towkays*, his head was dizzy, and his eyes were dazzling at the sight of the large amount of money. He knew that one could lose his mind by playing dice, since he owed his wealth to coolies possessed by the game. But now he brushed aside his premonitions: he was proud of the honour to play among the *towkays*, so he reached into the pocket of his white linen suit and bet his first hundred note. By the next morning, he had won eleven thousand four hundred dollars. Utterly exhausted and with ringing

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43 Toddy: palm wine or an alcoholic drink made of bourbon, brown sugar, hot water, and cloves.

ears, he stumbled home to the coolie barracks, after leaving his money in the care of the chief *tandil*. Of course, he had not received a receipt: it was possible to make a defenceless man drunk and then win all his money on dice, it could even be an honourable act, but leaving money with someone for safekeeping was an entirely different matter; it was a commercial transaction where the given word means a guarantee that no one would dare touch the money deposited.

The chief *tandil* was tearing his thin, grey hair with anger. Chaw A Hjong walked home to the barracks, woke up Ju-Imah, took the remaining three gold coins from her chest, confiscated the silk *baju* and floral *sarong*, and chased her out of the house. Then he picked up his pick mattock and went to work cutting the forest.

From here on it is difficult to follow the career of Chaw A Hjong. His contract expired a few months later, and Chaw A Hjong disappeared from the plantation. Later, he turned up in the city, where he managed several mysterious enterprises. His junks, with their sails like bat wings, traversed the whole area of the thousand islands, they turned up here and there, but always at night, under the cover of darkness, in a dark, muddy, mangrove-lined bay. The mysterious, pirate-faced Chinese manning his junks quickly unloaded their suspicious cargo and disappeared into the thick, warm mist.

The standing of Chaw A Hjong continued to grow: his own countrymen feared him and even the Europeans had to take into account his mysterious power. His palace was accessible, or rather inaccessible, through three courtyards, each with a dragon-decorated gate, for gigantic, gruff bodyguards—looking like executioners—prevented any unwanted guest from entering.

One day, however, disaster struck quite unexpectedly. Accompanied by his bodyguards, Chaw A Hjong, came out of one of the decorated gates to step into a rickshaw waiting for him there, when suddenly an old beggar, crouching at the gate, stretched out her long, wrinkled arm. Something glinted in the sunlight, the big *towkay* grabbed his stomach and collapsed.

The wise gentlemen of the court could not figure out what had led the old, stubbornly silent beggar to murder the wealthy Chinese, who was so highly regarded and known for his generosity. Nobody remembered, of course, that Chaw A Hjong had once started his career as a coolie. And no-one remembered Ju-Imah either. Because time passes fast under the Equator.

# ISLANDS OF PARADISE? JAVA AND BALI THROUGH A WOMAN'S EYES

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## The Journey of Ilona Zboray

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*Vera Brittig*



Ilona Zboray, a young Hungarian woman, arrived in the Indonesian archipelago in the mid-1930s to visit her brother, Ernő Zboray, who had been working in Java since 1921. They both wrote a good number of articles about the islands, with Ernő writing three books about Java as well. Ilona published several articles in the mid-1930s, focusing on culture and women's life in Bali, along with some noteworthy photographs. This was at a time when Bali, known as "the last paradise," was in its heyday and was one of the most coveted tourist destinations in the world. This chapter adds the name of Ilona Zboray to the list of known Asian travelers, among whom many more are men than women. I raise questions that are prefigured in her own writing: Did she try to understand and accept the different mindset of the locals? Did her attitude offer her a closer insight and deeper understanding of the worldview of the people of Java and Bali? Or as a stranger, even despite her best intentions, was she merely an intruder?

Scientific interest in the Southeast Asian archipelago started relatively late in Hungary, in the second half of the nineteenth century. Until 1918, the Kingdom of Hungary was part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy; consequently, Hungarian cultural and scientific interest could not escape Austrian influence. The official documentation language for state-initiated diplomatic trips or scientific expeditions was German, therefore works published in Hungarian are of particular significance. Those who were educated of course read and spoke in German as a must in Hungary, but the language of literature as well as the language of magazines and newspapers was Hungarian in that period of time. Relatively few sources are available in Hungarian about Southeast Asia, in terms of both research and surviving documents. This is the main reason why I think it is worth researching Ilona Zboray's writings, since she—together with her brother—was widely read in

her own time. Apart from a few mentions, however, her legacy has not been scientifically processed. The primary aim of this article is to provide a descriptive analysis of those of her writings which were composed in the tropics. Further research, however, will be needed to thematize her work within a broader narrative.<sup>1</sup>

### The Zboray siblings

As far as we know, Ilona Zboray traveled to the archipelago in order to visit her brother. Of the two siblings, we know much more about Ernő Zboray, as he published three books and a great many articles about Java. Ernő Zboray<sup>2</sup> relocated to West Java in 1921, where he subsequently worked on rubber plantations and built a successful career.<sup>3</sup> When the twenty-year old Ernő Zboray decided to embark on a trip to the island of Java in 1921 he probably knew very little about the everyday life and culture of the locals. Nonetheless, very soon, only a year later, he started to write about Java, and published writings on the subject continuously from 1922 to 1939, contributing greatly to making Java known to the wider Western public.<sup>4</sup> He was the first to publish regularly in Hungarian about the Indonesian archipelago and to provide a deeper insight into the culture of Java, describing the way of life and traditions of the locals. He described his motives for going and the ensuing journey to Java, his arrival and the first few joyful weeks he spent there, followed by the harsh early years on the island. His early writings were full of youthful enthusiasm and emotions, and because of his humor and style, his works are still enjoyable for readers even today. His writings and the exhibition of his West Javanese collection in Budapest in 1931 were fundamentally important in the development of scientific interest in both Java and the Indonesian archipelago in Hungary.<sup>5</sup>

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- 1 I would like to take this opportunity to thank Borbála Száva for her comments on this text.
  - 2 Ernő Zboray, also known as Ernst von Zboray, was born on August 21, 1901 in Budapest, in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and died on June 16, 1959 in Deventer, Netherlands.
  - 3 Gábor Pusztai's article published in Dutch in 2002 provides the most data and information about the life of Ernő Zboray as well as his family. See Gábor Pusztai and Gerard Termorshuizen, "Ernő Zboray: Een Hongaar op Java" [Ernő Zboray: A Hungarian in Java], *Indische Letteren* 17, no. 4 (2002): 147–66. [https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/\\_ind004200201\\_01/\\_ind004200201\\_01\\_0020.php](https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/_ind004200201_01/_ind004200201_01_0020.php). In addition to biographical data, we may learn the most about Zboray's first three years in Java, his first impressions there, and his personality in general from his own book. See Ernő Zboray, *Az örök nyár hazájában: Feljegyzések Jáva szigetéről* [In the land of eternal summer: Notes on the island of Java] (Budapest: Világirodalom, 1924).
  - 4 Ernő Zboray had already published some eighty-eight articles in various journals by 1931 alone.
  - 5 The highlights of his collections are a *wayang golek* set along with a gamelan orchestra from West Java.

Judging by his writings, he was continuously guided by a European way of thinking and favored a Western worldview: he never directly questioned the superiority or primacy of the colonizers. At the same time, he sought to know and understand the worldview and the mindset of the people of Java. He also used his knowledge of the local culture, even if not out of respect, in order to achieve his goals in his work: “With the more intelligent natives, great effect can be achieved with examples taken from the *wajang lakons* (wayang plays). This is the most artistic way of ‘persuading’; it’s not enough to master the language, it also requires full knowledge of the *lakons* and their characters.”<sup>6</sup> He respected the beliefs of the locals, although with the typical doubts and distance of a Westerner.

Like Ernő Zboray, most Hungarians before him, including the first women travelers to Southeast Asia, journeyed to the archipelago to pursue their careers. As early as 1879, in his text *Úti emlékeim Singapoore és vidékéről* [My travel memoirs of Singapore and its surroundings], János Xántus wrote about Hungarian women from Transylvania who belonged to a group of professional entertainers together with Hungarian Romani musicians. He reported that their group, along with three other groups of Hungarian musicians and performers, enjoyed a great reputation in Singapore’s nightlife.<sup>7</sup> Later, in the early 1920’s, newspaper reports appeared about artists and performers touring the islands, such as the opera singer Boriska Pálffy,<sup>8</sup> who also performed in the archipelago on her Asian tour. It is also known from the newspapers that the soubrette dancer Sári Csorba met her Javanese husband at the age of fifteen during a tour that also covered Singapore and Java.<sup>9</sup> She was accompanied on that tour by her sister Klári Csorba, who later had a successful career in Shanghai. Flora Desewffy,<sup>10</sup> of aristocratic origin, also arrived in the Indonesian islands as a dancer, as evidenced by a 1936 photo of her performance in Java with Ama-

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6 Zboray, *Az örök nyár hazájában*, 174.

7 János Xántus, *Úti emlékeim Singapoore és vidékéről* [My travel memoirs of Singapore and its surroundings] (Győr: 1879), 84–90.

8 Boriska Pálffy, born 1892, was a stage performer and opera singer; see “Négy hónap a boldogság szigetén. Két magyar művész körútja Jávában és Indiában” [Four months on the island of happiness: A tour of two Hungarian artists in Java and India], *Nemzeti Újság*, October 16, 1921, 4. Arcanum.

9 “Jáva szigetére ment férjhez egy milliomos hinduhoz a Kecskeméten is jól ismert Csorba Sári” [Sári Csorba, also well known in Kecskemét, married a Hindu millionaire on the island of Java], *Kecskeméti Közlöny*, September 2, 1934, 10; M. M. “Bubukár Nhaudhoy milliomos javai ültetvényes Budapestre repült, hogy feleségül vegye borsai Csorba Sárát” [Bubukár Nhaudhoy, a millionaire Javanese planter, flew to Budapest to marry Sára Csorba from Borsaj], *Pesti Napló*, August 19, 1934, 6. Arcanum.

10 See Györgyi Fajcsák, “Pokolra épült mennyország: Egy magyar táncosnő Shanghaiban” [Heaven built on hell: A Hungarian dancer in Shanghai], in *Sanghay Shanghai. Párhuzamos eltérések Kelet és Nyugat között* [Sanghay Shanghai: Parallel diversities between East and West], ed. Györgyi Fajcsák and Béla Kelényi (Budapest: Hopp Ferenc Ázsiai Művészeti Múzeum, 2017), 223–35.

lia Pollákovics,<sup>11</sup> in another photo, she poses with an umbrella in the palm garden of the Grand Hotel in Surabaya.<sup>12</sup>

Naturally, Hungarian women went to Southeast Asia not only for work, tours, and performances, but also for pleasure, as travelers and tourists. A 1937 travelogue, entitled *Rejtelmes Kelet* [The mysterious east], which guides the reader through Asia, is considered exceptional among contemporary Hungarian travel books.<sup>13</sup> The author was a young Hungarian woman, Júlia Geszty.<sup>14</sup> This young journalist began her trip to the East in 1933, and two years later, in 1935, she published not only a book about it but also a series of articles with excellent photographs. In her writings, she provides details about the culture of the different regions she visited—details that would have escaped the attention of most tourists, even though she did not spend a long time in any one place. She did not observe an area or a culture as a researcher or a scientist, but viewed them with the curiosity of a traveler. As we can see, Ilona Zboray was not the first Hungarian woman to visit Java, nor was she even the first woman author to write about it; however, the hitherto unexplored significance of her reports and descriptions lies in their unique perspective.

### Ilona Zboray<sup>15</sup>

Ernő Zboray spent most of his life in Java<sup>16</sup> but maintained a close relationship with his parents and sister. As a result, Ilona Zboray<sup>17</sup> visited her brother in Java in the mid-1930s, between 1935 and 1937. Unlike her brother, she went to the island as a visitor, and thus spent a shorter time in the archipelago, only

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11 “Magyarok Világhíradója” [Hungarians in world news], *Színházi Élet*, February 16–22, 1936, 71. Arcanum.

12 G. P., “Magyar nóta Shanghaiban: A Távolkeletről beszél egy magyar táncosnő” [Hungarian note in Shanghai: A Hungarian dancer talks about the Far East], *Színházi Magazin*, February 4–10, 1942, 26–27. Arcanum.

13 Júlia Geszty, *Rejtelmes Kelet: Egy magyar leány utazása Indiában, Sziámban, Jáva szigetén, Kínában, Japánban, Koreában, Mancsukóban* [The mysterious East: The journey of a Hungarian girl in India, Siam, the island of Java, China, Japan, Korea, and Manchuria] (Budapest: Singer és Wolfner, [1937])

14 Júlia Geszty was born in Budapest in 1908.

15 From this paragraph on, Ilona Zboray will be written as Zboray, and her brother Ernő with his full name.

16 Ernő Zboray lived and worked in West Java with his German wife and their children until the second half of the 1950s, building a prosperous planter career. He later moved to the Netherlands, where he died in 1959, in Deventer.

17 Ilona Zboray, also known as Ilona Maria Fennema-von Zboray, was born on April 6, 1914 in Budapest, in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and died on June 27, 2001 in Bussum, Netherlands.

about two years. Concerning the tropics, Ilona Zboray's primary source may have been her brother; it is most likely that she would have already had an impression of Javanese life through her brother's perceptions and interpretations by the time she arrived there. Thanks to her articles, we can gain an insight into the world of the archipelago of the 1930s through the eyes of a young Central European woman. Unfortunately, we know almost nothing about either her early life in Hungary or the details of her travels, except for what we can glean from her own articles. Although there is no doubt that her brother's knowledge of the archipelago and the culture of Java provided her with a wide range of information, she always observed local events through the eyes of a traveler and published her reports on the islands of Java and Bali as a tourist.

Her work is still largely unexplored and neglected, and to the best of my knowledge only Gábor Pusztai mentions it in his study of her brother's life.<sup>18</sup> So far, I have been able to find a total of twenty-eight articles published between the summer of 1935 and December 1939, in nine different Hungarian newspapers. Four of these articles are unrelated to Indonesia or to her travels in the archipelago. Much later, in 1979, her book *Nagyszülők és unokák* (Grandparents and grandchildren) was published,<sup>19</sup> which is not about Indonesia. Three of her writings were also published in German in *Pester Lloyd*<sup>20</sup> (in 1935, 1937, and 1938), only two of which are related to Indonesia.

Although we cannot be certain, we can assume that she began her journey in Java, where she probably visited her brother first and spent a lengthy period of time there in his company. While her writing on Java was already in print in 1935,<sup>21</sup> she published her first article on Bali ("Fire Dance in an Earthly Paradise") only in 1937.<sup>22</sup> According to an interview with her, her brother invited her to Java whence she returned—following a brief stay in the Netherlands—to Budapest after an absence of nearly two years. We know from this interview<sup>23</sup>

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18 Pusztai and Termorshuizen, "Ernő Zboray: Een Hongaar op Java," 149. [https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/\\_ind004200201\\_01/\\_ind004200201\\_01\\_0020.php](https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/_ind004200201_01/_ind004200201_01_0020.php).

19 Ilona F. Zboray, *Nagyszülők és unokák* [Grandparents and grandchildren], trans. Damokos Katalin (Budapest: Minerva, 1979.)

20 *Pester Lloyd* was the first independent newspaper in Hungary. This German-language, liberal daily-newspaper was published in Hungary between 1854 and 1945 and was mainly read by citizens of Pest who also read German.

21 See Ilona Zboray, "Hausweihe in den Tropen" [A house consecration in the tropics], *Pester Lloyd*, July 17, 1935, 7. According to this, Zboray was already in Buitenzorg (Bogor) in June 1935, as her article was dated in Buitenzorg.

22 Ilona Zboray, "Tűztánc a földi paradicsomban" [Fire dance in an earthly paradise], *Képes Vasárnap*, November 28, 1937, 20–21. Arcanum.

23 Rózsa Fehér, "Beszélgetés egy pesti úrileánnyal" [A conversation with a woman from Pest], *Pesti Napló*, January 30, 1938, 35. (the article also provides a full-length photo of Ilona Zboray)



that the time she spent in Bali was a particularly fond memory for her, as it was there that she met her future husband,<sup>24</sup> Dutch lawyer Anthony Fennema. According to the article, she also met the Sunan of Solo and his wife at the Hotel Isola in Bandung—as evidenced by the photos published in the article. She even ran into a “world-famous” fortune teller named Madame Leila, who—to her great surprise—actually turned out to be a fellow Hungarian.

## Java

Zboray’s articles on Java, perhaps due to the influence of her brother, have a different tone compared to those she wrote later about Bali. She does not write about tourist attractions in Java, such as Borobudur or Yogyakarta, nor about dance performances organized for tourists, but mostly about local events. In addition, she writes about women’s fashion (“Fashion of Native Women on the Island of Java”),<sup>25</sup> and about socially sensitive topics that were likely to attract less attention from a passing tourist, such as the introduction of vaccines into a community. In one of her earliest articles from 1935, entitled “Brown People under the Vaccine Needle,”<sup>26</sup> she mentions the Dutch government’s effort to vaccinate local children against infectious diseases in Java with a locally produced vaccine. She describes the course of the event, relating how the vaccination was carried out by so-called *mantris* (assistants), and took place at the *haji*’s house, in the presence of several people holding important positions in the village. Mothers with their children who turned up for vaccination wore their most beautiful dresses, considering the event as a holiday. In describing the women coming for vaccination she writes about the local way of carrying children: “They usually carry their child not in their arms but in a scarf-like batik shawl worn across their shoulders. This is the so-called *slendang*.” She also writes that the vaccine, which is scratched into the arm, causes the skin to swell if it works. So mothers applied homemade medicine to make the site of the vaccination less visible:

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24 They were married on July 7, 1938 in Budapest, see *Pesti Hírlap*, July 7, 1938, 10.; her husband’s full name was Antonij Gerardus Fennema (1902–1984)

25 Ilona Zboray, “Bennszülött nők divatja Jáva szigetén” [Fashion of native women on the island of Java], *Nemzeti Újság*, June 7, 1936, 25. Arcanum.

26 Ilona Zboray, “Barna emberek az oltótű alatt” [Brown people under the vaccine needle], *Pesti Hírlap Vasárnapja*, October 20, 1935, 16–17. Arcanum.

In a stone mortar [the mother] grinds some rice and dried *kentjuk* root into a powder, then mixes the whole thing with a little water. She puts this ointment on the child's arm at the site of the shot. The mother is also very careful that until the wound is completely healed, water and especially rain should not touch it, because then the scar at the shot site will be too clearly visible. And whether because there really is a basis for [what appears as] a superstition, and it is the effect of the home-made remedy, indeed, the point of vaccination on the child's arm can barely be discerned afterward.<sup>27</sup>

Another one of her articles, entitled "Inside a *Missigit*: Where a European Can Rarely Enter,"<sup>28</sup> discusses the religious life of the Javanese with a special emphasis on their houses of worship. In this article she presents a typical small Javanese Muslim house of worship ("a small house of prayer called a *missigit* by the Malays") and she provides the local terms for the four persons who perform the functions of the house of prayer. She writes at length about the importance of water in relation to the building and notes: "The richness of a *kampung* (village) can always best be judged by the size and beauty of the *missigit*." The interesting thing about the description is that, as Zboray describes it, although women were not allowed inside, she was able to get permission to enter for a fee—but only if she wore pants. However, she did not have to perform ablution for the visit. In her early writings, she had not yet dispelled her European prejudices, but at the same time she revealed some sort of respect for the locals: In complete silence, she took a photograph of the *imam*—and though she wanted to do so unnoticed—she felt the hostile gaze of the *imam*: "I must leave... I carefully close the small door behind myself and a strange feeling of shame comes upon me, as if I have committed some sin." This somewhat peculiar feeling of discomfort and shame, which first appears here, is a recurring element in Zboray's writings. In Bali, where she traveled basically as a tourist and discovered everyday life as a tourist, she makes similar remarks several times. The strange world she encountered there, which she did not understand as an outsider, elicited her respect. At the same time, she seems to feel bad for being an intruder, as someone disturbing and violating the local culture and people there.

Another major topic that captured her interest was the everyday life of women as well as their clothing and fashion in general. She mentions these sev-

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27 Zboray, "Barna emberek az oltótű alatt," 17.

28 Ilona Zboray, "A 'Missigit' belsejében, ahova ritkán léphet be európai" [Inside a "missigit": Where a European can rarely enter], *Nemzeti Újság*, January 19, 1936, 18. Arcanum.

eral times in her texts on both Java and Bali.<sup>29</sup> In a 1938 article, she expresses her admiration and appreciation for the refined elegance and learned knowledge of Javanese women as follows:

I once had the opportunity to join an official ceremony attended by all the major European and indigenous nobility along with their wives. There was a great contrast between the European women in fashionable clothes, wearing make-up and glittering with fake jewelry, and the native women moving with simple but inimitable grace—in which they outshone the European women. Even intellectually they held their own with their white-skinned fellow women because most of them spoke not only Malay but also Dutch and I even heard French. Then for a moment I thought to myself, see, you can still be a woman without the craze for fashion and the problem about what to wear.<sup>30</sup>

This kind of comment on local women represents a different point of view than the general imperialist tone and we might ask here whether it was because Ilona Zboray was a woman herself?

Among her writings on Java, there are several that offer the readers of her time a glimpse of the culture and beliefs of the island. Again, the phrasing of these texts suggests that Ernő Zboray, with his local knowledge and cultural understanding, might have played a role in their conception. As Zboray's articles on Java and Bali show, she tried to take part in events that were for the benefit of the locals and not for the sake of tourists. Such could have been a traditional ceremonial offering of a buffalo-head:

Among the many superstitions, traditions, and customs of the Malays, one of the most interesting is the "buffalo head sacrifice." Europeans living in Java very rarely have the opportunity to attend the celebration that comes with it. This belongs, so to speak, to the "internal affairs" of the people and it is not very much liked if the infidel white man disturbs this private ceremony with his presence.

Like all the offerings in the East, this is also done to fulfill a request. This time the reason was to plant tree seedlings in the plowed rubber field of the plantation. The day before the planting, the native supervisor, the *mandur*,

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29 See e.g. Zboray, "Bennszülött nők divatja Jáva szigetén," 25; Ilona Zboray, "Hogyan él a jávai bennszülött?" [How does the Javanese native live?], *Új idők*, September 4, 1938, 345–346. Arcanum.

30 Zboray, "Hogyan él a jávai bennszülött?" 345.

appears before the European administrator and humbly asks permission to hold a *slametan*. A *slametan* means a ceremony, that is, a feast combined with an offering. The native workers wish to celebrate Allah's goodness with a ceremonial offering before planting new gardens. In short, they ask for rain to strengthen the newly planted trees. A European plantation would not need a similar "call for help," but the situation is different in the tropics.<sup>31</sup>

She gives a relatively detailed description of the course of the ceremony, together with the preparations. Meanwhile she covers the privileged role of the *karbau*, i.e., the buffalo, in the life of the locals. She doesn't comment on what she thinks of the offering, she doesn't judge the customs of the locals, but she leaves no doubt in making the reader understand that the other half of the world operates differently:

The buffalo head hasn't been in the soil for three hours yet and dark clouds are towering in the sky. It's pouring. A real deluge, the tropical rain lasts for three days and three nights. The native plants the trees and thinks of the wonderful goodness of Allah...<sup>32</sup>

The title of another quite remarkable piece of writing is "Peculiar Ceremonies in Java," which describes a traditional funeral among the Chinese minority living in Java, laying a member of a wealthy family to rest in a ceremonial setting.<sup>33</sup> She also documents the narrative with four photographs, including the funeral procession and the table with offerings set up in front of the tomb, along with the deceased's son and his wife.

Perhaps not in her day, but looking back now, one of her most significant writings documenting the period was written in connection with the Javanese worldview and the organizing of a ceremony. It was published in 1936 with the title "How a Native Helps Himself in Java If He Has No Money."<sup>34</sup> In the story, she contemplates on the Javanese way of thinking with some perplexity, but with

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31 Ilona Zboray, "Bivalyfej áldozat Jáván" [Buffalo head sacrifice in Java], *Képes Vasárnap*, February 20, 1938, 14–15. Arcanum.

32 Zboray, "Bivalyfej áldozat Jáván," 15.

33 What is described in the article corresponds to a traditional Chinese funeral even today, e.g., in Yunnan. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Sinologist Judit Bagi for her explanations on the Chinese aspects. Ilona Zboray, "Különös szertartások Jáván" [Peculiar ceremonies in Java], *Pesti Hírlap Vasárnapja*, November 29, 1936, 14–15. Arcanum.

34 Ilona Zboray, "Hogyan segít magát a jávai bennszülött, ha nincs pénze" [How a native helps himself in Java if he has no money], *Pesti Hírlap Vasárnapja*, June 21, 1936, 18–19. Arcanum.

humor at the same time, similar to her brother's "reversed world" approach, according to which everything in Java is *done in reverse*.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, she also documents the main attraction of the ceremony, a *wayang golek* performance.<sup>36</sup> The text does not include the location and date, but it does provide photos. One of them shows her, while the others document the *wayang golek* stage during the performance, which is built on a high platform.

What makes the report significant is that there is no known detailed description of a *wayang* performance from her brother, Ernő Zboray, even though the only *wayang golek* set in Hungarian public collections comes from him.<sup>37</sup> His West Javanese collection, which was first exhibited in 1931 in the Ferenc Hopp Museum in Budapest, testifies to his in-depth knowledge of the local culture.<sup>38</sup> His writings convey that he tried to understand the local beliefs and the way in which the people of Java interpret their own traditions. In an article written in Batavia at the end of September 1922, he wrote about going to a local "holy man" to learn about the nature of the traditional thinking of the people of Java. He describes the case in connection with the solar eclipse observed on the island of Java on September 21, 1922. "Such a venerable priest is also 'my older brother,' Hadji Nasad. Two days before the eclipse, I visited him at his bamboo house in 'Kampung Lima' to find out what he thought of *Dukun*, the evil spirit, the 'death of Sun,' and other current affairs."<sup>39</sup> And the fact that this was not the first time he visited the *haji* to gain insight into the beliefs of the people of Java is also clear from the article itself: "Remember, Sir, I talked about it once when you asked for the names of the *wajang* puppets." In other words, it is not a matter of randomly collected knowledge. He consciously wanted to learn about and to get to know the way of thinking and the various beliefs of the locals. From his writings, Java emerges as an ancient culture with a unique belief system. However, thanks to Ilona Zboray's article, the original, local context of a way-

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35 Zboray, *Az örök nyár hazájában*, 196.

36 *Wayang* theatre is a popular and spectacular artistic tradition in Java. There are many different types of *wayang*; *wayang golek* refers to plays performed by three-dimensional wooden rod puppets.

37 Ernő Zboray writes at length about *wayang* both in his books and in several articles, but he generally writes about *wayang kulit* in these, and does not describe any particular performance in detail.

38 The schematic display of *wayang golek* puppets on the wall of the exhibition room in the Ferenc Hopp Museum was actually arranged according to the setting of the puppets on a real *wayang golek* stage. Without the information acquired by Zboray in situ, such an arrangement would have been very unlikely in Budapest in 1931.

39 Ernő Zboray, "Dukun, a rossz szellem megeszi a napot... Napfogyatkozás Indiában" [Dukun, the evil spirit, eats the sun... A solar eclipse in India], *Nemzeti Újság*, November 7, 1922, 4.

*ang golek* performance had already been documented in Hungarian in 1936, including the first photo documentation of a *wayang golek* performance in Hungary. While most photos of *wayang* at this time were pre-arranged and posed photography sessions rather than actual performances, this was not the case here, as the photograph shows the stage built on the podium where the night performance takes place, along with the performers as well as the audience.

This kind of attention to an actual *wayang golek* performance in a village setting presupposes some deeper knowledge. As with the attention to detail which appears in her writings and in her photographs—there is a real effort to understand the thinking behind the spectacle. So we cannot avoid asking the question: how much did Ernő Zboray influence his sister's point of view?

## Bali

In contrast to Java, Zboray reports on Bali primarily as a tourist. Bali became a tourist paradise in the 1920s and 1930s, after the Dutch government began to advertise it as a tourist destination soon after the brutal subjugation of the island. Advertisements offered a carefree island of spiritual harmony with wonderful natural endowments to Westerners who were tired of and disillusioned with their own civilization. The “Paradise Island” that appeared in the advertisements attracted many artists (Maurice Sterne, Walter Spies, Rudolf Bonnet, etc.) and world-famous celebrities including Charlie Chaplin in 1932, who only enhanced the image of the island. In fact, visitors to Bali, whether tourists, artists, or even researchers, were selective about what they saw and experienced there.<sup>40</sup> Thus, whether consciously or not, they conveyed what they themselves thought of Bali, constructing their own Bali image. Zboray presumably arrived in Bali in its heyday in 1936, the very year the anthropologist Margaret Mead started her fieldwork on the “island Eden” with Gregory Bateson.

Like most foreigners, Zboray was fascinated by the culture of the island, but the beauty of nature took a backseat in her writings. She visited the usual tourist destinations in Bali, as we know from the article “In the Valley of the

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40 The Netherlands Packet Steam Ship Line (KPM) started to advertise the island of Bali in 1914. See Adrian Vickers, *Bali: A Paradise Created* (Tuttle Publishing, Kindle Edition, 2013), 131; David Shavit, *Bali and the Tourist Industry: A History, 1906–1942* (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2003), 14. Vickers also notes that Walter Spies had a key role in the creation of the image of Bali, see “The birth of Bali the Paradise,” chap. 3 in *Bali: A Paradise Created*, 113–184.

Royal Tombs,”<sup>41</sup> for instance. Throughout her travels her descriptions portrayed characteristic features of traditional architecture, such as the tripartite division of the Balinese temples.<sup>42</sup> From her writings, as she shared the usual impressions of the tourists in those days, the reader has a feeling that the island is permeated by art. She observed that when a temple is built, almost all the villagers work on its construction and decoration, not only the craftsmen. The emphasis is on getting everyone involved in the activity, and along with other foreign visitors, she saw how “all Balinese are artists.”<sup>43</sup>

However, as Zboray became acquainted with the everyday life of the locals, it can be sensed from her writings that she could no longer take the easy-going attitude of tourists. According to her, in the traditional world of Bali, where their gods are constantly present and there is a festival every day,<sup>44</sup> the presence of tourists creates a conflict: She became an active participant of events yet felt uncomfortable and embarrassed. This is echoed several times in her writings:

At one of the intersections, I meet a group of women husking rice. Beautiful women working under shady palm trees make a truly picturesque sight. When they spot me, they start giggling loudly, pointing at my camera. Then one of them leaves the group and signals to me that they want money. When they find out I don't have a penny, they sulkily turn their backs. The culture of the white man, his money, has already poisoned them. Their pristine modesty and naivety are slowly fading away, and the “child of the people”<sup>45</sup> becomes oddly distorted. We Europeans regret this and in the meantime we forget that we made it so.<sup>46</sup>

The Dutch government launched a campaign to make Bali a coveted tourist destination, the tropical island of happiness, where a piece of treasured ancient art and culture could still be enjoyed, even by outsiders who, however, would cer-

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41 Ilona Zboray, “A királýsírok völgyében: Utazás Bali szigetén” [In the valley of the tombs of the kings: Travel on the island of Bali], *Pesti Napló*, July 27, 1938, 11. Arcanum.

42 Ilona Zboray, “A balinézek országában” [In the land of the Balinese], *A földgömb* 9, no. 10 (1938): 375.

43 Zboray, “A balinézek országában,” 368–375.

44 Ilona also wrote an article on this topic, see Ilona Zboray, “Az ünnepek hazájában. Utazás Bali szigetén” [In the land of holidays: Travels in the island of Bali], *Pesti Napló*, July 27, 1938, 12. Arcanum.

45 The unusual phrase Zboray uses here is most probably some kind of literary reference and its original Hungarian version is also uncommon.

46 Ilona Zboray, “Egy balinéz kampunban” [In a Balinese kampung], *Képes Vasárnap*, August 27, 1939, 21. Arcanum.

tainly not leave it untouched. We can assume that the reason for her visit was also to experience this unspoiled fairy tale culture. However, although her attitude exemplifies a common touristic, exoticizing search for intact, pristine culture and natives, her repeated discomfort and embarrassment also suggests a sensitivity to something being wrong.

One of Bali's main attractions has always been its traditional dances and the dancers who perform them. It was no different in the mid-1930s; indeed, this was perceptible from the very beginning: "When we docked on the island of Bali, all I knew was that I would find here the most beautiful girls in the world and most of the temples in the world."<sup>47</sup> In her writings about Bali, Zboray places the greatest emphasis on dances, on the lives of dancers, and on Balinese women in general. As a tourist, she had the opportunity to witness several performances of which she gave sensuous descriptions and even published photos in her articles. These dance performances captivated her as they made her feel like she could really take part in local traditions:

The European traveling in the tropics, who has already been pampered by the exotic, craves an exclusive experience! Not a performance for the people, for the public at large, but to watch the people during their own celebrations and ceremonies. This desire also guided me as I tried to enter the privacy of the people during my stay on the Island of Bali.<sup>48</sup>

Thus, she was able to witness the "witch dance" of the Barong dance drama, the "kris dance" performed in a trance during a night-time ceremony, and the "fire dance" of young girls in the village of Kintamani.<sup>49</sup> It is clear from her description that she did not secretly witness the event in Kintamani; rather, it was a performance for tourists, where the dancers donning their costumes is already part of the attraction, as it also takes place in public.<sup>50</sup>

The experience of an inquisitive tourist is also apparent in the following description:

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47 Ilona Zboray, "A táncosnők szigetén" [On the island of dancing women], *Nemzeti Ujság*, March 12, 1939, 14. Arcanum.

48 Ilona Zboray, "A boszorkánytánc: Utazás Bali szigetén" [The witches' dance: Travel on the island of Bali], *Pesti Napló*, July 30, 1938, 8.

49 Zboray, "Túztánc a földi paradicsomban," 20–21.

50 "We arrived at the lodge in the afternoon and learned that the dance would be held in our honor this evening—"for two forints fifty"—as the native waiter quietly remarked. ... Watching the dancers dress up is a special attraction for Europeans and is therefore done in public." Zboray, "Túztánc a földi paradicsomban," 20.



On a sultry afternoon, just as I was taking a rest after lunch on the terrace of the small tropical hostel, the servant announced the coming of a native. ... To tell the truth, I was surprised by a slightly qualmish feeling, as the old man in a turban squatted silently in front of me, with vivid blinking eyes that belied his age. In my embarrassment, I almost forgot that I had to give him the signal to talk, otherwise he would be sitting here speechless until sunset. From the awkwardly performed rhyme, I finally understood that in a Balinese village an hour's walk from the hotel, a festival was being held today in honor of a temple anniversary, at which the famous "witch dance" would also be performed. Would I like to watch, and if so, he would lead me there and allow me to witness the celebration unnoticed.

Zboray happily accepted the invitation and watched the stunning performance. Her thoughts on the end of the performance:

I come out of my daze and stare at the temple, as if expecting it to completely disappear now. But only the servant comes—"can we go now?" I look for the little old man in the turban and want to ask about him, when to my greatest surprise I see him as he gets out of the legendary monster. He controlled the two hind legs of the animal! Covered in sweat, tired of the fight, but still smiling, he comes to me and asks if I am satisfied? I think that the tip I gave was more eloquent than any words.<sup>51</sup>

In her writings she pays special attention to women, as is evident already from her writings on Java. Someone paying special attention to women in a description of Bali in the 1930s was not uncommon —Bali was the island of beautiful bare-breasted women, who were the main attractions of the tourist business. But in Zboray's reading a different approach comes to the fore. Maybe because she herself was a woman, the role of women, their presence, and even their absence never escapes her attention. For example, she dedicates a separate article to the Balinese cockfight<sup>52</sup> in which she participated and described in detail something that is not only a game but also a sacrifice. The fact that she was alone as a woman may have made her inadvertently conspicuous: "Spectators

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51 Zboray, "A boszorkánytánc," 8.

52 Ilona Zboray, "Bru és a kakasviadalok elveszik a balinézek eszét és családokat tesznek tönkre" ['Bru' and cockfighting are driving the Balinese out of their minds and destroying their families], *Nemzeti Ujság*, September, 25, 1938. 9. Arcanum.

are waiting tightly side by side in tailored seats or squatting in a large circle. All are men, young men, or children. Not one woman can be seen.”

In 1939, she published two articles specifically on women, entitled “The Life of the Wondrous Balinese Women” and “The Island of Dancers.”<sup>53</sup> In her writings she seeks to approach and present the lives of the performers of mesmerizing dances and of Balinese women in general from the perspective of everyday life. In the eyes of strangers—namely tourists—Balinese women are envied for their beauty and talent. But in fact their life is mostly one of hard work. Moreover, according to Zboray, “Women usually work much more than men,”<sup>54</sup> and what’s more, in her view: “Their beauty deserves a queen’s destiny and yet fate placed them in bondage. On the Island of Bali, women are subordinate.”<sup>55</sup> Zboray’s observations are from a woman’s perspective. Yet, it should be noted, as Tessel Pollmann remarks, that it was a common opinion in the precolonial and early colonial times that women in Bali were “portrayed beautiful but were horribly exploited by their men.”<sup>56</sup> However, perhaps it was precisely at this point that Zboray captured the supposedly enviable female status with a woman’s eye, when the constructed romantic image of carefree Bali melted away. While she herself does not raise the question, it evidently arises in the reader: is Bali really the island of Paradise?

## Conclusion

We know from the 1938 interview with Zboray<sup>57</sup> that she went to the tropics, to one of the most coveted tourist destinations in the world at the time, at the invitation of her brother. Neither Ilona nor Ernő wrote about their relationship or their experiences together; it is not even mentioned that they spent time with each other in the archipelago. Still, we can assume that what Ilona Zboray saw and—more importantly—how she experienced the islands was largely influenced by her brother’s local knowledge and experience. She also refers to it in her interview in 1938: “By the way, my brother recently published his

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53 Ilona Zboray, “A világszép balinéz nők élete” [The life of the wondrous Balinese women], *Új Idők*, January 8, 1939, 73–74. Arcanum. Zboray, “A táncosnők szigetén,” 14.

54 Zboray, “Egy balinéz kampungban,” 20–21.

55 Zboray, “A világszép balinéz nők élete,” 73.

56 Tessel Pollmann, “Margaret Mead’s Balinese: The Fitting Symbols of the American Dream” *Indonesia*, no. 49 (1990): 24.

57 Fehér, “Beszélgetés egy pesti úrileánnyal,” 35.

book with the title *Fifteen Years on the Island of Java*,<sup>58</sup> which is the only authentic Hungarian work so far. Everything and everyone of interest there is in it.”

Ilona Zboray had the opportunity to gain insight into the everyday life of the locals in Java, something which was rarely given to those who were only passing-by; and without background knowledge she would probably not have been able to interpret it. However, as a guest of her brother, she was able to obtain a viewpoint in which the locals were not tourist attractions, but real people who cultivated a respectable culture. This may have played a role in the fact that at times Zboray saw herself as a disturbing factor, as someone who violated the harmony with her presence,<sup>59</sup> and she clearly respected not only the culture and the knowledge, but also the people.

She visited Bali as a tourist in its heyday, but she arrived there already armed with her Javanese experiences. The image of the “Paradise Island” was created by Europeans, who lived accordingly in Bali. Apparently, Zboray may have sought this “last Eden” as well, and it is reflected in her writings as her articles were built around these favored topos and slogans; *Bali is the island of gods, art and religion, the last Paradise, the island of dancers and the most beautiful women of the world, where everyone is an artist*. She was confronted with the wonderland that the brochures offered, yet her writings mostly reveal that this was merely the surface which the locals presented for the tourists. This was not the *real Bali*, but rather a play, a performance, their proffered goods—be it their arts or crafts, religion or everyday life.

Ilona Zboray’s journey was not unique; when she traveled, the Indonesian islands were already a greatly desired tourist destination from everywhere in the world. However, her journey and her writings are interesting not because of the fact that she traveled and she wrote about it but because of her perspective, because of what she described and the way she described her experiences, and because of her themes and the depth of her writings. She arrived in the archipelago as a young woman in her early twenties in the mid-1930s, and her writings and photographs are still edifying and enjoyable for Hungarian readers even today. Apart from the language of her writings, there is nothing specific in their content to indicate that she was Hungarian; at the same time, we can find some obvious hints pointing to the life of women. Her articles devoted considerable attention to the status of women—and of women

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58 Zboray, *Tizenöt év Jáva szigetén*.

59 See, for example, her article, where she describes her feeling of shame when she took a photo of an *imam*, Zboray, “A ‘Missigít’ belsejében, ahova ritkán léphet be európai,” 18.

in general—and she wrote of them with explicit sympathy and, where appropriate, compassion. Her attitude and perception, in my opinion, were probably primarily due to gender<sup>60</sup> and had less to do with being Hungarian, for instance. The journey itself, the trip and its coverage in the papers, was a once-in-a-lifetime experience for her; no other similar writings from her are known. Nor do we know what is reality and what is fiction in her published articles. Thanks to the precisely described details of her experiences, the location and identity of certain dances can be determined in most cases, even if she did not provide the actual names. She shared her own, first-hand experiences with the reader, not only what she had seen but also her feelings, which emerged when she met the other culture. The image of the “Paradise Island” and the “carefree life” is shattered in her writings about the daily lives of the beautiful dancers; nevertheless, the wonderful culture of Bali, the beautiful tropical island where one stumbles upon art at every step, undoubtedly fascinated her. At the same time, her writings also show that she always had the feeling of being a stranger, sometimes even that of an intruder.

### **Ilona Zboray: How a Native Helps Himself in Java, If He Has No Money.**

(Zboray, Ilona. “Hogyan segít magán a jávai bennszülött, ha nincs pénze.” *Pesti Hírlap Vasárnapja*, June 21, 1936. Arcanum.)

Amat, the aged native was short of money. What can a poor servant of Allah do now to get some money? He follows the traditional custom and holds a ceremony. Now everyone thinks that a ceremony is about spending money, not making money. This is true. But since everything is reversed in India,<sup>61</sup> so is this. This is because the guests customarily pay admission—10 or 20 cents, but sometimes even 50. So the aged Amat calculates that if he invites about 150 people from the village, he can make a nice income. But to organize the festivity, he still needs a little bit of capital. He asks for this as a loan from the “great lord,” the head of the plantation, about 20 forints, and invites him to the ceremony as well. As usual, he first sends gifts to each guest; one or two cigarettes or some banana or coconut or cake, or maybe a chicken, according to the person’s rank,

60 For more, see Sara Mills, *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women’s Travel Writing and Colonialism* (Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005), 1–23.

61 Meaning: the East Indies

thus inviting them to his house. The *tuan besar*, the “great lord,” receives the richest gift. On a wide wooden tray are piled bananas, all sorts of small fruits of the Indies, a large coconut, jars of cakes, and sweets.

As darkness sets in, when the first candle has already been lit in the *kampung*, the festivity begins. Guests come in groups from here and there. The aged Amat stands in front of his house in festive attire, wearing a closed white tropical coat and sarong, and greets the guests with a big smile. On a small bamboo table, there is a simple wooden bowl, the shiny cents fall here and the more it jingles, the gentler is the old man’s face. Slowly half of the village gets here. Everyone is in fancy dress. The women wear batik sarongs and colorful long-sleeved jackets with a comb or flower in their hair. Brightly colored shawls adorn the men’s shoulders, in which they are fully wrapped. There are flaming stoves all around the house, resembling cauldrons. Meat and rice boil here, which are then served on banana leaves to the guests. Crowds of people are waving everywhere, there are laughing faces and the noise of children. A carousel rotates in the middle of a small square. Women and children sit on makeshift horses and swings mounted on bamboo poles. For a cent or two, the swing spins for ten minutes. And not to miss the music, a native entertains the bystanders with a little bamboo flute.

Vendors also take advantage of the opportunity and offer their goods by settling in a long line at the side of the road. It is like a village festival.<sup>62</sup> Everything that a native can wish for is placed on small mats. Glass- and tin-jewelry, colorful scarves, toys, cigarettes, and every size and kind of pocket knife are available here. But the native, who is always in dire need of money, doesn’t buy much, he just eyes the goods.

Friends and acquaintances of the host sit down on a mat in a rough-and-ready shed to play cards. They play with tiny gray cards, and the amateurs can barely discover any difference between the single card sheets. Without a word, the game continues with measured slowness; thousands of nocturnal beetles are circulating around the kerosene lamp set in the middle. The money jingles, and sometimes even the weekly earnings of the native are swallowed up by the little gray cards. Children sleep all over the ground, they are already exhausted from the many attractions and from the unusually big crowd.

In front of the house, on a high, roofed bamboo platform, the main attraction of the festival, the *wayang* play, is performed with a gamelan orchestra in the background. The *wayang* puppets are stuck into the trunk of a thick fibrous banana palm. These are decoratively painted and gilded wooden puppets, in batik clothes, with long, moveable arms and upper body. The *dalang*, the teacher of the people, sits in the middle and a lamp hung above him envelopes his turbaned head in mystical light. Now he takes

62 Here Ilona Zboray uses the Hungarian expression *búcsú* which refers to various kinds of events even in Hungary. In a transferred sense it means a “village festival” in general.

a puppet in his hand, the music resounds and he begins the tale with a resonant singing voice. He plays and moves the puppet with incredible skill, it almost seems alive. Depending on the scene, the *dalang* sings, while the music plays louder or quieter. The story is about a king, who wants to marry off his daughter, but only to a knight, who will bring the flower from the holy mountain. Many try their luck, but the dragon guarding the flower wounds all those who dare. Finally, the real knight comes and he is not harmed, because the monster knows that the beautiful princess will be happy with him.

The story lasts for long hours. In all, about forty puppets, stuck into the trunk of the banana palm, have their turn come. Sometimes the storyteller takes a break; he eats from the food placed at his feet, drinks cold lemonade, and then he continues to narrate. During dramatic scenes, he hits the copper gong on the ground hard with a wooden hammer. The audience stands in front of the high platform for hours; the native is tireless in listening to stories. Their slight imagination is completely satisfied by the primitive play and speech of the wooden puppets. The *dalang* is perfectly skilled and performs his message thrillingly until the very last minute. The sky is turning grey when the princess finally gets her betrothed and the *dalang* hits the gong for the last time. Everyone is happy with the end of the story and they are about to leave for home. The women take their sleeping children in their arms, the men wrap themselves in their shawls and return to their bamboo huts with the memory of a pleasant day. The vendors pack up, the wooden horses of the carousel are taken down, and only the trampled grass and scattered food scraps still recall the ceremony.

The aged Amat sits on the mat of his room and by the flickering light of the lamp he pours the contents of the small wooden bowl to the ground. The many shiny pieces of money roll down all over the ground and the old man's face turns into a big smile; it seems that he is pleased with the result.



# INDOCHINA'S DEADLY SUN

## The Polish Maritime and Colonial League's Depictions of Southeast Asia

*Marta Grzechnik*



The sun of Indochina is nasty .... In Indochina, the sun has chemical rays that cause a fatal process in our brains. Therefore, no European would tip his helmet during the day, not even for the most beautiful acquaintance. Because he knows very well that even if he did it for a moment too short to “kill,” he would still get a severe paralysis.<sup>1</sup>

This description of Indochina's deadly sun appeared in 1930 in the popular Polish monthly *Morze* (Sea). The journal was published by an organization called the Maritime and Colonial League (*Liga Morska i Kolonialna*, hereafter LMiK). This was just one example, albeit somewhat symbolic, of Southeast Asia's portrayal in the journal. In this paper I discuss the ways in which the region was presented in the Maritime and Colonial League's rhetoric, and the ways in which it helped build arguments for Poland's colonial expansion which—in addition to the questions of maritime policy—were at the center of the League's program.<sup>2</sup>

- 1 Michał Leszczyński, “Daleki Wschód” [The Far East], *Morze: organ Ligi Morskiej i Rzecznej* 7, no. 6 (June 1930): 9.
- 2 The question of Polish interwar colonial aspirations in general, and the activities of the League in particular, have been studied by scholars: Tadeusz Białas wrote a history of the Maritime and Colonial League, Marek Arpad Kowalski analyzed the colonial discourse of the Second Polish Republic, and other authors examined particular aspects of the League's activities, such as actions in Africa and South America, and propaganda. Polish colonial plans have been discussed in English and German by, among others, Taras Hunczak, Maria Rhode, Piotr Puchalski, and myself: Tadeusz Białas, *Liga Morska i Kolonialna 1930–1939* [The Maritime and Colonial League 1930–1939] (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Morskie, 1983); Marek Arpad Kowalski, *Dyskurs kolonialny w Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej* [Colonial discourse in the Second Polish Republic] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo DiG; Instytut Etnologii i Antropologii Kulturowej Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2010); Anna Nadolska-Styczyńska, *Ludy zamorskich lądów: kultury pozaeuropejskie a działalność popularyzatorska Ligi Morskiej i Kolonialnej* [Peoples of overseas lands: non-European cultures and the popularization activities of the Maritime and Colonial League] (Wrocław: Polskie Towarzystwo Ludoznawcze,



I would like to start with several key points, which will help contextualize the topic. One of them has to do with the League's origins. These lay in its founders' interests in navigation, originally (in 1918, when the LMiK's first predecessor was founded) on inland rivers and—as soon as access to it was *de facto* secured in 1920—on the Baltic Sea. The colonial program started to emerge towards the end of the 1920s, initially connected first and foremost with questions of emigration. It was not until 1930 that the League acquired its final name, including the adjective “colonial” (it had been called the Maritime and River League before this). The sea and making use of the sea remained at the center of the League's program and rhetoric, including practical aspects such as the building of ports, a navy, and a merchant marine, but also more “romantic” notions connected with a vision of the sea, such as character-building, encouraging innovation, entrepreneurship, etc. Scholars such as the historian Franciszek Bujak argued that “maritime cultures” possessed these qualities, while “land cultures” were inert and passive.<sup>3</sup> The sea was pictured as Poland's gateway to the world, thanks to which Poland would be able to escape its historically problematic position between Germany and the USSR, and become “neighbors with the whole world.”<sup>4</sup> The problematic factor was that Poles had traditionally been a land culture, and one of the important goals of the LMiK (and other

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2005); Michał Jarnecki, “Fantastyka polityczna czy konieczność? Portugalska Afryka, Nikaragua, Boliwia i Ekwador w polskich planach kolonialnych” [Political fantasy or necessity? Portuguese Africa, Nicaragua, Bolivia, and Ecuador in Polish colonial plans], *Sprawy Narodowościowe. Seria Nowa*, no. 36 (2010): 92–105; Oskar Myszor, “Frontem do morza. Kształtowanie świadomości morskiej społeczeństwa II Rzeczypospolitej na łamach miesięcznika ‘Morze’ oraz ‘Morze i Kolonie’ (1924–1939)” [Front to the sea. Shaping the maritime consciousness of the society of the Second Polish Republic on the pages of the monthly magazine “Morze” and “Morze i kolonie” (1924–1939)], in *Polska nad Bałtykiem. Konstruowanie identyfikacji kulturowej państwa nad morzem 1918–1939*, ed. Dariusz Konstantynów and Małgorzata Omilanowska (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo słowo/obraz terytoria, 2012), 38–55; Andrzej Szczerski, “Kolonializm i nowoczesność. Liga Morska i Kolonialna w II Rzeczypospolitej” [Colonialism and modernity. The Maritime and Colonial League in the Second Polish Republic], in *Polska & Azja. Od Rzeczypospolitej Szlacheckiej do Nangar Khel. Przewodnik interdyscyplinarny*, ed. Max Cegielski (Poznań: Fundacja Malta, 2013), 43–66; Taras Hunczak, “Polish Colonial Ambitions in the Inter-War Period,” *Slavic Review* 26, no. 4 (1967): 648–56; Maria Rhode, “Zivilisierungsmissionen und Wissenschaft. Polen kolonial?” [Civilizing missions and science. Colonial Poland?], *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 39, no. 1 (2013): 5–34, doi:10.2307/2492615; Piotr Puchalski, *Poland in a Colonial World Order: Adjustments and Aspirations, 1918–1939* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021); Marta Grzechnik, *Aspirations of Imperial Space. The Colonial Project of the Maritime and Colonial League in Interwar Poland*, CES Open Forum Series 2019–2020 36 (Cambridge, MA: Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies at Harvard University, 2019), <https://ces.fas.harvard.edu/publications/aspirations-of-imperial-space-the-colonial-project-of-the-maritime-and-colonial-league-in-interwar-poland>.

3 Franciszek Bujak, “Kultury morskie i lądowe” [Sea and land cultures], in *Światopogląd morski*, ed. Józef Borowik (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Bałtyckiego, 1934), 1–19.

4 Andrzej Szczerski, *Modernizacje: sztuka i architektura w nowych państwach Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej 1939–1918* [Modernizations: art and architecture in the new states of Central and Eastern Europe 1918–1939] (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki, 231, 2010).

institutions, e.g. the Baltic Institute, which published Bujak's paper) was precisely to promote Polish maritimism.

The second point concerns the LMiK's political orientation. It evolved throughout its history, but in the second half of the 1930s, when most of the texts quoted here were written, the League worked in close proximity to Polish governing circles. Many of the League's prominent members were army officers and members of Parliament, and through them its arguments and its program permeated into parliamentary discussions and policies. The LMiK's journals, especially *Morze* and *Sprawy morskie i kolonialne*, quoted, in turn, these discussions whenever they revolved around colonial matters. That is not to say that there were no skeptical voices pointing out the high costs of securing and maintaining colonies, as well as the fact that the time for acquiring colonies was over (but usually not questioning the colonial system as such). Józef Piłsudski himself was such a sceptic, as well as—up to a point—the foreign minister, Józef Beck.<sup>5</sup>

The third point has to do with the LMiK's understanding of "colonies." For the most part, the League's ambition was not to take direct political or economic control over a territory, but to gain access to territories for settlement, export markets, and resources. The focus of the LMiK's postulates changed over time; for example, at the end of the 1920s it was emigration, including its concentration and organization. Colonization was then mostly understood as organized emigration to a specific territory of concentrated Polish settlement, for example, to Paraná in Brazil. Towards the mid-1930s, questions of resources and export markets gained more weight, and with that the focus shifted to Africa, which was often seen as Europe's supply base. In both cases, colonies were envisaged by the LMiK as a remedy to what they perceived as the country's most serious problems: overpopulation and resulting unemployment, and underdevelopment of industries due to the lack of direct access to raw materials and export markets. Because of this ambiguity in the understanding of colonies and colonialism, and because Poland never succeeded in acquiring actual colonies, it is impossible to study the LMiK's colonial project in terms of relations between the colonizer and the colonized. As several scholars of colonialism have pointed out in the case of the established colonial powers, it is more productive to approach European colonialism as a complex system, with a dynamic eco-

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5 See: Białas, *Liga Morska i Kolonialna*, 138–41; Józef Beck, *Pamiętniki (wybór)* [Memoirs (selection)], ed. Grzegorz Jaszuński, trans. Aleksander Ewert (Warsaw: Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza "Czytelnik", 1955), 104.

conomic, political, and ideological discourse and practice.<sup>6</sup> This system, and its attendant discourse and practice, has also benefited from the actions of non-colonial European nations.<sup>7</sup> In the case of Poland, there is yet another dimension. Rather than as a means to justify and uphold the colonial nations' rule over non-European territory—as in the case of the established, Western European colonial powers—it was to be a means to modify the status quo by including Poland among these powers, and thus to improve its own position within the global hierarchy. Adopting the colonial views and ideologies (such as European racism, European civilizing mission, etc.) was an expression of the aspiration, the dream of becoming fully European—since being European was understood, among other things, as possessing colonies. The LMiK's colonial discourse was performative: its goal was to talk this Europeanness of Poles into existence.

From the interest in emigration, gaining access to raw materials and export markets follows the fourth key point: the LMiK was mostly interested in South America and Africa. Asia was not in its focus as it was too far away and Asian countries had comparatively few previous connections to Poland. There was little emigration to Asia, and—with the exception of Siberia—few concentrated Polish settlements. Therefore, the place devoted to Asia (including Southeast Asia) in the League's publications was comparatively small. In *Morze* (and *Morze i kolonie*, as the journal was renamed in 1939), these were: eight travelogue articles written by Edward Czerw,<sup>8</sup> four articles relating various authors' travels to Southeast Asia, several reports about Polish ships in Southeast Asian ports, sketches on the history of the French and Dutch colonization

6 Ann Laura Stoler and Carole McGranahan, "Introduction: Refiguring Imperial Terrains," in *Imperial Formations*, ed. Ann Laura Stoler, Carole McGranahan, and Peter C. Perdue (Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, 2007), 8.

7 See e.g.: Kirsten Alsaker Kjerland and Bjørn Enge Bertelsen, *Navigating Colonial Orders: Norwegian Entrepreneurship in Africa and Oceania* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014); Suvi Keskinen et al., eds., *Complying with Colonialism: Gender, Race and Ethnicity in the Nordic Region* (London; New York: Routledge, 2009); Marta Grzechnik, "The Missing Second World: On Poland and Postcolonial Studies," *Interventions. International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 27, no. 7 (2019): 998–1014, doi:10.1080/1369801X.2019.1585911.

8 Described as "*Morze's* special correspondent" in his articles, Edward Czerw was most probably the pseudonym of Roman Fajans (1903–1976), a reporter and war correspondent (I thank Tomasz Ewertowski for sharing the results of his investigation into the identity of Czerw/Fajans). Apart from the articles on Southeast Asia, he published in *Morze* on the Italian colonization in Africa, including the invasion of Abyssinia (these texts appeared under the name Fajans). He also wrote for the journal *Polska Zbrojna* and published books about the Spanish civil war and the Italian invasion of Abyssinia. Fajans was furthermore, for a time, a Polish Radio correspondent in Egypt and in Geneva, with the League of Nations. Tomasz Ewertowski, *Images of China in Polish and Serbian Travel Writings (1720–1949)* (Leiden and Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2021), 41–42, doi:10.1163/9789004435445; Mariusz Szczygieł, ed., *100/XX+50: Antologia polskiego reportażu XX wieku [100/XX+50: An anthology of the Polish reportage in the twentieth century]*, vol. 3 (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2015), 264.

in the area, and graphic materials in the form of photo collages and mini-reportages, usually placed on the inside of the journal's covers. Almost all of the texts were published between 1935 and 1939. In studying them, I decided to treat the geographical limits of the region of Southeast Asia rather loosely. Neither the quoted authors nor the editors of *Morze* used the term Southeast Asia, and there is nothing to indicate that they were familiar with it. They did, on the other hand, treat the territories adjacent to Southeast Asian destinations *sensu stricto*, such as Ceylon and Hong Kong, as parts of the same narratives and having been visited during the same journeys, and I decided to interpret them in this way.



Figure 11.1. Luang Prabang, from *Morze i kolonia*, January 1939.

The kinds of arguments used to describe Southeast Asia were also different than in the case of Africa and America: they were less explicit and exhortative in favor of colonial expansion, since no concrete, distinct colonizing efforts were directed towards the Asian countries, unlike the case with several South American and African territories. Still, even without referring to any explicit projects, texts about and photographs of Asia helped build an ideological basis for overseas expansion by reproducing the colonial mindset and racial stereotypes which underlay the colonial system. However, perhaps because of this lack of specific actions and plans, they retained more elements of exoticism. This was also connected with the idea of the sea as the gateway to the world: journey by sea was a journey to the exotic, with the added element of pioneering and exploration.

This, in turn, connects with yet another key point. Even though the places described in Southeast Asia had already long before been explored by European travelers, they still remained to a great extent unexplored for the Polish reader, in the sense that knowledge about the non-European world was limited in Poland.<sup>9</sup> The Polish exploration of the world was delayed. This was partly caused by the underdevelopment of research institutions, which—as was the case in many other areas of life—were unable to develop fully throughout the previous century up until 1918 because of Poland's lack of statehood. Another reason was the above-mentioned land-based nature of Polish culture, which meant that even before Poland had lost its independence in the late eighteenth century, there had been little interest in overseas travel and exploration.<sup>10</sup> Even though the LMiK and others attempted, in the interwar period, to construct a Polish tradition of exploration by blowing every example of a past explorer out of proportion, the age of exploration, which Western Europe had experienced centuries before, was in many ways only starting then in Poland. This increased the tendency to exoticize the non-European. Part of the LMiK's mission was to spread knowledge by means of publications, public lectures, exhibitions, etc. This knowledge was problematic in several ways: firstly, it was not produced by experts or scholars such as Orientalists, but by journalists, publicists, and officers on ships. Secondly, it reproduced European racism, hierarchies, con-

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9 Nadolska-Styczyńska, *Ludy zamorskich lądów*, 15–16.

10 Stefan Troebst, "'Intermarium' and 'Wedding to the Sea': Politics of History and Mental Mapping in East Central Europe," *European Review of History: Revue Européenne d'histoire* 10, no. 2 (2003): 293–321, doi:10.1080/1350748032000140813; Marta Grzechnik, "Love of Wide Open Waters. The Polish Maritime Programme according to the Baltic and Western Institutes in the Aftermath of the Second World War (1945–ca. 1950)," *Acta Poloniae Historica* 117 (2018): 202–3, doi:10.12775/APH.2018.117.07.

cepts of civilization, and other ideas underlying European colonialism. Despite the shortcomings, this did constitute some knowledge and in this sense the sea and overseas travel served as a gateway to the world.

The representations of Southeast Asia in *Morze* and *Morze i kolonie* can be grouped into four types of arguments: 1) the economic benefits of possessing colonies; 2) the European civilizing mission; 3) notes on Poles and their activities in Southeast Asia; and 4) descriptions of the region's nature and culture. I will explore these in the context of the key points presented above.

### **Benefits of possessing colonies**

*Morze* presented the Southeast Asian colonies of the Western European powers as very profitable for their metropolises. The language and imagery with which they were described conveyed an image of affluence and fertility. A short photo reportage about Java, for example, showed rice fields and rice harvests, with the accompanying text explaining: "South of the volcano belt there is a fertile plain, occupying 1/3 of the island. Coffee, sugar cane, tobacco, rice, and indigo all grow very well here. Characteristic of Java is the landscape of rice fields, representing about 40 percent of the cultivated land."<sup>11</sup> There was also an abundance of raw materials, for example, zinc and rubber in Malaya.<sup>12</sup> Java, Singapore, and French Indochina were all called "pearls" in their respective colonial empires.<sup>13</sup>

Another category was places such as Singapore and Hong Kong, where huge profits came not from nature's riches but from planning and investments. Edward Czerw praised the genius and far-sightedness that lay at the foundation of both cities. He was amazed by the "genial intuition and orientation" of Stamford Raffles, the founder of Singapore, thanks to whom the jungle was transformed into "the world's most powerful sea fortress" and the "strange conglomerate of races and nationalities, religions and languages, which we call today

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11 "Jawa - Indie Holenderskie" [Java - Dutch India], *Morze: organ Ligi Morskiej i Kolonialnej* 13, no. 10 (October 1936): 41.

12 Edward Czerw, "Malaje Brytyjskie" [British Malaya], *Morze: organ Ligi Morskiej i Kolonialnej* 15, no. 5 (May 1938): 11-12.

13 "Jawa - Indie Holenderskie"; Edward Czerw, "Baza morska w Singaporze" [Naval base in Singapore], *Morze: organ Ligi Morskiej i Kolonialnej* 15, no. 4 (April 1938): 24; Edward Czerw, "Indochiny - wczoraj i dziś. I. Wczoraj" [Indochina - yesterday and today. I. Yesterday], *Morze: organ Ligi Morskiej i Kolonialnej* 15, no. 6 (June 1938): 12.

‘the city of the lion’—Singapore.”<sup>14</sup> He described Hong Kong as a risk that paid off despite initial skepticism:

A tiny colonial property, which actually only covers a small rocky island and seemingly worthless peninsula, can lead to this influence and wealth. This is what colonial tradition, experience, and iron consistency leads to. The creators of Hong Kong were considered madmen and fantasists.<sup>15</sup>

An echo of the LMiK’s own arguments can be heard here. The League often wrote about skeptics opposing the idea of Poland acquiring colonies. Meanwhile, Hong Kong, as described by Czerw, showed that the skeptics were narrow-minded people who lacked vision, that even small colonial possessions could yield huge profits, and so could the colonial markets. Since Poland had no colonial tradition or experience, the only thing that remained was “iron consistency,” and this was precisely what the LMiK was calling for when presenting its colonial vision. Czerw did not hide that this “iron consistency” required investment—on the contrary, he mentioned the “roughly twenty-five million pounds sterling” spent on the building of the newly unveiled King George VI Dock in Singapore, with its impressive size and other features.<sup>16</sup> However, rather than a source of discouragement, this costly colonial endeavor had the effect of showing, on the one hand, the power, ability, and daring of the British Empire to make such investments, while also showing, on the other hand, that although costly investments were necessary in the building of a colonial empire, these investments would pay off.

It was no coincidence that both Hong Kong and Singapore were seaports. The latter especially was described first and foremost as a naval base, “the world’s most powerful sea fortress,” a visible manifestation of the power of the British Empire, which was allegedly “omnipotent” there, and, “after opening the base and the fortress, perhaps more powerful than ever before.”<sup>17</sup>

Apart from the practical grounds of acquiring access to raw materials and export markets, the colonial project also had an ideological-psychological component. As mentioned before, the LMiK’s origins lay in an interest in navigation, and seafaring—as a necessary prerequisite for acquiring and maintain-

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14 Czerw, “Baza morska,” 24.

15 Edward Czerw, “Hong-Kong,” *Morze: organ Ligi Morskiej i Kolonialnej* 15, no. 8 (August 1938): 19.

16 Czerw, “Baza morska,” 23.

17 Czerw, “Baza morska,” 25. This admiration for British might in Singapore may appear ironic, made as it was just four years before the fall of Singapore to the Japanese on February 15, 1942.

ing overseas colonies—was seen as character-shaping, pioneering work that was to be accomplished by “conquerors of seas and oceans,” that is, by Poles who had transformed themselves from farmers and peasants into seafarers and sailors.<sup>18</sup> This was supposed to be the essence of becoming a maritime nation: a ground-breaking transformation of the Polish character. According to the ideological testament—the “dream”—of the League’s director, Gustaw Orlicz-Dreszer, this transformation was meant “not only to destroy proverbial Polish poverty, to build general welfare, but most of all to fight Polish dawdling, and to reforge the Polish psyche in the fire of competition with the world’s most powerful nations.”<sup>19</sup> One of those most powerful nations, the British, undoubtedly represented a maritime culture, which bred daring and enterprising people of bold vision, not afraid to take the risks inherent in realizing this vision. Such was the kind of nation that the Poles, according to the LMiK program—or dream—also aspired to become.

But the Southeast Asian colonies brought wealth not only to nations but also to individuals, as followed from Czerw’s description of the Europeans’ living conditions in Singapore:

Along the wide, neatly asphalted, and shaded avenues, stand the elegant, mostly one-story palaces, hidden in the thicket of tropical vegetation of large gardens. In these comfortable and sometimes highly luxurious villas the “colonial” life of the families of officials, lawyers, doctors, officers, bankers, and a few English merchants goes on. In each of the villas there is one family, as the custom dictates. And, in fact, the budgets of these privileged ones are so great, and the standard of living is so high that they can afford many things that would be unrealistic in Europe. Everyone, absolutely every European from Singapore has their own car. Almost everyone belongs to one of the extremely expensive, luxuriously furnished Singaporean clubs.<sup>20</sup>

This was an almost dream-like vision of Singapore as a perfect city, where there were no poor Europeans, no hard work, no dirt, nothing to spoil the illusion that in such an environment the readers, too, could join this elite of car owners and club members; in other words, they could become fully European.

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18 Michał Pankiewicz, “Niezlomny pionier Polski kolonialnej” [The steadfast pioneer of colonial Poland], *Morze: organ Ligi Morskiej i Kolonialnej* 13, no. 9 (September 1936): 17.

19 Pankiewicz, “Niezlomny pionier,” 17.

20 Czerw, “Baza morską,” 25.



## The European civilizing mission

The *Morze* articles framed the European presence in Southeast Asia as a civilizing mission. It was, for example, part of the praise of the bold British vision that they had transformed “an uninhabited isle, covered with thick jungle, populated by tigers”<sup>21</sup> (Singapore) and “a small rocky island and seemingly worthless peninsula”<sup>22</sup> (Hong Kong) into profitable colonies and strategic naval bases. Before the coming of the Europeans these territories had been supposedly uninhabited and unused (except by the tigers)—after their arrival they became thriving centers of economic, political, and military activities.

The texts thus presented Southeast Asia without Europeans as a *terra nullius*, or empty space. Such empty space was constructed as a justification for European colonization, both in Asia and elsewhere, and implied that non-European space was “empty” either in a literal sense or in the sense of lacking peoples who were able to use the land in a “rational” (in the European understanding) way, and in general displayed European values of rationality, private property, diligent work, etc.<sup>23</sup> The indigenous inhabitants of Southeast Asia and their cultures were therefore either ignored in the texts of *Morze* or presented as incapable of pursuing equally efficient policies and having equally grand visions.

One way in which this image was constructed was by setting Europeans in contrast to Asians. The description of the luxury in which Europeans lived in Singapore, for example, was immediately followed by a mention that the Chinese diligently saved every penny.<sup>24</sup> The stereotype of the Chinese as frugal materialists was also repeated by the writer-traveler Michał Derenicz, when he compared Saigon and Cholon. “French” Saigon was compared to a young coquette, elegant and afraid to get dirty, while “Chinese” Cholon was defined by omnipresent noise and the hustle and bustle of trade: “Trade is the motto of Cholon, according to its name, because ‘Cholon’ means ‘Great Market.’”<sup>25</sup> Another example of the heartless materialism of the Far East was provided by Michał Leszczyński on the occasion of his visit to Saigon. He witnessed a child getting run over by a car, which the parents used as an opportunity to haggle for compensation: “The bargaining has been completed, the parents walk away

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21 Czerw, “Baza morska,” 24.

22 Czerw, “Hong-Kong,” 19.

23 James M. Blaut, *The Colonizer's Model of the World: Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History* (New York: Guilford Press, 1993), 15.

24 Czerw, “Baza morska,” 25.

25 Michał Derenicz, “Saigon,” *Morze i kolonie: organ Ligi Morskiej i Kolonialnej* 16, no. 7 (July 1939): 21.

to their work, the crowd has dispersed, and in the middle of the road sits the baby, weeping, bleeding, to whom no one pays any attention.”<sup>26</sup>

The colonial policies of the European powers were sometimes described in separate articles focusing just on them,<sup>27</sup> and sometimes in passing when describing various places in general. Czerw, as the author who wrote the most about South(east) Asia for *Morze*, also dealt with this topic. The Europeans, he admitted, when writing about Ceylon, “did not always go down well in [the island’s] memory, sometimes they built and ruled wisely and justly, sometimes they demolished and left behind misery and destruction.”<sup>28</sup> He did not, however, dwell on these instances, nor did he give any concrete examples. Nevertheless, each of his articles about the various places on his route describe enthusiastically and in some detail the development brought by Europeans, including colonial policies, urbanization, infrastructure, etc. Colonial authorities were praised for introducing order, culture, and economic prosperity.<sup>29</sup>

But not only that, the Europeans also brought rational knowledge, as expressed for example in this note on Macau:

[The Portuguese] left in Asia not only the ruins of castles and fortresses, not only a knightly legend, but things a hundred times more important. They gave the Asian people the first glimpse of Europe and the white race. They taught them to learn about themselves and to record their knowledge rationally, in a classified and ordered way. They created words and concepts that are still in use in the Far East to this day, to mention only “mandarin” or “compradore.”<sup>30</sup>

The European civilizing mission was thus justified, in this imagery, by the earlier “emptiness” and lack of urban infrastructure, which were perceived as proof of the inability of the local population to construct cities and infrastructure in either a technological or a mental sense (i.e. the inability to en-

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26 Leszczyński, “Daleki Wschód,” 9.

27 Bolesław Celiński, “Przyczynki do dziejów kolonialnych Francji. Protektoraty indochińskie” [Notes on the colonial history of France. Indochina protectorates], *Morze: organ Ligi Morskiej i Rzecznej* 8, no. 3 (March 1931): 23–25; Bolesław Celiński, “Przyczynki do dziejów kolonialnych Francji. Protektoraty indochińskie” [Notes on the colonial history of France. Indochina protectorates], *Morze: organ Ligi Morskiej i Kolonialnej* 8, no. 4 (April 1931): 25.

28 Edward Czerw, “Cejlon” [Ceylon], *Morze: organ Ligi Morskiej i Kolonialnej* 15, no. 3 (March 1938): 11.

29 E.g.: Edward Czerw, “Indochiny – wczoraj i dziś. II. Dziś” [Indochina – yesterday and today. II. Today], *Morze: organ Ligi Morskiej i Kolonialnej* 15, no. 7 (July 1938): 26–27.

30 Edward Czerw, “Macao” [Macau], *Morze: organ Ligi Morskiej i Kolonialnej* 15, no. 10 (October 1938): 22.

vision such development, as their ideas supposedly did not go beyond saving money), not to mention their inability to know even who they were themselves.

In the best case, the local civilization, although it had once been impressive, was presented as long past its time of greatness. Czerw, it is worth mentioning, was not an ignorant or even an especially arrogant (comparatively speaking) traveler: he had done his homework in acquiring at least some knowledge about the region's pre-European history. He referenced the Ramayana and the legendary kings of Ceylon,<sup>31</sup> discussed the history of Indochina as the meeting place of two cultures—Hindu and Mongol—the basis of the region's cultural, religious and ethnic heterogeneity, and he was awestruck by both cultures' extant monuments.<sup>32</sup> But, for him, these were things of the past. The indigenous civilizations, even if they had been great, left nothing but monuments and toponyms, as for example in the case of Ceylon:

Today there is not a trace of this legendary king on the green island anymore, there is nothing left of his predecessors and not much left of the later Ceylon kings. The invasions and reign of Europeans have left lasting traces on the island. ... [T]hey came, they stayed, and, as everywhere where the white man's feet stood, they left an indelible mark.<sup>33</sup>

These indelible marks of the white men's feet were given more attention than the old civilizations' monuments; more importantly, they had more bearing on the present.

Of course, the idea of the European civilizing mission was not an invention of the Polish LMiK writers. It was downloaded, to use Christoph Kamissek and Jonas Kreienbaum's term, from the "imperial cloud."<sup>34</sup> It was adopted keenly and uncritically, not only in the case of Southeast Asia, but in the non-European space in general. But in adopting it, its purpose shifted: instead of perpetuating the global hierarchies of Western Europeans, it served the aspirations or dreams of Eastern Europeans to modify those hierarchies without upsetting them altogether. In other words, it constituted a means to secure their own, very much insecure, position as being fully European. As I have argued else-

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31 Czerw, "Cejlon," 11.

32 Czerw, "Indochiny," June 1938.

33 Czerw, "Cejlon," 11.

34 Christoph Kamissek and Jonas Kreienbaum, "An Imperial Cloud? Conceptualising Interimperial Connections and Transimperial Knowledge," *Journal of Modern European History* 14, no. 2 (2016): 164–82.

where, the interwar Polish colonial project was, apart from its pragmatic aspect, also rooted in notions of prestige, aiming to secure Poland's global position after over a century of foreign rule.<sup>35</sup> This required mentally mapping Poles as being equal to Western Europeans, and superior to non-Europeans. This was not a given, and from Polish anxiety to be recognized as equal to Western Europeans came the LMiK's rhetoric which reproduced racial divisions and hierarchies. The Poles themselves, as white Europeans, situated themselves as members of the civilized—and civilizing—rational race, capable of making the land habitable and profitable.

### Polish activities in Southeast Asia

The fact that the LMiK did not have any colonization projects in Southeast Asia did not mean that Poles only went to the region as tourists and journalists. The Polish authorities and trade organizations had ambitions to develop direct trade with Southeast Asia. One expression of this ambition was the ship *Dardanus*. In 1935 it was sent by the State Export Institute to Asian ports, carrying onboard a Polish floating exhibition. It showcased various products of Polish industries and was meant to promote Polish exports in Asia. The industries represented in the exhibition included metallurgy, textiles, timber, food and chemical products as well as Polish manufactured goods. As explained in *Morze*:

[The floating exhibition aims to] establish contacts with markets which have been mostly unknown to us so far. The further task of the exhibition is to convince the distant visitor that the Polish industrialist is a solid producer and supplier, and that establishing direct trade relations, avoiding unnecessary and expensive mediation, is beneficial for both parties.<sup>36</sup>

The *Dardanus*'s route included George Town, Singapore, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Kobe, Osaka, and Dalian (Manchuria). The readers of *Morze* could follow the journey thanks to four articles written by Ludwik Schmorak. Schmorak had a very pragmatic approach to his task: he described the contents and layout of the exhibition itself, the numbers and types of visitors at the ports of call

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35 Grzechnik, *Aspirations of Imperial Space*, 11–18.

36 Ludwik Schmorak, "Polska Wystawa Pływająca" [Polish floating exhibition], *Morze: organ Ligi Morskiej i Kolonialnej* 12, no. 4 (April 1935): 20.

(which included, for example, members of various chambers of commerce and representatives of local industries), as well as the reception among them, including which types of products were especially interesting to which visitors. But even given this pragmatic approach, Schmorak seemed quite enthusiastic as he described crowds visiting the exhibition in each port (often requiring the organizers or the authorities to limit the number of visitors or to temporarily close the admission) and related positive reviews in the press, which helped attract even more visitors in the following ports. He underlined several times that Polish products were on par with those offered by Western Europeans when it came to quality while often offering better prices, and therefore had the potential to successfully compete with them. The message was that the Poles did not need to feel inferior in competition with other Westerners, but could enter the global markets on equal terms. To back this message Schmorak mentioned the visit by the British Trade Commissioner while *Dardanus* was in Singapore, who,

after scrupulously examining the exhibition, ... expressed his appreciation for our undertaking. He stated that our exhibition, although it is placed on only one deck of the ship, with its aesthetic appearance as well as professionalism is much more appealing than a similar Australian exhibition, even though that one was placed on all decks of a ship as big as ours.<sup>37</sup>

The floating exhibition not only promoted Polish trade, it also promoted Poland in general. As Schmorak reported, the local press, for example, in Shanghai, when commenting on the ship's visit, included information about Poland, its industries, and production.<sup>38</sup>

Another floating ambassador of Poland in Southeast Asian waters was the Polish tall ship *Dar Pomorza*, which visited Asian ports the same year. *Dar Pomorza*, the training ship of the State Maritime School in Gdynia (today the Gdynia Maritime University), was not just any ship. Its purchase in 1930 was funded by public collections in Poland's seaside region of Pomerania (hence its name, which translates as "gift of Pomerania"), and it became the symbol of Poland's ambition to become a maritime nation. *Dar Pomorza's* visit to Asian ports, including Shanghai, Hong Kong, Singapore, and several Japanese ports,

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37 Ludwik Schmorak, "Polska Wystawa Pływająca" [Polish floating exhibition], *Morze: organ Ligi Morskiej i Kolonialnej* 12, no. 7 (July 1935): 27.

38 Ludwik Schmorak, "Polska Wystawa Pływająca" [Polish floating exhibition], *Morze: organ Ligi Morskiej i Kolonialnej* 12, no. 8–9 (August 1935): 32.



Figure 11.2. Dar Pomorza, painting by Michał Leszczyński, 1934.

was part of its journey around the world (1934–35), during which it called at many ports where it was the first ship in history under the Polish flag. As such, it was both a historic and a propaganda journey, which was meant to place Poland on the map as a seafaring nation. Captain Stanisław Kosko, one of the officers onboard, reported for *Morze* throughout the journey, including its Asian section. This time, the focus in every port was on meeting local Poles, who welcomed *Dar Pomorza* with gifts and were in turn welcomed with receptions onboard. In Hong Kong, for example, the ship was visited, among others, by a delegation of students from Harbin (home to a Polish community originating from the time of construction of the Chinese Eastern Railway).<sup>39</sup> These visits were often quite emotional on both sides, as the Polish expats expressed their longing and loyalty to the mother country. Kosko expressed the sentiment that this loyalty should be rewarded, with this longing somewhat mitigated by the

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39 Stanisław Kosko, “W portach Azji” [In the ports of Asia], *Morze: organ Ligi Morskiej i Kolonialnej* 12, no. 12 (December 1935): 24.

establishment of lasting diplomatic and economic connections with the region. Furthermore, the presence of Poles in every port created an image that there were Polish communities all over the world, including in Southeast Asia, thus giving the impression that Poles were already colonizing the world.

In many ways, *Dar Pomorza* was expected to make up for the delay that Poland had in comparison to Western Europe in terms of overseas exploration, as discussed earlier. The pioneering aspect of the journey—the fact that *Dar Pomorza* was in many cases the first Polish ship to ever enter the ports—was mentioned with pride and hope: pride from this demonstration of Poland entering the seas and oceans of the world as an equal, and hope that soon such journeys would become a matter of regular connections, and not just special events. This is evidenced by the following comment made on the visit to the Hong Kong shipyard for maintenance:

In front of the dock, there was a tall, steep, smooth rocky slope. On it, like other customers of the shipyard, we painted a large Polish flag. In this exotic harbor it will probably become the most exotic object, but perhaps not for long. The successful development of our trade relations with the countries of the Far East allows us to expect the establishment of a Polish shipping line to Asian ports. Gdynia is already known here today. In the shipping section of the local magazines, registering ships coming or going to such ports as London, Rotterdam, Antwerp, Hamburg, and Marseille, you will find it every day.<sup>40</sup>

It is interesting that the Poles appear (to themselves) exotic in this context, against the background of the established colonial nations: a newcomer who has yet to establish itself.

On the other hand, even with this pioneering aspect in mind, Kosko did not neglect to mention, when passing Formosa, the name of Maurycy Beniowski. Beniowski was an eighteen-century Polish-Hungarian adventurer and traveler who, among his many adventures, spent some time on Formosa while escaping exile in Kamchatka. Later in his life, he ended up establishing a short-term rule over Madagascar, which made him a favorite among the proponents of Polish colonial plans and overseas exploration in the interwar period. The frequent references to him—almost whenever Polish global exploration or travel was mentioned—were meant to prove that Poles had prior experience as ex-

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40 Kosko, "W portach Azji," 24.

plorers and colonizers, and this was his function also in this instance. In this way the far-away place was made more familiar to the reader and less unattainable than it could have seemed.

There were other mentions of Poles in Southeast Asia, usually isolated examples. But even these two cases—the *Dardanus* and *Dar Pomorza*—served to assure the reader that Poland was ready to conquer Southeast Asian markets, be more present and active in the region, and tap into the riches that other Europeans already enjoyed there. It also positioned Poles as competitors to Western Europeans on equal terms, for example, in terms of the quality of the products offered for export, but also as travelers circumnavigating the globe. In this way the texts fulfilled a performative function: equality with Western Europe was being written into existence.

### Descriptions of the region's nature and culture

Another reason why Captain Kosko mentioned Maurycy Beniowski while passing by Formosa could have been that the island's name was only familiar to the Polish reader because of Beniowski's life story. It had been recounted numerous times in *Morze* and other LMiK publications, most notably in Stanisław Zieliński's encyclopaedia of colonial pioneers (one of the tools in the attempts to construct a Polish tradition of exploration).<sup>41</sup> Texts and photographs published by the LMiK, including in *Morze*, had an educating function and served to arouse general interest in the non-European world in a nation which had limited experience with it. This held also for the Southeast Asian region. Articles about the cities, such as Hong Kong and Singapore, were often accompanied by photographs showing their streets, buildings, and cityscapes. Less frequently, there also appeared short photographic reportages, such as about Annam and Luang Prabang, both presenting royal and religious ceremonies, accompanied by short explanatory texts.<sup>42</sup>

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41 Stanisław Zieliński, *Mały słownik pionierów polskich kolonialnych i morskich: podróżnicy, odkrywcy, zdobywcy, badacze, eksploratorzy, emigranci – pamiętnikarze, działacze i pisarze migracyjni* [Little dictionary of Polish colonial and maritime pioneers: Travelers, explorers, conquerors, researchers, explorers, emigrants—diarists, activists, and migration writers] (Warsaw: Instytut Wydawniczy Ligi Morskiej i Kolonialnej, 1933), 25–31.

42 E. Ernest, "Annam," *Morze i kolonie: organ Ligi Morskiej i Kolonialnej* 16, no. 1 (January 1939): cover; E. Ernest, "Luang Prabang," *Morze i kolonie: organ Ligi Morskiej i Kolonialnej* 16, no. 1 (January 1939): 41.



The articles themselves, of course, also provided information and descriptions. Depending on the authors' main interests, they focused on different things. For example, Schmorak concentrated on statistics, which could be relevant for the envisaged future trade with the region. Michał Derenicz was more interested in culture and society, and in his text the reader could find such information, presented in the form of the author's dialogue with a "young Annamite," who chatted with Derenicz while he was sitting in a park in Saigon, and with a member of the city council of Cholon (both these men remained unnamed in the text).<sup>43</sup>

There were also descriptions of nature, in which the authors mostly enthused about its beauty. Ceylon, according to Czerw, for example, was full of "unparalleled landscapes, a fantastic richness of vegetation, and the cheerful, idyllic life of the people of the towns and villages";<sup>44</sup> British Malaya was "one of the most beautiful, most picturesque countries in the world," filled with "incomparable landscapes, splendid vegetation, picturesque and poetic indigenous villages, hidden among huge coconut palms, with joy and beauty emanating from every corner of this land," because of which Europeans found it difficult to leave it and return home.<sup>45</sup> The region's beauty could serve as another incentive for Poles to become interested in it, and in overseas travel and colonization in general.

That is not to say, however, that everyone was stunned by the nature's beauty. Captain Kosko, for example, complained about the heat and humidity, which made it difficult to stay inside the ship, and because of which "paper became unusable, books fell apart and came out of the covers, windows, glass, and mirrors were covered with steam, and all the leather things and uniforms—with mold."<sup>46</sup>

An extreme case of the struggle with the Southeast Asian climate comes from this paper's opening quote. Its author, Michał Leszczyński, was an officer on a French ship sailing from Marseilles to the Far East.<sup>47</sup> The journey's

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43 Derenicz, "Saigon," 19–21.

44 Czerw, "Cejlon," 13.

45 Czerw, "Malaje Brytyjskie," 12.

46 Kosko, "W portach Azji," 24.

47 In the 1930s Michał Leszczyński (1906–1972) cooperated with the LMiK, among others serving as an officer on its ill-fated ship, *Elemka*. Apart from being a master mariner, he was also a marine painter. After the Second World War he emigrated to Great Britain and finally to Jamaica, where he opened an art gallery and continued his art career under the name Michael Lester (Jacek Sieński, *Elemka: kolonialny żaglowiec* [Elemka: a colonial sailing ship] (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Marpress, 2020), 72–73).

destination, even before reaching there, evoked in his mind images of “things fascinating, light, and colorful”; it was a place of which he “always dreamt as the most interesting, most beautiful part of the world.”<sup>48</sup> Leszczyński painted a very exotic, even fantastical picture of this part of the world where everything, including the sun, appeared to the awe-struck officer as alien and completely different from what he was used to in Europe—and more dangerous. This nature needed to be tamed for Europeans to be able to live in it.

At this point it is worth remembering that Asia was in general not at the center of the LMiK's attention. As a result, descriptions of its lands, especially in comparison to Africa and South America, where many of the LMiK's activists had first-hand, and sometimes years-long, experience, were few. Still, such an extreme case of exoticization of the tropics, of which the claims about the supposedly deadly “chemical rays” of the sun over Indochina provided an example, was surprising, given that at the same time the LMiK published reports from Africa debunking the myth of the tropics as uninhabitable for Europeans.<sup>49</sup> It shows how little Southeast Asia was known to the reader of *Morze*, and presumably to Leszczyński himself, who was too overwhelmed by the experience of traveling to the place of “things fascinating, light, and colorful” to notice the reality that belied his expectations. But the fact that the journal published his text without correcting the information, while at the same time it was keen to persuade its readers that it was absolutely safe to settle in the African tropics, and took living and working in the South American tropics completely for granted,<sup>50</sup> pointed to the LMiK's lack of practical plans with regard to Asia. The exoticization of Southeast Asian nature, however, could be maintained in the name of another of the LMiK's interests: the adventure of overseas travel.

As I mentioned before, the LMiK's colonial program was inseparably connected with seafaring and the idea of maritime cultures as superior to land cul-

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48 Leszczyński, “Daleki Wschód,” 6.

49 This was done in order to help persuade the public that settlement in Africa, in the late 1920s mostly Angola, presented no major problems in this regard, and thus to back up the colonial project in general. See: Marta Grzechnik, “‘Ad Maiorem Poloniae Gloriam!’ Polish Inter-colonial Encounters in Africa in the Interwar Period,” *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 48, no. 5 (2020): 826–45, doi:10.1080/03086534.2020.1816619.

50 There had been, since the second half of the nineteenth century, numerous Polish immigrants in Brazil and neighboring countries, whose life stories had been depicted in LMiK's texts. See: Leny A. Ureña Valerio, *Colonial Fantasies, Imperial Realities: Race Science and the Making of Polishness on the Fringes of the German Empire, 1840–1920* (Ohio University Press, 2019); Marta Grzechnik, “Land Flowing with Milk and Honey. Polish Maritime and River/Colonial League's Depictions of South America,” in *The World beyond the West: Perspectives from Eastern Europe*, ed. Magdalena Kozłowska and Mariusz Kaczeziak, *New Perspectives on Central and Eastern European Studies* (New York and Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2022), 176–182.

tures. Poles were supposed to acquire colonies not only because it was profitable, but also because they were destined to become bold seafarers, travelers, and explorers. The overseas interest of *Morze* readers was to be based not only on the profit which could be made there, but also on the fascination with the non-European, the daring to venture even into lands where everything was different than at home, the far-sighted vision that could envisage far-away travels, the trade and naval bases to be built in uninhabited jungles, and the possibility of a Polish colonial empire. And unbridled exoticization was a way of compensating for Poland's delay: its age of exploration, even though several centuries late, was to be filled with equal wonder as that of the Western Europeans.

Moreover, descriptions of the non-European not only conveyed knowledge, but knowledge specifically framed; to borrow Mary Louise Pratt's expression, they "*produced* 'the rest of the world,'" along with the acute difference between the European and the non-European.<sup>51</sup> The more acute this difference was, the more "white" the Poles themselves could appear in comparison. Thus, by discursively constructing Southeast Asia as the exotic, the texts also discursively posited—or fantasized—the Poles as European.

## Conclusions

Images of Southeast Asia in the publications of the Polish Maritime and Colonial League helped to build its argument about Poland as an aspiring colonial power. However, it was only rarely that *Morze* or its successor, *Morze i kolonie*, dealt with the region. In comparison to Africa and South America, Southeast Asia did not have to be put on the readers' mental maps as firmly, and knowledge about it could be less precise, complete, and internalized. The region comes across as characterized by wealth, fertility, and abundance which—unlike in the descriptions of the other two continents—came seemingly (at least to the Europeans) without hard work.

The lack of practical colonization projects directed towards Asia meant that in this case the LMiK did not feel the need to deal with practicalities, such as working conditions, formalities, and capital necessary for settlement. Rather than practical handbooks, success stories, or pieces propagating particular colonizing projects, the texts about Southeast Asia served as a general con-

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51 Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London, New York: Routledge, 1995), 5.

tribution to the topic of overseas territories, colonial policies, overseas trade, Polish expat communities, seafaring, etc. They were uncritical towards the European colonial system in general and colonial powers in particular, often adopting Western European stereotypes and ways of thinking about non-Europeans. After all, questioning European colonialism would have meant undermining the whole colonial project that the LMiK pursued—that of joining the colonial powers as their equal.

The aspiration to equality is an interesting aspect of the analyzed texts, as it is of the Polish colonial aspirations in general. It is explicitly visible in Schmorak's assurances that Polish products were as good as their competitors' and in Captain Kosko's mention that an American admiral's ship in Shanghai greeted *Dar Pomorza* with military honors (despite it not being a military ship) and the Polish anthem.<sup>52</sup> But there were also less explicit ways, most notably through the marking of non-European space as empty, the reproduction of racial difference and the racial hierarchy connected with it, and the framing of the space as exotic and different from that of Europe. In this framework the LMiK could posit Poles as Europeans, i.e., as members of the colonizing, civilizing race, even though this colonizing and civilizing was, in their case, not meant to happen in Southeast Asia in particular. In a way, Poles could only hope, or so it seemed, to be perceived as fully "white" when there were others who were not; from this perspective, Poles could hope to free themselves from their own marginality within Europe, and embrace their place as close to—even if not exactly part of—the global core.

Finally, Southeast Asia was the setting of exotic adventures, such as Maurycy Beniowski's exploits and *Dar Pomorza's* journey around the world, and the home to ancient civilizations, of "things fascinating, light, and colorful," and of profuse and threatening nature. It was the wide, wide world, which had become (in theory) accessible to Poles when they gained access to the sea, when they became "neighbors with the whole world." The sea which, it was believed, widened one's horizons, made it possible to dream big and to imagine the wildest things, such as the deadly sun—or Poland actually ruling over its own colonies.

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52 Kosko, "W portach Azji," 23.

## Edward Czerw [Roman Fajans], “The Naval Base in Singapore.”

Translated by Marta Grzechnik<sup>53</sup>

The day of the inauguration of the naval base at Singapore was certainly a great day for Great Britain and for the Far East, and perhaps indeed for the whole world. In the presence of twelve thousand invited guests, representatives of the highest British civilian and military authorities, representatives of India and Australia, Malaya and New Zealand, assisted by a powerful array of armed forces—naval, air, and land—and accompanied by the roar of heavy ships’ guns and coastal batteries, the largest floating naval dock in the world was solemnly inaugurated and put into service: the George VI Dock. At the same time, it was officially announced that the Singapore naval base is, in its general outlines, completed. The massive coastal fortifications designed to protect the base from possible external attack are also complete. Finally, the large air base is ready. In a word, the impressive work of maritime defense, about which so much has been said and written in the recent years, has been completed. It is a great day for England,<sup>54</sup> and its pride in the completion of such a large-scale undertaking is understandable.

The George VI Dock is so spacious that it can even accommodate transoceanic colossuses like the *Queen Mary*. It is complemented by superbly stocked workshops. Some 2,200 feet of concrete quays and a great number of cranes, each of which has a lifting power of 150 tons, and, finally, tens of miles of newly built railway lines—these are the various parts of this enormous naval base. It cost Britain, without the fortifications and without the air base facilities, roughly twenty-five million pounds sterling (nearly seven hundred million zlotys). Work on the entire project took, admittedly with some interruptions, about fifteen years.

The naval parade and the combined naval-air-landing maneuvers that preceded the inauguration ceremony were extremely splendid and demonstrated England’s rapidly resurgent military power. The unusually strong concentration of the British fleet already made it clear how great an importance the British Admiralty attached to the launching of the new base. It should be added that a United States squadron, consisting of the cruisers *Trenton*, *Memphis*, and *Milwaukee*, also took part in the celebrations, and during the maneuvers themselves the British Air Force was represented by numerous squadrons of heavy bombers and pursuit aircraft, which on this occasion used the

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53 Edward Czerw, “Baza morska w Singapore” [Naval base in Singapore], *Morze: organ Ligi Morskiej i Kolonialnej* 15, no. 4 (April 1938): 23–25.

54 Czerw, like most of his Polish contemporaries, made no distinction between England, Great Britain, and the United Kingdom, and often used these terms interchangeably.

completely finished air base at Seletar (Singapore Island) for the first time. Among the most modern facilities of this airbase there are even hangars and underground cisterns.

However, those who have seen Singapore and got to know this city, or rather this islet, separated from the mainland (the Malay Peninsula) by the narrow Strait of Johor, must admit that the English are right to spend hundreds of millions and to work so many years to fortify this piece of land. The importance of Singapore is enormous—everyone knows that and enough has been written about it in the recent years. However, it is only after a longer stay in this “gateway to the Far East,” now turned into an impregnable fortress, and only after a more thorough examination of this strange city, that one can see what a valuable pearl in the British colonial crown it is. And it is only then that one begins to comprehend why we find statues of Sir Stamford Raffles everywhere in Malaya, why hotels and schools, libraries and streets, scientific institutions and hospitals here bear his name. As we get to know Singapore, we become more and more amazed at the genius intuition and orientation of this self-taught, humble official of the famous East India Comp., who, against his own people, against his scornful superiors, against everything and everyone, bought this priceless island from the Sultan of Johor in 1819, paying him a ridiculously modest annuity of a few thousand dollars a year. We admire the iron will and foresight of the man who, upon seeing the uninhabited island, overgrown with dense jungle and inhabited by tigers, and observing only its geographical position, decided at once that here and not elsewhere a British naval base in the Far East should be established, that here is the key to the distant seas and the foundation of the British power in this part of the world. We are struck by the accuracy of his judgement when he insisted that Singapore should once and for all be a free port, paying neither duties nor taxes, which, in his opinion, was the *sine qua non* condition for the success of the whole enterprise.

Who of those who today stop for a moment in the middle of the magnificent Bund (Singapore's seafront boulevard), of the populous Prince Street, or of the bustling Raffles Square would think of the jungle, inhabited by tigers? Who would think of a deserted island when they find themselves in the huge port of Singapore, through which several thousand ships pass every year in both directions? Who among those who know the bustling Singapore Stock Exchange, with its impressive transactions, the Exchange that to some extent decides on the world prices of rubber and lead, would think that in the place where it stands now one hunted wild animals and drowned in swamps a hundred years ago? So strange it all seems, so improbable...

For today's Singapore is not only the world's most powerful naval fortress and a great global port, it is also a huge city of half a million people, the capital of the populous and wealthy Malay Peninsula, and a powerful center for rubber and lead. Gold flows here in streams, and its splendor attracts more and more groups of vagabonds hun-

gry for easy money, clever and enterprising daredevils, who tomorrow will be universally respected millionaires, or poor, helpless, human pawns, who will die quickly and without a trace in the swarming cosmopolitan crowd. And it was from this constant ebb and flow of new human elements, from the rapid flow of streams of gold, from the fantastic possibility of easy fortune, though now already a thing of the past, that this strange conglomerate of races and nationalities, religions and languages, which we call today "the city of the lion"—Singapore—was created. It is supposedly the capital of Malaya, yet we have only 68,000 Malaysians here out of the total population of 550,000, or not much more than 12%. The rest? Indians, Europeans, Eurasians, and, above all, Chinese. Because Singapore is actually a Chinese colony rather than English. Out of the 550,000 population 407,000 are Chinese. Although the city and the island are politically and militarily English, of course, in terms of population they are almost entirely Chinese. But not only in terms of population. Trade, finance, industry—all this is in Chinese hands in Singapore. And here we touch upon the question whose importance is very great in the Far East, and which will be the subject of one of our next articles: the question of the Chinese colonies. Although these are not colonial possessions in the political sense of the word, they are colonial possessions in terms of the economy and population, and which consideration plays a bigger role; which is more important and more lasting, only the future will tell.

Singapore covers an area of 22 square kilometers. Of course, this refers to the city itself, not the harbor or the island. Most of this area has been converted into the city's garden districts, which are residential areas for the whites, the vast majority of whom are English. Along the wide, neatly asphalted, and shaded avenues, stand the elegant, mostly one-story palaces, hidden in the thicket of tropical vegetation of large gardens. In these comfortable and sometimes highly luxurious villas the "colonial" life of the families of officials, lawyers, doctors, officers, bankers, and a few English merchants goes on. In each of the villas there is one family, as the custom dictates. And, in fact, the budgets of these privileged ones are so great and the standard of living is so high that they can afford many things that would be unrealistic in Europe. Everyone, absolutely every European from Singapore has their own car. Almost everyone belongs to one of the extremely expensive, luxuriously furnished Singaporean clubs. Meanwhile, at the same time, every Chinese in Singapore is saving every penny, putting it aside, he goes without, and buys, one by one, the biggest commercial, industrial, and credit enterprises, not only in Singapore itself, but in the whole of Malaya. All the while in the City of Singapore the walls of the mighty multi-story buildings are more and more densely covered in the complex signs of Chinese names and inscriptions.

Politically and militarily, however, England is still omnipotent here, today, after the opening of the base and the fortress, perhaps more powerful than ever before. From

the highest point of the town, Fort Canning, the Union Jack banner flies proudly over the island, and in the newly inaugurated fortress powerful naval and air squadrons watch over its safety.





# CZECHOSLOVAKS IN SINGAPORE AND MALAYA BEFORE AND DURING WORLD WAR II

Jan Beránek



## A short chronology of the Czechoslovak presence in Singapore

The presence of Czechs and Slovaks in the colonial Far East, and in particular Singapore, can be historically divided into three distinct periods. They differ in terms of the types of people visiting Singapore; the length of their presence and the focus of their interests; as well as the ways in which they captured their experiences and observations.

The first period is characterized by early explorers and adventurers. We can identify at least a dozen Czech and Slovak names among the Central European travelers to Singapore in the nineteenth century and before World War I.<sup>1</sup> These were mostly limited stays (weeks or months), as these travelers passed through as part of their longer journeys across the Far East. Most of them consequently published popular books and scientific articles upon their return, written from ethnological or natural science perspectives, often accompanied by photographs.

The second period can be dated between 1918 and 1921, when Singapore had the opportunity to encounter Czechoslovaks not as individual explorers but as large and organized groups of patriotic citizens of the newly established Czechoslovak republic. They were soldiers of the “Czechoslovak Legions,” who fought against the Bolshevik Red Army along the Trans-Siberian Railway be-

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1 To name a few, we can mention the educator, paleontologist, and entomologist Josef Kořenský, who visited Malaya in 1893-1894 and Singapore in 1893 and again in 1900-1901; the traveler, photographer, and writer Enrique Stanko Vráz; the scientists Karel Domin and Jiří Viktor Daneš whose journey brought them there in 1909-1910; and the writer and diplomat Jan Havlasa, who collected an impressive set of photographs in Malaya during 1913. Among the first recorded women, we know of Markéta Eliášová, who in the 1920 visited Malaya, Singapore and Java.

tween 1917 and 1920, and were returning home from Vladivostok. Many of the transport ships carrying them back to Europe passed through Singapore and made a stop there. While these men were in transit, they used their opportunity to take a welcome break on their long journey and explored the vibrant city, perhaps even enjoying its nightlife for a day or two. Sometimes they took an active part in the local social life—as, for example, when a group of Czechoslovak soldiers gave a musical performance,<sup>2</sup> or when they formed a team and played soccer matches against local British officers.<sup>3</sup> Some of these events are documented by articles in the local Singaporean press, but for the authentic stories and experiences, we need to look at the diaries and letters that some of these legionnaires wrote for themselves or for their families. A selection of these were later compiled and printed in various Czech publications.

Finally, the third and most significant period of Czechoslovak presence in colonial Singapore and Malaya took place in the 1930's and through World War II. By the end of the 1930s, there were over one hundred Czechoslovaks who had come to Singapore to live and work—today we would refer to them as “expats.” Based on my research that began in 2017, I have managed to compile a comprehensive list of these individuals together with brief accounts of their life stories—it is now available on my website,<sup>4</sup> and comprises one of the appendices to my book *Pátrání po Silvestrovi* [Searching for Silvestr] published in October 2020.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, we know that it constituted a very diverse group of artists, missionaries, business people, and adventurers. The majority—about two thirds—were employees and managers of the Baťa Shoe Company, some of them accompanied by their wives and children. They settled in Singapore and British Malaya for several years and became active players in the local economy and social life. They were a very well-knit and tightly organized community with strong and specific subcultural traits that informed both their views and their habits, which were also later imprinted on the local citizens and society. Their first hand, lived experiences and observations can today be found in their diaries, letters, and archival documents from various authorities, as well as in the

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2 For example, during an event at the Boustead Institute, which was opened by a speech from Mr. L. G. Cranna and reported in *The Straits Times*, July 3, 1920, 8.

3 On May 10, 1920, one Czechoslovak team (5th regiment) drew 1:1 while another (4th regiment) lost 2:4; Adolf Zeman, *Cestami odboje* [Ways of resistance], vol. 5, 204, (Prague: Pokrok, 1929).

4 Jan Beránek, List of Czechoslovaks in Singapore in 1941, <https://silvestr.janberanek.cz/list-of-czechoslovaks-in-singapore-1941>.

5 Jan Beránek, *Pátrání po Silvestrovi - válečné osudy baťovců v Singapuru* [Searching for Silvestr: The wartime stories of the Batamen in Singapore] (Prague: Mystery Press, 2020).

contemporary press (including articles they sometimes wrote for the Czechoslovak press back in their homeland).

In my essay, I will further explore this third period of Czechoslovak presence in Singapore, with a focus on the late 1930's and the wartime years. Its rich and diverse documentation allows us to reconstruct an insightful picture of how they interacted with the local society, what their impressions were, and how they were perceived by "the others" in the culturally and socially rich Singapore of the late colonial era.

### **The Baťa phenomenon**

The first sign of what would later become *the* defining phenomenon of Czechoslovak presence and influence in Singapore during 1930s and through World War II can be dated to August 1926, when the first advertisement for shoes made by Baťa appeared in local newspapers.<sup>6</sup> This was shortly after Tomáš Baťa, the founder and owner of the company, took his first trip to the Far East, seeking new markets for his successfully growing industrial empire.

The popular brand Baťa started out as a Czechoslovak family business established in 1894 in Zlín—a town in the middle of Czechoslovakia. Its founder, the visionary entrepreneur Tomáš Baťa, turned it after World War I into one of the most successful Czechoslovak companies, with a global reach and even bigger ambitions. At the beginning of the 1930s—which became the company's "golden decade"—his business empire already included dozens of branches. These included a broad range of products and services, from aviation and construction to chemical factories, but the core business remained shoe manufacture and sales. His production in 1932 exceeded 30 millions pairs of shoes, most of which were exported.

By the end of the 1930's, Baťa was not only operating across the whole of Europe, but had factories and shops on every continent, from Rhodesia to Brazil, and from India to the Philippines. A major milestone for its presence in Singapore occurred in February 1931, when Baťa opened a flagship store in the Capitol Building on the North Bridge Road. This was followed by a significant wave of publicity, reporting on Baťa's unique business model—for example, in the articles "Cutting the Cost of Living—the Baťa System in Singapore",<sup>7</sup> and "Baťa—

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6 *The Straits Times*, August 11, 1926, 6; another similar advertisement appeared on November 24, 1926.

7 *Malaya Tribune*, February 11, 1931, 7.

The Boot King.”<sup>8</sup> At that time, the company was advertising itself as “The Largest Shoe Factory in the World.”<sup>9</sup> The company was then officially incorporated in Singapore as the Baťa Shoe Co. Ltd. in August 1931.<sup>10</sup>

Sales, however, did not perform as well as expected—partly because of the high prices necessary to cover the production costs in Czechoslovakia, and partly due to import barriers that many countries introduced in response to the Great Depression. The ever innovative Tomáš Baťa, therefore, decided to change the game fundamentally: he launched a strategy to relocate mass scale production directly to where most of his target customers lived.<sup>11</sup> This included a number of countries in Europe and the Americas, but also British Malaya as well as British India. In order to secure these plans and set them up for success, Tomas Baťa went on a second, and much more extensive, business trip across the Far East at the end of 1931 and the beginning of 1932, during which he personally visited key places in British India and the Dutch East Indies, as well as several other places, including Singapore. This famous trip was well documented locally in a number of press articles with headlines such as “Shoe King on Way to Singapore”<sup>12</sup> and “To Buy Rubber and Sell Shoes—Mr Baťa in Singapore.”<sup>13</sup>

The success of this trip sealed Baťa’s decision to expand into these markets not just with sales but also with full-scale production. To facilitate such a massive logistical undertaking, the company developed a sophisticated strategy for establishing its new overseas operation: from its home in Zlín, it dispatched dozens of machines, enough to make complete production lines, along with so called “units” of staff. These “units” were in fact specialized core teams capable of launching new production branches from scratch. They typically consisted of a few dozen young, carefully selected and trained talents who between them had the full range of skills required to build, start, and run a new overseas factory as well as organize subsequent sales.<sup>14</sup>

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8 *The Straits Times*, June 18, 1931, 19.

9 *The Straits Times*, November 17, 1931, 14.

10 Bata Shoes, *Bata 1931–1951: 20 years of progress in Malaya* (Singapore: G.H. Kiat, 1951).

11 Martin Marek et Vít Strobach, *Batismus, urychlená modernita a průkopnická práce – personální politika Baťova koncernu a řízené přesuny pracovníků v letech 1938–1941* [The Bata phenomenon, accelerated modernism and pioneers of work – personnel management at the Bata enterprise and organized relocations of employees 1938–1941], *Moderní dějiny* 18, no. 1 (2010): 103–53.

12 *The Straits Times*, January 6, 1932, 1.

13 *The Straits Times*, January 20, 1932, 11.

14 Martin Marek, *Projektování transferu baťovských jednotek* [Planning the transfers of Bata’s units], *Acta historica Universitatis Silesianae Opaviensis* 3 (2010): 163–178; Martin Marek: *Strategie Baťova koncernu v letech 1938–1939* [The Bata company’s strategy in 1938–1939], *Hospodářské dějiny* 25, no. 2 (2010): 167–97.



Figure 12.1. Cover page of the Batanagar News with an article about Bata in Singapore and Malaya

One of the first such projects took place in Batanagar in India—a brand new city built by the company on virgin land, offering accommodation and a range of services to the company’s workers. Several young Baťa managers continued onwards from there to Singapore, setting up a core unit for further expansion.

Building on such educated pioneers and “units” of his best talent, Baťa quickly established his empire in the Malay Peninsula and in Singapore. In 1934, the company purchased its own rubber plantation at Bukit Tiga in Johore; in 1936, it built a large factory in Klang, near Kuala Lumpur; and in 1939, it opened its own headquarters building in the center of Singapore as well as launched a new factory in Singapore itself.<sup>15</sup> By that time, Baťa was running hundreds of its own stores, serviced by over 40 distribution centers across Singapore and Malaya. Production and sales expanded, and in 1941 the factories in Klang and Singapore together produced nearly 2.5 million pairs of shoes which were also sold locally.<sup>16</sup> As already mentioned, Baťa’s flagship store was located in Singapore’s Capitol Building and served customers from the Singapore elite, mostly British and European, although not exclusively; for instance, one regular customer was the Sultan of Johore.<sup>17</sup>

15 “Bata 1931–1951: 20 years of progress in Malaya”, 2.

16 “Bata 1931–1951: 20 years of progress in Malaya”, 30.

17 Josef Vyhnaněk, *Zpráva z pobytu v zahraničí* [Report from my stay abroad] (unpublished manuscript, Zlín, 1966).



**Figure 12.2.** The new building and headquarter of the Bata company in Singapore in typical functionalist style. From: *Bata Shoe Co.: 20 Years in Malaya* (Singapore: G. H. Kiat, 1951).

**Figure 12.3.** Interior of the main Bata shop in Singapore around 1935. Courtesy the State Archives in Klecuvka, Zlín.



The philosophy and culture which these Baťa pioneers brought with them from Czechoslovakia is worthy of further investigation. This is because Tomáš Baťa not only revolutionized the shoe manufacturing industry by adopting modern production lines which he first observed at the Ford factory in Detroit; he also strongly believed that his shoe business was a means to create a better world—a world in which people would be lifted out of poverty, would receive better education, health care, and social services, and would dedicate their lives to the aspiration of becoming “better people.”<sup>18</sup> He not only wished

18 Jan Antonín Baťa, *Budujme stát pro 40 milionů lidí* [Let us build a state for 40 million people] (Zlín: Tisk Zlín, 1937; new edition 2015); Tomáš Baťa: *Úvahy a projevy* [Essays and speeches] (Zlín, UTB, 2002).

but demanded that his employees never stop learning new things in order to improve not only their performance but also themselves as individual beings. Therefore, there were also strong expectations of how they should behave in their private lives, such as taking the initiative in their community and investing their personal time in further education, sports, and culture, in addition to what they were supposed to avoid, for example, drinking, being extravagant, or having a “disordered” family life. This was all enforced by a strict social control and even by formal visits to workers’ homes by company representatives in order to check on them.

Repeated violations of this code of conduct, even in the workers’ private lives, frequently resulted in immediate termination of employment.<sup>19</sup>

Baťa realized that to make his system and vision work, he had to educate his workers from a very young age, when an individual’s personality could still be easily shaped and formed. He began recruiting young boys, preferably from poor village families (although not from dysfunctional ones, as everyone’s family situation was thoroughly screened), to enter his own educational system, the “Baťa School of Work,” while simultaneously introducing them to



Figure 12.4. Bata rubber plantation in Johore. State Archives in Klecuvka, Zlín



Figure 12.5. Group picture of Bata employees in Singapore. The Straits Times, January 21, 1940.

19 Jana Hofmanová, *Aplikace Baťovy soustavy řízení do moderní firmy* [The application of Bata’s methods of management in a modern company] (dissertation, Univerzita Tomáše Bati ve Zlíně, 2012).



their positions either in factories or in other departments.<sup>20</sup> Because the salaries and standards of living provided by the company were unprecedented, there was always great interest and competition, which allowed Baťa to choose only the best applicants.

Even after signing a contract, the competitive environment forced new employees to further grow professionally or eventually lose their jobs. A sophisticated administrative system—what today would be called “HR”—meticulously and regularly monitored the performance and behavior of each individual employee and selected those with special talents and/or dedication for further promotion.<sup>21</sup>

At the same time, the company gave significant attention to the well-being of its workers: each of the Baťa “cities” built around its factories not only guaranteed good quality accommodation but also provided comprehensive social care: there were schools, hospitals, churches, cinemas and theaters, shops, sports halls, and other facilities considered necessary to keep the employees active, fit, healthy, and happy. According to the company’s doctrine, only such employees were able to perform optimally at their jobs.

It is not difficult to recognize the strong elements of social engineering in this arrangement, some of which were not too distant from the proclaimed ideals of Soviet communism. (This parallel did not go unnoticed by Jan Antonín Baťa, the brother and successor of Tomáš Baťa, who took over the company after the tragic death of Tomáš in 1932. J. A. Baťa is said to have proclaimed: “Zlín is more than Moscow. Zlín is the ideal that Moscow should follow.”).

There are also some obvious parallels between the Baťa system and the narrative of colonialism. Take, for example, the mission to “civilize” the local inhabitants and turn them into “better people.” Arguably, the Baťa Company’s philosophy originated in Czechoslovakia, which had no colonial history (at least not externally oriented, although there had been waves of “internal” colonialization of the country’s border regions), and it was thus applied to the domestic population, with the intention of raising it from ignorance and poverty. On the other hand, we can imagine that when the pioneers from Baťa started to organize shoe production in the British colonies, such an approach conveniently resonated with the established practices there.

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20 Martina Uhlířová, *Andragogický odkaz Tomáše Bati* [The andragogic legacy of Tomáš Baťa] (dissertation, Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci, 2011); Gabriela Končítíková, *Podnikové vzdělávání ve firmě Baťa a. s. do roku 1945 a využití těchto principů v současnosti* [Company education at Bata until 1945 and the application of these principles in the present day] (dissertation, Univerzita Tomáše Bati ve Zlíně, 2015).

21 Marek and Strobach, *Batismus, urychlená modernita a průkopníci práce*, 127.

However a racial attitude was not natural to them, so when the Czechoslovaks settled into their new homes in Singapore, they found it remarkable that in most companies, as well as in all public offices, workers and clerks were often of other races, but the bosses were always English.<sup>22</sup> Yet, seen from the outside, the same pattern was applied in the Baťa factories in Malaya and Singapore: About a thousand local employees were managed and overseen by a team of several dozen Czechoslovaks.<sup>23</sup>

A noteworthy example is how Antonín Rája, who was responsible for establishing a rubber plantation in Johore, described his challenges and eventual success in an article worth quoting at length: “On the morning of my second day on the job I went to see the wooden shanties where our Chinese, Indian, and Malay workers lived. They were all in ruins, with their roofs covered in attap. I hated these huts from the first moment I saw them and immediately decided that they had to go. It is the same everywhere in the world: when workers are provided with better living conditions, they also deliver better results; so I replaced these huts with clean, decent apartments.”<sup>24</sup> Rája also noted how he was initially perceived by the local workers to be a lunatic for taking such unusual steps, but he was eventually rewarded with a highly performing plantation: “It was a hard and exhausting effort, but it succeeded because I stayed positive and I enjoyed it. At first, many people thought that ‘the *tuan* [master] had gone crazy,’ but I eventually succeeded in transforming the life on our plantation entirely.... I taught our people to wake up and get to work very early in the morning; established salary rewards based on delivered tasks and concrete results; ensured that every tree was given special care.... In order to allow people to have a good night’s rest, I banned card games and introduced a ‘lights-out’ rule after 9pm.... When I left five years later, my workers had tears in their eyes when they saw me go: their *tuan* was strict, but honest and righteous.”<sup>25</sup>

Unfortunately, we cannot compare these impressions with what was the actual perception of Mr. Rája and his certainly well-meant efforts on the part of the local employees. Although they were probably used to a white man in charge, I wonder whether they noticed the difference, with the arrangement

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22 Josef Kramoliš, “Ze Zlína až do Singapuru” [From Zlín to Singapore], in *Srdcem Baťovců. Neobyčejné příběhy baťovců v cizině* [Bataman at heart: Extraordinary stories of Bata people abroad], ed. Gabriela Culík Končítíková (Zlín: Thomas Bata Foundation, 2016); Vyhnálek, *Zpráva z pobytu v zahraničí*.

23 “Mass-Production of Shoes in Malaya,” *The Straits Times*, February 1, 1940, 11; “New Bata Factory,” *Morning Tribune*, February 1, 1940, 14.

24 Antonín Rája, “Pěstoval jsem gumovníky” [I grew rubber trees], *Zlín – časopis podnikavé práce* 7, no. 51 (1938): 7.

25 Rája, “Pěstoval jsem gumovníky,” 7.

this time not driven by the arrogance of racial superiority but by a genuine effort to improve the economic well-being and quality of life of all Baťa workers, regardless of them being in Czechoslovakia or Malaya.

This important difference becomes even more evident since Baťa—just like back home in Zlín—organized sports and social events for its local workers in the British colonies. As part of this, the company established and funded its own soccer teams in both Singapore and Klang. Its soccer club in Singapore was called the “Moravians”—patriotically referring to Moravia, the region in Czechoslovakia where the company and many of its staff originated from. It played in a number of tournaments and competed in Division 2 of the Singapore Football League, as numerous newspaper articles demonstrate.<sup>26</sup> It is obvious from the names of the players that most of the “Moravians” actually consisted of local Chinese and Malay—with one exception: the goalkeeper was Josef Zuna, a Slovak who arrived in Singapore in February 1939.<sup>27</sup> We can also find other newspaper reports about various tournaments in which the Czechoslovaks, or the Baťa teams (obviously comprising a mix of various nationalities, both locals as well as Czechoslovaks), played against local sportsmen:



**Figure 12.6.** Football match with the “Moravians” team, pictured in Singapore’s main newspaper. *The Straits Times*, April 17, 1939.

26 An online search results in over 50 mentions in local Singapore newspapers; for example, “Skins beat Moravians in div. 2,” *Morning Tribune*, May 20, 1938, 24.

27 When World War II started in Europe, Zuna was one of the few Czechoslovak youth who decided to leave Singapore and join the fight against Nazi Germany in Europe. In December 1939, the Singapore newspapers reported that Zuna had joined the Czech legion in France: “Mainly about Malaysians – In Czech Legion,” *The Straits Times*, May 19, 1940, 10.

for example, a badminton match against Malay teachers,<sup>28</sup> and a table tennis tournament between Baťa and the Humorist Party.<sup>29</sup> As these examples show, the approach taken by the Baťa management with respect to their local employees was not burdened with the racial segregation or assumed racial superiority commonly applied by the ruling British. In fact, as we will see further, the Czechoslovaks found the racist setup quite strange and were skeptical as to its manifestations.

### **Strangers caught up between two worlds**

It is difficult to fully comprehend how it must have felt for Czechoslovaks, often young and growing up in poor countryside families in a land-locked country in central Europe, to arrive in this vibrant, multi-ethnic city on a tropical island. We can, however, get a glimpse of this from their letters home, diaries, and articles they wrote for Czech newspapers and magazines. Their perspectives were inevitably shaped by the frames of reference and stereotypes of their own country.

We will not be surprised, then, that thanks to the island's abundant tropical vegetation, this is how some of them captured their first impressions of Singapore: "[As we approached], it was hard to see any house on the shore—the shoreline was entirely green, as if Singapore were a big orchard ... Singapore looks like a giant garden. Nature is green all year round, and coconut and towering oil palms are rise toward the sky and continuously bear fruit."<sup>30</sup>

The frame of reference for the young men from the Czechoslovak countryside made them compare Singapore to an "orchard" or a "garden," and they used similar parallels to what they knew from home when they encountered the local people with their exotic attires: "The English and the Chinese dress up in a European style, but the women here wear a kind of pyjamas.... The Indians wrap themselves in cloths similar to a bed sheet, with a towel around their head to wipe the sweat, and they wear clogs that make a terrible noise."<sup>31</sup>

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28 The Batamen from Klang won 5:2, see "Batas Beat Teachers at Badminton," *Malaya Tribune*, August 15, 1940, 4.

29 Here, another Slovak, Jan Boďa, lost against Chan Thian Seng 0:3, see "Ping-Pong," *The Malaya Tribune*, January 31, 1940, 11.

30 Vyhňálek, *Zpráva z pobytu v zahraničí*, 3.

31 Silvestr Němec, letter to his family, March 11, 1939; family archive

Similarly, they were also surprised by some activities that contradicted their own cultural patterns. For example, one young Czech man described in a letter home the surprising contrast to the Czechoslovak countryside where at that time cooking was exclusively the role of women: “There are streets here filled with kitchens. Let me explain to you about the kitchens. There are a number of Chinese workers here who do not cook at home, and thus they go out to eat in these kitchens. But it’s different than back at home; it’s not the women who cook here but the men.”<sup>32</sup>

Naturally, many of the new arrivals immediately noticed the very different climate: consistently high temperatures, high humidity, and heavy rainstorms were a daily occurrence.<sup>33</sup> These climactic conditions, combined with the large number of blood-sucking insects, had a long-term effect on morale and undermined the nerves of some Czechoslovaks who were used to a temperate climate and who began to refer to the local climate as “unbearable.”<sup>34</sup>

What must have been quite a cultural shock to the Czechoslovaks occurred in multiple layers. First, there was the diversity of the local population, which amazed the newcomers from Central Europe. The rich mix of Malays, Chinese, Indians, Europeans, and Eurasians—each of these categories alone covering a diverse group of cultures and languages—was unprecedented even for people coming from Czechoslovakia—a multi-ethnic country with its own history of being part of the Habsburg Empire encompassing a number of central European nations.

Then there was the official racial segregation in Singapore—also something quite unusual for people from small Central European nations. Although the Jewish and Roma/Gypsy communities in Czechoslovakia were also marginalized and sometimes targeted for violence, this was still quite different from the institutionalized racial segregation that existed in the British domains. There were very different work and entertainment options for different categories of

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32 Němec, letter to his family.

33 “Singapore is a city of rain; hardly a day passes without a major rainfall. Terrible storms and heavy rains last for hours. The city is well adapted and instead of the usual channels in the middle of the roads, which would be insufficient to absorb so much of water, they have dug out meter deep trenches along the roads; however, during summer, these turn into hotbeds of dirt and disease.” Karel Šoun (a Bata salesman based in Singapore), interviewed by the newspaper *Svět*, January 21, 1942, 3.

34 “The unbearable damp heat gradually got on my nerves. Clothing is constantly stuck to your body, and it rains almost every day, which is followed by the hot burning sun.... I also suffer from the annoying creatures: bloodthirsty mosquitoes are literally everywhere, and despite sleeping under a net, there are always some that find their way to me. The house is full of vermin such as lizards and scorpions.” Kramoliš, *Ze Zlína až do Singapuru*.

people—as well as the kind of lifestyles and behavior expected of them. It was not obvious and sometimes not easy for the Czechoslovaks to navigate this situation, as overnight they found themselves members of a very privileged society, that of “white Europeans.” This required them to observe quite specific behaviors and lifestyles. Many were surprised when they were advised upon arrival to hire servants for their household, because “if they do the household chores and manual labor themselves, they will lose all the respect of the Malays, which could even put them into dangerous situations.”<sup>35</sup> And so they recalled with some amazement how they suddenly ended up having 3 or 4 servants in their houses, with the usually mentioned setup consisting of “a cook, a housemaid, a gardener, and a driver.”<sup>36</sup>

A business report written by a Baťa representative in Singapore, mapping the situation and opportunities in 1935, is very laconic: “European employees at the shops are given a starting salary of \$350 and a top salary of \$700. Asiatic employees at the shops start at a salary of \$40 with their wage topping at \$150.”<sup>37</sup> While this is merely the recitation of what were probably just the facts, in their personal views several Czechs commented with amusement on the differences between the British, or “white Europeans” in general, and the locals. For example, Josef Vyhnálek—a Baťa employee and the only Czechoslovak prisoner of war to survive Japanese captivity—wrote: “The central swimming pool allowed access only to the white race. But since most of the citizens are Asians, the Chinese also built their own beautiful swimming pool as revenge against the British.”<sup>38</sup>

Later, when they met with obvious racism and discriminatory treatment in the ranks of the local volunteer defense corps (LDC)—to which most of the Czechoslovak men signed up—we can find even cynical comments. Viktor Koš wrote in his diary: “There were many foreigners in the LDC, mostly Dutch, then Czechs, also some French and a lot of Chinese and Eurasians. It was interesting to observe the attitude of the English members of the LDC towards us. For them, we were always just ‘bloody foreigners.’ The Australians did not hold such sentiments, but the English treated them as second-class people as well. However, the English were always ready to use us, the ‘bloody foreigners,’ for every inconvenient, dangerous, or dirty job—in such cases, the foreigners were

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35 Kramoliš, *Ze Zlína až do Singapuru*.

36 Kramoliš, *Ze Zlína až do Singapuru*.

37 K. Dittrich, *Zpráva z Britské Malay K. Dittricha* [Report from British Malaya by K. Dittrich], 1935 (Fond Baťa, a. s., Zlín, sign. X – Prodejní oddělení, kart. 1596, inv. n. 371).

38 Vyhnálek, *Zpráva z pobytu v zahraničí*, 4.

the first to receive orders to do it. There was a running joke between us: it was often said that ‘The English will fight to the last man’—we modified this saying to ‘The English will fight to the last foreigner.’”<sup>39</sup>

Several documents, however, also capture what the Czechoslovaks observed as characteristic traits of the local population in the 1930s; although, whether these were genuine first-hand experiences and to what extent such remarks were already conditioned by what they had previously read or heard remains in question. Here is a paragraph from the memoirs of Josef Kramoliš, a young Baťa man who reflected on the Malays:

They are very warm-hearted and honest people, but also terribly lazy. During the middle of the day, when the heat reaches its maximum, it’s normal even for Europeans to take a nap, but the Malays often sleep throughout the whole day. So, for example, the watchmaker’s shop is already closed in the morning, and there is no way to persuade its owner to open it, because he sold enough goods last night. Similarly, a sleeping taxi driver won’t wake up to give you a ride, because he had a busy day yesterday. There is nothing that can be done against their argument that they have already worked enough. There is plenty of food around in nature, so the Malays see no reason to work hard for living.<sup>40</sup>

Another example is found in the diary of Josef Vyhňálek: “It is enough for the typical Malay to have a good catch of fish twice a week, to buy a sack of rice for his family, and then rest for the rest of the week.”<sup>41</sup>

This casual attitude toward life on the part of the Malays was often contrasted by Czechoslovak observers with the busy and sedulous life of the Chinese. Thus, Josef Štach, who bought rubber for Baťa in Siam and British Malaya, wrote to the company’s magazine in Zlín: “The Chinese are good at business. They are always smiling and validate the Chinese proverb ‘if you can’t smile, don’t open a shop’ .... They are all literate, so only the local Malay population remains uneducated—every Chinese can read and write. They also live together as one family. You can see that when you enter a big Chinese shop at noon—all the employees eat together with the owner at one table .... The Chinese rubber merchants have established a great system. They are immediately informed

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39 Viktor Koš, *Paměti* [Memoirs] (unpublished, written in Medan, August 1943).

40 Kramoliš, *Ze Zlína až do Singapuru*.

41 Vyhňálek, *Zpráva z pobytu v zahraničí*, 3.

via telegraph by their relatives in Singapore about any change in market prices [for rubber].”<sup>42</sup>

While the Czechoslovaks certainly interacted with others, they also maintained a close community among themselves. It is well documented that the young Baťa employees took weekends off to travel to the small coral islands around Singapore, using small boats. They refer to beautiful beaches and swimming pools separated from the open sea by lines of nets.<sup>43</sup> There is also a record of a dramatic encounter with a shark experienced by a group of Baťa men when swimming in the open sea; they escaped unharmed, but a dog belonging to one of them was eaten by the predator.<sup>44</sup> Another source describes the leisure attire that the Czechoslovaks wore during these weekend trips: “we wear blue shorts, a white shirt, and a red silk scarf.”<sup>45</sup> It is noteworthy that these are also the colors of the country’s flag. Based on the plural reference, it would seem that a group of Baťa colleagues used this as a dress code, perhaps even as an informal uniform; something that would not be entirely surprising given the company’s collectivist culture.

On some weekends, the young Baťa men and women headed inland. A favorite destination was the Kota Tinggi waterfalls in Johore, which were part of the private lands of the Sultan of Johore. The Baťa team maintained good and regular contacts with Sultan Ibrahim, as is evidenced in photographs as well as memoirs: “Access to the Kota Tinggi waterfalls was restricted, and we needed special permission from the sultan. We used those occasions when he visited our shop [at the Capitol Theater] and asked him for permission; he always gladly agreed.”<sup>46</sup>

The young men, of course, were also into more adventurous activities. We can read about car races they organized between themselves on trips to inland Malaya, and, not surprisingly, they also experimented with opium smoking: “Since I had heard and read a lot about opium, I was eager to try the intoxicating smoke myself. I chose a secluded coffee house and ordered an opium cigarette. It cost 200 Singapore dollars, but the experience was worth it ...; however, it got much worse as the intoxication started to fade away—I ended up with a

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42 Josef Štach, *Obchod gumou v zemi bílého slona* [Trading rubber in the country of the white elephant], *Zlín*, March 15, 1939, 10.

43 Silvestr Němec, letter to his family (unpublished, dated March 11, 1939 in Singapore).

44 “Suddenly we heard a loud bark and the dog was gone – only a stain of blood remained on the water where he was just a second ago; you can imagine how quickly we ran out of the water!”; Vyhánálek, *Zpráva z pobytu v zahraničí*, 6

45 Silvestr Němec, letter to his family, 4.

46 Vyhánálek, *Zpráva z pobytu v zahraničí*, 5.



terrible headache and was unable to move for a long while. The following day, I was late to my job; luckily my supervisors didn't find out the real reason."<sup>47</sup>

While there is virtually no documentation about their intimate life, it is certain that many of them established such relations with local women. This was inevitable, since most of the Baťa staff that came from Czechoslovakia were young men, and there were only two or three single Czechoslovak women in the group (one of them—Vlasta Šebová—married an Englishman, George Tarry, while in Singapore<sup>48</sup>). The sparse records in this area include Josef Kramoliš's serious relationship with a girl from a Eurasian family named Mercedes,<sup>49</sup> in addition to two other Baťa employees who are known to have married locally, one to a Filipino woman and the other to a Singaporean Chinese partner.<sup>50</sup> However, interracial relationships on the part of Czechoslovak men must have been much more common than reflected in the records.

There were also more official events where the Czechoslovaks presented themselves to Singaporean society. Besides concerts and radio interviews, perhaps the most formal were the annual gatherings at the Cenotaph, where dozens of Czechoslovak citizens met every year on October 28—Czechoslovak Independence Day—in order to celebrate and commemorate the anniversary of the creation of their own young country. Newspapers in Singapore regularly reported on them and even printed several photographs,<sup>51</sup> which today represent a unique documentation of the Czechoslovak community there.

It must have been an almost surreal dynamic: a community of Czechoslovaks celebrating their still young independence from the Habsburg Empire, just as it was being taken away from them by Nazi Germany, while other people around them in the Far East—particularly the Indians—were still struggling to gain their own independence from the British Empire. We do not know what the position of the British authorities was towards such gatherings, although they must have tolerated them at the very least.

However, not all was rosy in this small community. In a way, it was just a miniature of their motherland, with its diversity as well as animosities among

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47 Kramoliš, *Ze Zlína až do Singapuru*.

48 "Wedding Celebration," *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, April 29, 1941, 5.

49 Kramoliš, *Ze Zlína až do Singapuru*.

50 Oldřich Lebloch married a Filipina in 1939 in Manila before he moved to Singapore in 1940 or 1941; František "Frank" Wakerman married a local Chinese girl named Daisy who is still alive; the author met her personally, along with her son and daughter, in May 2019 in Singapore; see ref. 9.

51 "Czechoslovak cenotaph ceremony," *Malaya Tribune*, October 27, 1939, 3; "40 Czechoslovaks in Cenotaph ceremony," *The Straits Times*, October 28, 1939, 10; "Singapore Czechs at Cenotaph," *Malaya Tribune*, October 28, 1939, 2.

various nationalities within the multi-ethnic republic. And as the war erupted in Europe, these tensions and differences only escalated not only between the ethnic Czechs and Slovaks, but also between the Poles, Germans, and Jews in Singapore.<sup>52</sup>

It so happened that some of the Czechoslovak Germans in Singapore sided with Hitler and applied for German passports after Germany occupied the remainder of the Czech lands in March 1938. One of them was subsequently interned on Singapore's St. John's Island after Germany went to war with Great Britain;<sup>53</sup> another (a former Baťa employee) was also interned but was released after intervention by Baťa's director and moved to Siam where he maintained his freedom of movement while reportedly also working for the Gestapo.<sup>54</sup>

The Czechoslovaks tried to establish an association in Singapore, but repeatedly failed to agree on who should be the chair and what the statutes should look like. The whole spat eventually escalated to a level where various factions sent denunciations and complaints against each other to the British authorities in Singapore, as well as to the Czechoslovak consulate in Bombay and the Czechoslovak government-in-exile in London.<sup>55</sup>

One of the issues was that the Baťa Shoe Co. had been bypassing the local British regulations setting minimum salaries for the company's Czechoslovak employees. The Baťa management's practice was to withhold 50% of these wages on the company's account, eventually forcing the employees to return it to the company or donate it to the War Fund. Baťa's director, Václav Rojt, was quoted saying that "[the employees] do not have the right to these monies, and the company was only obligated to give them such salaries 'because the bloody British regulations required it.'"<sup>56</sup>

There were probably even more situations where the modus operandi of the Baťa Shoe Co. clashed with local regulations and culture. This unfortunate dynamic also included the fact that in June 1940, the Baťa Company was put on a black list by the allies, because its headquarters back in Czechoslovakia was in German-occupied territory and under Nazi control, and there was a risk, from

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52 Beránek, List of Czechoslovaks in Singapore in 1941.

53 The son of Osvald Mense, an engineer employed in Singapore, had Austrian citizenship; he was later transported to an internment camp in Tatura, Australia.

54 Testimony of Erich Lachs given to the Czechoslovak consul in Cape Town, April 7, 1942; K. Dittrich was working for Baťa in Singapore in 1935 as the head of its store in the Capitol Theater. He apparently returned to Singapore before the war, although we do not know in what capacity.

55 *Zpráva Singapore – poměry v kolonii* [Singapore report: Situation in the colony], dated 1941 (Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Prague, catalogued under Londýnský archiv, no. 162).

56 Testimony of Erich Lachs, 4.

the perspective of the Allies, that the Singaporean branch would be “trading with enemy.” Accordingly, the British government appointed Philip Kinsley as the company’s administrator in order to ensure strict oversight and to prevent any financial or material exchanges between the Baťa Shoe Co. in Singapore and Baťa in Zlín.<sup>57</sup>

Given its tenuous relations with the British authorities, the management of Baťa was clearly interested in trying to improve its image. It almost certainly put pressure on its single young male employees to sign up with the British volunteer corps in Singapore. There is no need to doubt that the main driving force for the Czechoslovaks to sign up was their patriotic sense of duty (and possibly peer influence); however, it is not difficult to imagine that Baťa actively organized this. In the end, at least thirty of Baťa’s male employees joined either the Straits Settlements Volunteer Force (SSVF) or—in the case of older or married men—the Local Defense Corps.<sup>58</sup>

However, the older and more experienced Czechoslovaks who served in the LDC were very skeptical about the whole arrangement: “We had some training before the war started, but it was more like children playing soldiers. For example, when we were supposed to perform a dummy bayonet attack, they couldn’t get us to show what they called ‘determination’—everyone looked so innocent and composed that we eventually had to laugh ... it was ironic that they were teaching us how to shoot at airplanes with our rifles which were not even loaded .... After the war broke out, we were put on guard duty at various strategic objects in town. We received rifles and ammunition. Our commanders warned us to stay alert but not to shoot. The concern about panic shooting was real, since one LDC member had recently shot dead two Chinese people by accident.”<sup>59</sup>

On the other hand, the Czechoslovaks contributed without reservation to the War Fund and other war-related charities. The local newspapers contain dozens of articles mentioning their charitable efforts. These include donations to the War Fund by specific Czechoslovak citizens, as well as company donations from the Baťa Shoe Co.; the sum of all the amounts mentioned gives us a ballpark figure of several tens of thousand dollars. The Baťa Shoe Co. and its em-

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57 “Shoe Company under Supervision,” *The Straits Times*, June 22, 1940, 11; “Position of the Bata Company - Government has not Taken Control,” *The Straits Times*, June 26, 1940, 11.

58 “Czechs Give Fullest Support to L.D.C.,” *The Straits Times*, November 26, 1940, 10. “All our European employees with the exception of two or three became members of the LDC. We entered it voluntarily around December 1940,” cited in Koš, *Memoirs* (Koš worked as chief accountant of the Baťa Shoe Co. in Singapore).

59 Koš, *Memoirs*.

ployees also contributed to other collections, such as the Christmas Fund for the Poor, the Polish Relief Fund, the YWCA, and the Salvation Army. It also organized several charity actions of its own, for example, offering to repair for free any donated used shoes to be distributed to those in need, with several hundred pairs of such shoes eventually being handed out. The Czechoslovaks in Singapore also donated to the Czechoslovak War Fund in London. One such action, which attracted considerable attention and guaranteed public visibility, was the fundraising sale of the “Czechoslovak Badge” to be placed on car windows.<sup>60</sup>

Czechoslovak wives joined the Inter-Allied Women’s Association of Malaya, where they knitted warm sweaters and other clothes for the Allied soldiers in Europe. Thanks to the newspapers, we know that they met every Wednesday afternoon to work together.<sup>61</sup> Subsequently, in October 1941, the female members of the Czechoslovak community formed their own Czechoslovak Women’s Club in Singapore. In a span of two and a half months, they organized two shipments to London with supplies for Czechoslovak soldiers in the British Army, including 85 sweaters, 20 shawls, 16 pairs of socks, and a blanket.<sup>62</sup> A Czechoslovak national costume was also to be seen at the beneficiary event by the Cyrano’s War Fund event in July 1940, among a parade of national costumes of ten Allied countries. This even featured in photographs in two local newspapers.<sup>63</sup> Additional publicity and visibility for the Czechoslovak community in Singapore came as a result of several radio interviews, where members of the community talked about the situation in their homeland back in Europe.<sup>64</sup> And on one occasion, readers of *The Straits Times* found on the front page a reproduction of an illegal Czechoslovak resistance magazine—*V boj!* [To fight!], accompanied by an article about resistance activities against the Nazi occupation.<sup>65</sup>

On the eve of the Japanese invasion of Malaya, Czechoslovak volunteers were mobilized along with all other soldiers and volunteers on December 4, 1941. Several Czechoslovak employees of Baťa were stationed in Penang and Klang at the time, and they were the first to face the fast-moving Japanese invasion forces. Their stories vividly capture the chaos and incompetence of the British authorities, who were not only unprepared but failed to organize either

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60 “Czechoslovak Badge,” *The Straits Times*, April 29, 1941, 10.

61 “Allied Women Form Local Association,” *The Straits Times*, October 1, 1939, 7.

62 Josef Luley, *Zpráva* [Report], Singapore, December 31, 1941.

63 “A Singapore Woman’s Diary,” *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, July 5, 1940, 6; “Cyrano Aids War Fund,” *The Straits Times*, July 4, 1940, 10.

64 See, for example, “Czech Revolt against the Nazis Will Come,” *Malaya Tribune*, December 16, 1939, 2.

65 “V boj!,” *The Straits Times*, November 30, 1941, 1.

an evacuation or a “scorched earth” policy during the rushed retreat.<sup>66</sup> As for the volunteers, there were 15 young Czechoslovaks men in the SSVF’s 1st Battalion, many of whom took part in the Battle of Pasir Panjang. Here they fought shoulder to shoulder with defenders of other nationalities: their unit was commanded by an Englishman, but they also must have interacted with the Malay Regiment which they had been sent to reinforce from their original positions on the beaches east of Keppel harbor.<sup>67</sup> One of their number—Silvestr Němec—died either in the battle or was wounded and then murdered during the massacre at the Alexandra (British Military) Hospital. Four others were captured and became prisoners of war, only one of whom survived the terrible conditions in the labor camps on Borneo.<sup>68</sup>

Many of the other Czechoslovak men were more fortunate and used the chance given to them by their commander to ditch their uniforms and change into civilian clothes. Interestingly, the Japanese occupational authorities did not know exactly how to handle these Czechoslovak civilians, because their country was occupied by Nazi Germany (in the case of Czechia), or had sided with it (in the case of Slovakia). Thus, it was not clear whether these white Europeans belonged to the enemy or to the allied camp. This allowed most, if not all, of these Czechoslovaks to live and roam freely around Singapore until December 1943, when they were all eventually rounded up and sent to Changi. Until that moment, they continued to perform their civilian jobs: the Baŕa people had been forced by the Japanese to restart shoe production and supply it to the Japanese (which they tried to resist even by acts of sabotage),<sup>69</sup> while some others performed arts and concerts in the city.<sup>70</sup>

In total, 24 Czechoslovak men, 7 women, and 4 children were eventually interned in Singapore. However, the largest part of the Czechoslovak community tried to evacuate Singapore, and most of them were lucky enough to succeed. Of these, a total of 31 men, 27 women, and 22 children managed to reach safety in Australia, India, or South Africa. Sadly, at least six other Czechoslo-

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66 Koš, *Memoirs*

67 “The story of Batamen in Malaya,” *Batanagar News*, October 6, 1945; letter from Josef Vyhnlák to the family of Silvestr Němec, August 21, 1947 (family archive).

68 More detailed research on these cases has been published recently in the author’s book *Pátrání po Silvestrovi*.

69 Jan Baroš, *The Fight and Fate of the Batamen in Singapore and Malaya* (Batawa, ON: Bata Ltd., 1945).

70 David Apelbaum was a Czech composer and conductor. His appearance at concerts is mentioned in a number of newspaper articles in 1942 and 1943; for example, “Orchestral Concert in Syonan Tomorrow,” *Syonan Shimibun*, October 20, 1942, 4; “Popular Concert at Former Y.M.C.A. Padang,” *Syonan Shimibun*, January 6, 1943, 2; “First Symphony Concert Being Held Tomorrow,” *Syonan Shimibun*, May 19, 1943, 2.

vak men died while attempting to evacuate—five of them on board the SS *Re-dang*, and one other probably on the SS *Giang Bee*.

### **Final reflections**

The Baťa company from Czechoslovakia brought a specific model of operation, including a conscious and systematic effort to improve the living conditions of its local workers. While it may appear similar in some respects to the colonial setup and proclaimed ethics, it was very different in other respects, particularly in the lack of racial prejudice and the emphasis on equality. In the end, nothing is a better indication of the successful localization of the Baťa Company—including its unique methods of production, sales, and management—than the fact that many local people today consider it to be a local, Malaysian or Indian, brand. Meanwhile, its Czechoslovak managers and other employees in Singapore and Malaya lived a life strangely divided between British/European society, local Singaporean culture, and their own national traditions.

We can be almost certain that many Czechoslovaks retained their typical skeptical and cynical attitude towards great empires (and authorities in general) as a coping strategy. It is therefore not surprising that they observed with curiosity, and sometimes with irony, some of the behaviors of British citizens towards non-British subjects, as well as other absurdities of the colonial regime. While the cultural and social differences between Czechoslovaks and the local population were also inevitably significant, some similarities emerged: besides complex and complicated relations towards the ruling British, it was the events of World War II that brought them closer together. The Japanese were already fighting and committing atrocities in China, when in 1938 Germany conquered part—and soon after invaded the rest—of Czechoslovakia. In this situation, the Czechoslovaks and the local Chinese suffered equally from the disturbing and often tragic news arriving from their countries and families back home. This motivated a number of them to either decide to return home to fight the enemy there or to at least join the allied/British forces in Singapore. In 1938–1940, some 30 Czechoslovak men signed up with various volunteer corps in Singapore and in British Malaya. In the end, at least 10 of them lost their lives as a result of the Japanese invasion and occupation.



# COLONIALISM MEETS EMPATHY AND INSIGHTFULNESS

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Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's Travel Diary to Burma\*

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*Michał Lubina*



Gustaw Herling-Grudziński (1919–2000)—one of the most important Polish writers of the twentieth century—visited decolonizing Burma in 1952 and left behind a travel diary titled *A Journey to Burma (Podróż do Burmy)*. This text paints a vivid, fascinating, disturbing, and complicated picture. Herling was a conflicted writer who struggled to understand this faraway country. His writing revolves around colonialism, its legacy, and the complicated colonial relationship with Burmese culture.<sup>1</sup>

## Why Burma?

As Herling himself writes, he was invited by On Kin, the editor of a major Burmese newspaper, *Bama Khit*, to give a series of anti-communist lectures in May 1952. Herling was probably noticed by On Kin thanks to his recently published book *A World Apart (Inny świat)*, a first-hand account of the Gulag system in the USSR. One imagines that the Burmese offer was a one-time opportunity for him, a chance to see a far-away country and to fly by plane for the first time. His diary starts on May 13 and ends on June 8, 1952, covering the flight to Burma (with stops in the Middle East and in Pakistan), his three-week stay in Burma, and the return flight to London along with a four-day in-

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\* This publication has been supported by a grant from the Faculty of International Relations and Political Studies under the Strategic Programme Excellence Initiative at Jagiellonian University.

1 I am grateful to Dr. Jan Mrázek for all his comments about the text.



terlude in India.<sup>2</sup> The description of South Asian countries forms an integral part of the diary. The diary was published in December 1952–January 1953 in *Wiadomości*, a Polish émigré journal in London, and later republished in a book format in London in 1983 and in Kraków in 1999.

Herling's knowledge about Burma was limited at best, although he must have read several books about the country and about Buddhism. Western influences are evident both explicitly (in quotes from Orwell, Kipling, Lewis, Fielding Hall, Conrad, Malraux, and others) and implicitly, when he echoes some typical colonial stereotypes. Herling, however, moved beyond these narratives and created his own original story.

### Why Herling?

Herling visited Burma just four years after the country gained independence from the British Empire. Colonialism as a political, social, cultural, psychological, and philosophical phenomenon did not disappear overnight once Burma gained its independence (although many Burmese nationalists dreamed it would).<sup>3</sup> It persisted well into the late 1990s<sup>4</sup> and in various reincarnations still figures in contemporary Myanmar even today. Much of Herling's book deals with the colonial heritage, both intellectual and physical. Herling himself echoed some colonial narratives (though in a complex way) and in places described his Burmese hosts as colonized. Herling's thoughts—complex, engaging, and disturbing—well deserve our attention.

Before turning to the text itself, some further introductory remarks are essential. First, a word or two about Herling's life are in order. He was a Polonized Jew, with a socialist upbringing from before World War II. Arrested in 1940 by the Soviets on charges of espionage, he spent two years in Soviet labor camps, becoming a staunch anti-communist (though he remained a socialist). Released in 1942, he joined the forces of the Polish Anders Army (composed of Poles released from the USSR). Evacuated from the USSR via the Middle East,

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2 Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, *Podróż do Burmy* [A journey to Burma] (Krakow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1999; reprint of 1952), 9–12, 124, 157. Herling was accompanied in his lectures and travels in Burma by the Czechoslovak dissident Vilém Bernard.

3 Melford Spiro, *Buddhism and Society. A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes* (Los Angeles–London: University of California Press, 1982), 183–85.

4 E.g. General Khin Nyunt, one of Myanmar's junta leaders, called Western criticism a form of “psycho colonialism,” quoted in David Steinberg, *Burma. The State of Myanmar* (Washington D.C: Georgetown University Press, 2000), 310.

the Army fought in Italy. After the war Herling remained in emigration, living first in London, and then in Munich. In 1955 he settled for good in Naples, Italy, gaining national and later international prominence.

Important in this short biography in the Burmese context are three things. First, there is Herling's complicated Jewishness. Although Polonized—Polish was his mother tongue and he consciously chose to be part of Polish culture by studying Polish Studies (against the will of his father) and by writing in Polish—Herling nevertheless must have felt the burden of being from a disliked minority. He studied in Warsaw in the difficult 1930s, when anti-Semitism was on the rise and incidents took place on an almost daily basis.<sup>5</sup> Presumably, he was considered a Jew by many Poles and a Pole by many Jews.<sup>6</sup>

In *A Journey to Burma* Jews appear twice, and only as a means of comparing Burmese conditions to Poland.<sup>7</sup> Herling describes, quite skillfully and impartially, the Karen minority problem in Burma,<sup>8</sup> writing that Karens are scattered around Burma which makes it difficult to satisfy their political demands for autonomy;<sup>9</sup> and ending with a less adequate comparison: “ethnically one may consider Karens a kind of Polish Ukrainians, while geographically—an equivalent of Polish Jews.”<sup>10</sup> More tellingly, elsewhere Herling introduces the reader

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5 Herling himself mentioned this antisemitism, see Sławomir Buryła, “(Nie)obecność Zagłady w twórczości Gustawa Herlinga-Grudzińskiego” [The (non)presence of the Holocaust in Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's works], in *Świadectwo – mit – tajemnica* [Witness-myth-mystery], ed. Z. Kudelski (Warsaw: NCK, 2019), 95. For more on this atmosphere, see *Alma mater antisemitica: Akademisches Milieu, Juden und Antisemitismus an den Universitäten Europas zwischen 1918 und 1939* [Academic milieu, Jews, and antisemitism at European universities between 1918–1939], ed. Regina Fritz et al (Vienna: New Academic Press, 2016), 113–137, 203–221; Paul Brykczyński, *Primed for Violence: Murder, Antisemitism, and Democratic Politics in Interwar Poland* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2016), 131–57.

6 This was a larger phenomenon, see Marci Shore, *Caviar and Ashes: A Warsaw Generation's Life and Death in Marxism, 1918–1968* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 135–141. A Polish-Jewish writer, Henryk Grynberg even accused Herling of being an anti-Semite, see *Pamiętnik* [A memoir] (Warsaw: Świat Książki, 2011), 773. About the complicated relationship between Polishness and Jewishness in Herling see Buryła, “(Nie)obecność Zagłady,” 95–107.

7 Although there was still a significant Jewish diaspora in Burma as late as the 1950s (Ruth F. Cernea, *Almost Englishmen: Baghdadi Jews in British Burma*, Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007), 105–106), Herling did not mention them (since he probably did not meet them).

8 The Karen ethnic minority, the third most populous ethnic group in Burma, developed national consciousness during colonial times (Karen elites were Christianised) and supported colonial rule. After Burma's independence, the radical wing of the Karen political movement started an uprising which lasted until 2012. See Bertil Lintner, *Burma in Revolt. Opium and Insurgency since 1948* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1999), 19, 71, 96–98, 102–108.

9 Herling was only partially correct here. Although a significant number of Karens, roughly half of their population, was scattered around the Irrawaddy Delta and elsewhere, they formed a cohesive majority in the Burma-Thai borderlands, see Martin Smith, *Burma. Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (Dhaka–Bangkok–New York–London: Zed Books, 1999), 30–38, 46, 50–52, 460.

10 Herling-Grudziński, *Podróż do Burmy*, 89.

to the problem of Indian moneylenders, *chettians*, hated in Burma, by describing how they forced into debt the Burmese peasants and took over two thirds of Burmese land.<sup>11</sup> Herling compares *chettians* to Jews: “so, a situation developed as if Jewish usurers bought out two thirds of the land in Poland and then leased it out to the peasants as tenancies.”<sup>12</sup> These words are a surprisingly adequate description of rural politics in Burma,<sup>13</sup> but the comparison is interesting in that it (un)consciously follows the Polish negative stereotype of a Jew as a rich, urban moneylender who exploits the Polish masses.<sup>14</sup> These passages suggest how Herling saw Burma through his own Polish-Jewish lenses. Burma’s ethnic problems might have seen to him as somehow similar, or comparable, and not totally alien. He might have understood (or thought he understood) the in-between status of Karens or *chettians* (Burmese but non-Burman) and all the emotions that surrounded these uneasy identities; problems not that dissimilar to his own hybrid identity.

Second, Herling was a socialist in his youth and remained so after the war. As such he couldn’t have been a fan of the colonial system. The opening pages of his diary give a description of two “withering British ladies” sitting opposite him on the plane. Crocheting, they were “seated upright with such dignity and grudge against the world as if they had just heard at the pastor’s tea party the dreadful news that British civil servants were no longer in Cairo.”<sup>15</sup> At the same time, after experiencing the Gulags, Herling became a staunch anti-communist, which alienated him from many European socialists.

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11 Herling was wrong here: *chettians* were hated, indeed, but owned much less. At the peak of their influence (in the 1930s), *chettians* owned more than 25% of the cultivable land in Burma, not two-thirds, see Robert Taylor, *The State in Myanmar* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2009), 143–46. Herling’s mistake was probably influenced by a misreading of Norman Lewis’ *Golden Earth* (Herling praises Lewis at the end of his diary, though does not quote him in the text). Lewis, in his travelogue, met a Burmese politician Tun Win (whom Herling also met later on) and after a conversation with him wrote that “the Indian community as a whole owned two thirds of Burmese agricultural land,” Norman Lewis, *Golden Earth: Travels in Burma* (New York: Scribner’s 1952), 40. Lewis was wrong here with this two thirds figure (all foreign-owned land in the country constituted slightly more than 50% but not two thirds), too, but less than Herling as not all Indians in Burma were *chettians*.

12 Herling-Grudziński, *Podróż do Burmy*, 46.

13 Indeed, as Herling writes further on, the actions of the *chettians* led to anti-Indian sentiment which enhanced the anti-colonial movements, see Maung Htin Aung, *A History of Burma* (New York-London: Cambridge University Press 1967), 273.

14 Although the Jews in pre-war Poland were indeed mostly urban (though many lived in small towns), some of their elites (lawyers, physicians) were rich and some of them exploited the Poles; the majority of Polish Jewry, however, comprised a very poor urban proletariat, along with artisans and petty merchants. See Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe Between the World Wars* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 11–85; Joseph Marcus, *Social and Political History of Jews in Poland 1919–1939* (Berlin–New York–Amsterdam: de Gruyter, 1983), 27–259.

15 Herling-Grudziński, *Podróż do Burmy*, 14.

When we combine this with the third important aspect of his biography—the fact that he visited the Middle East previously (during World War II) and probably disliked it<sup>16</sup>—we have a truly ambivalent picture. Nothing shows this ambiguity better than the introduction, where Herling compares the Middle East with the Indian subcontinent.

The transition from the Middle East to India is almost as rapid as the one from Europe to the Middle East. Not that the climate has changed .... Rather, the dignity of people's movement, the beauty of their true bred faces, and the calm pride emanating from every look make a curious, overawing charm. Stars seem to shine differently here, more decoratively, just like lanterns hanging from the celestial ceiling. The evening pants with heat so silky one may almost touch it .... One may, without being a supporter of the colonial system at all, have doubts as to the extent to which the inhabitants of Egypt and Iraq have matured to independence. But in India, the fact that it was ruled by British *sahibs* just a few years ago seems almost a miracle. Everything runs so smoothly and efficiently here, the mechanism of administration works with such precision that one does not have to lose much time to realize who oiled the wheels and set it in motion. That's right, the British. It is a truism now to say that the British Empire prepared its dismantlement by its own hands. The British arrogance in India, however, was based on something different: it dared to muster, from civilizational and technical superiority, a feeling of racial superiority of the whites in a country where every second human could—after looking in a mirror and comparing his face with the face of an ordinary *sahib*—become an Indian Mr. de Gobineau.<sup>17</sup>

This introduction foreshadows the fundamental ambiguity of Herling's description of Burma. The romanticization ("beauty of their true bred faces, and the calm pride emanating from every look make a curious, overawing charm"), exoticization, and orientalizing of India ("stars seem to shine differently here, more decoratively, just like lanterns hanging from the celestial ceiling"), plus controversial remarks ("a country where every second human could—after looking in a mirror and comparing his face with the face of an ordinary *sahib*—become an Indian Mr. de Gobineau"), meet an anticolonial interpretation of the subcontinent's decolonization. Throughout the book, Herling is antico-

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16 Herling-Grudziński, *Podróż do Burmy*, 14.

17 Herling-Grudziński, *Podróż do Burmy*, 16–17.

lonial in a fundamental sense: he understands the psychological backbone of colonialism's ultimate demise. And yet, in his description, he follows some colonial narratives. His view of India as an extraordinary land of unordinary Messrs. de Gobineau is the classic colonial narrative based on the hierarchy of races. The only—significant!—difference is that Herling reverses the narrative and places Indians at the top. However, the very idea of judging people—positively or negatively—by their physical, “national” features is quintessentially nineteenth century thinking. This introduction foreshadows the ambiguities in Herling's portrait of Burma.

### Literary influences

When Herling came to Burma, he was hardly a *tabula rasa* in his knowledge of the country. His view of the country, which he saw for the first time, was influenced by his readings of colonial writers. Upon landing in Rangoon and being greeted by smiling Burmese hosts, Herling notes: “cheerfulness seems to perfectly harmonize with Burmese appearance: they have ceaselessly joyful eyes, intelligent faces, and they move charmingly and freely in their colorful longyi skirts;”<sup>18</sup> a couple of pages later he quotes an Indian diplomat saying “in general the Burmese don't take anything too seriously.”<sup>19</sup> This observation is clearly inspired by colonial literature—e.g. Kipling (“When I die I will be a Burman ... and I will always walk about with a pretty almond-colored girl who shall laugh and jest too”),<sup>20</sup> or other writers (“life comes to them always as a pleasant thing. It is worth living. It is to be passed through with a laugh and jest, not to be taken too seriously. The people seem all happy”).<sup>21</sup> Colonial literature painted a “picture of childlike and happy people, not particularly hard working or well-disciplined but with many attractive qualities.”<sup>22</sup> It was a Burmese version of the “happy savage” myth.

Herling, however, is less judgmental and voices his observations in a softer, less authoritarian manner. He doesn't portray his hosts with the mannerisms

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18 Herling-Grudziński, *Podróż do Burmy*, 21.

19 Herling-Grudziński, *Podróż do Burmy*, 26.

20 Rudyard Kipling, *From Sea to Sea and Other Sketches: Letters of Travel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) (reprint of 1899), 217.

21 H. Fielding Hall, *A People at School* (London: Macmillan & co, 1906), 22–23.

22 Thant Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps: A Personal History of Burma* (New York: FSG, 2007), 193.

of a master's view of his servants, so typical for the colonial attitude. When Herling visited Shwedagon, the most important pagoda in Rangoon, he was taken aback: "Nothing, really nothing of what I saw in the Middle East can be compared with the oriental splendor of this city-within-a-city, with the extravagance of the rich, fairy tale-like composition of its space. Words like 'magical' or 'surreal' are only approximate descriptions .... Its architecture is based on an accumulation of forms bordering on madness."<sup>23</sup> Herling expressed his feelings in a classical orientalist way, romanticizing and eroticizing, echoing Kipling's famous description of Shwedagon which shaped the stereotypical image of Burma in the West for at least two centuries: "Then, a golden mystery upheaved itself on the horizon—a beautiful winking wonder that blazed in the sun, of a shape that was neither Muslim dome nor Hindu temple spire .... 'This is Burma, and it will be quite unlike any land you know about.'"<sup>24</sup> Here Herling's depiction follows Kipling's footsteps, except for Herling's greater attention to the pagoda's details (Herling—unlike Kipling—went inside Shwedagon, rather than just seeing it from a ferry).

There is an explicit reference to Kipling in Herling's description of Lazarus, an Indian servant in his host's house, who kept his "unwavering faith in the Empire's might," and consequently "considers Burma's and India's independence a ridiculous joke," so instead of returning to India prefers to stay in Burma as "it is unknown what might happen next." Herling summed up his description by saying, "so, in this part of the world the protagonists of Kipling's novels still exist."<sup>25</sup> Herling indirectly distances himself from Kipling here: we may deduce that such "unwavering faith in Empire" seems outmoded for Herling, who had a more critical view of the colonial legacy.

Interestingly, in the same passage, Herling seems to make a switch in his literary inspiration: he moves away from Kipling to Orwell. When Herling describes the physical appearance of Lazarus ("a pretty Indian boy," with "a broad smile brightening his face, revealing two rows of white as ivory teeth and lighting up sparks in the darkness of his navy eyes"), he might have been inspired by Orwell's (in)famous poem "Romance"<sup>26</sup> which eroticizes (albeit in an ironic way) the locals.

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23 Herling-Grudziński, *Podróż do Burmy*, 31.

24 Kipling, *From Sea to Sea*, 217.

25 Herling-Grudziński, *Podróż do Burmy*, 41–42.

26 George Orwell, "Romance" (1925), "George Orwell.ru," last modified December 29, 2019 [https://orwell.ru/library/poems/romance/english/e\\_rom](https://orwell.ru/library/poems/romance/english/e_rom).

Taken to a Burmese teahouse, Herling discusses politics with his host, but stops his note-taking to say “this is all interesting,” but there are things of more importance: “I finally have the first opportunity to look closely at Burmese women. They are small and petite, move with grace ... but they unnecessarily cover their olive faces with a layer of powder, and their breasts, flat as a board, take away half of their glamour. Apparently the Burmese ideal of feminine beauty demands breasts as small as possible.”<sup>27</sup> Herling did not have to know about *thanaka*—a yellowish-white cosmetic paste made from ground bark, traditionally used by women *and* men alike in Burma to protect their skin from the sun—but his comment about breasts was clearly copy-pasted from *Burmese Days* where Orwell’s opinion about the ideal, small breast is explicitly declared.<sup>28</sup>

## Disgust

Herling repeatedly writes about his “disgust.” When in Chinatown for the first time, despite noses covered with tissues, he “felt nauseated” seeing what came across to him as “a giant dustbin, which after opening the lid, swarmed with human vermin.”<sup>29</sup> This served him as a pretext to theorize:

Few people sensitive to human misery realize that it evokes our sympathy and offends our conscience only around a certain lower level of human life, when the people suffering are clearly victims of bad social systems. Here, in Chinatown and in Scott Market in Rangoon, on the other hand, one can spot mostly the plague of the animal instinct of procreation which got stuck at such a primitive level of development that it involuntarily generates something along the lines of disgust. Up close, a man’s fate in Asia attunes more to cold pondering about limiting natural growth than giving thrills along the beat of the drums of revolution. I even start to suspect that social moralizing—at least the way we know it in the West—is a product imported from Europe, alongside the colonial exploitation system, and equally as unpopular as that.<sup>30</sup>

The problem of Herling’s theorization is multidimensional. The words about “stages of development” are clearly inspired by the colonial idea of progress radiating from the center (Europe) and unevenly distributing itself around the

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27 Herling-Grudziński, *Podróż do Burmy*, 57.

28 George Orwell, *Burmese Days* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1934), 44.

29 Herling-Grudziński, *Podróż do Burmy*, 48–49.

30 Herling-Grudziński, *Podróż do Burmy*, 50.

world. According to these ideas, the non-European “heathens” lived in perpetual darkness outside Europe and only contact with the European colonial power helped them to “advance” along the progress/developmental stages. Later, when social Darwinism influenced colonial thinking, it led to the emergence of a hierarchy of races, with Caucasians at the top, and non-European races below. Accordingly, the Europeans themselves had a benevolent influence upon any peoples who came under their sway. Herling’s unconscious Eurocentrism, coupled with his dehumanizing remarks (“primitive,” “human vermin,” “animal instinct,” and even “river rats”),<sup>31</sup> mirrors these infamous ideas. Polish commentators may claim that Herling “highlights specific individuals,” that for him “they are all equally interesting, independently of the role and social position that has been given to them ... each subtitle could be named *Ecce Homo*,”<sup>32</sup> but the dehumanizing evidence quoted above contradicts such a favorable interpretation.

Although Herling is not entirely wrong when writing about importing colonial social moralizing—he guesses its unpopularity—he fails to notice the long Asian philosophical tradition of social justice, most importantly Buddhism’s stress on compassion, as well as a firmly rooted obligation to prevent poverty. Moreover, given Herling’s fascination with India, it is worth remembering that Burma in some colonial writings was compared favorably to India due to the former’s lack of extreme poverty and more just social features.<sup>33</sup> If Herling had gone to India before Burma he might have developed a more balanced opinion. The only place when his observation is unambiguously correct is when he admits about the unpopularity of the colonial system. He fails, however, to realize that this was partially due to explaining Asian reality by using similar language to the one he used to paint the picture of Rangoon’s Chinatown.

Disgust is yet another example of Herling’s unconscious orientalism. Disgust, alongside its close cousin—contempt, work to hierarchize the political order: they constitute righteously presented claims of superiority.<sup>34</sup> As such, disgust has a long, inglorious history of usage in colonial discourse. Colonial administrators, writers, and diarists portrayed the colonial subjects as “filthy natives” in contrast to the clean, hygienic colonizers; the “disgusting” natives

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31 Herling-Grudziński, *Podróż do Burmy*, 82.

32 Włodzimierz Bolecki, *Postłowie (Afterword)*, in Herling-Grudziński, *Podróż do Burmy*, 154–155.

33 Fielding Hall, *A People at School*, 22–23.

34 William I. Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 9.



were a threat to the healthy, enlightened, colonial order.<sup>35</sup> By shaming and ridiculing locals or local conditions, colonists asserted their alleged superiority: disgust became “the colonial master’s emotion of superiority.”<sup>36</sup> As such disgust was an integral part of the general colonial belief superstructure which painted colonized peoples as primitives who needed to be civilized for their own good and for the general benevolence of humankind.

Herling’s next moment of disgust came while visiting Mandalay. One was due to “a horde of giant winged insects” that surrounded his hotel room.<sup>37</sup> The other, more interesting, case came while visiting the Mahamuni Pagoda in Mandalay, famous for the gold leaf stuck to the stone statue by devotees. While circumventing the image, he noted: “I feel on both hands the hot stickiness of some goo .... With an instinctive feeling of disgust I tear my hands off the statue; they are covered in gold.” A few lines further he describes the Mahamuni image as “a golden snowman” and “a huge golden fish in an aquarium,” while the practice of sticking gold leaf on the statue is termed “golden craziness.”<sup>38</sup> Again, perhaps, Herling was inspired by Kipling, who—famously and deeply insultingly for the Burmese—called the Buddha a “Bloomin’ idol made o’ mud—Wot they called the Great Gawd Budd.”<sup>39</sup> Or perhaps a socialist woke up in Herling? There was a popular socialist dislike for religious edifices wasting money that could have been spent on eradicating poverty.<sup>40</sup> In *Burma Diary* a similar, indirect passage repeats itself later on, when Herling visits the modern Kaba Aye pagoda in Rangoon and is very critical of it.

Herling did not like Burmese art. When writing about hand weaving, he summarizes it as “one of the very few crafts where some ambitions and artistic skills on the part of the Burmese emerge.”<sup>41</sup> As his travels progressed, he became more critical: “the monotony of Burmese architecture gets more and more depressing after some time, while wall paintings—a bizarre mix of folk primitiveness with the colorful kitsch found on the covers of American exotic novelettes about Far East—almost nauseate. The Burmese build their pago-

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35 Maggie MacLure, *Discourse in Educational and Social Research* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2003), 45.

36 Thomas Schwarz, “Colonial Disgust: The Colonial Master’s Emotion of Superiority,” in *German Colonialism, Visual Culture, and Modern Memory*, ed. Volker Langbehn (New York: Routledge, 2010), 182–97.

37 Herling-Grudziński, *Podróż do Burmy*, 67.

38 Herling-Grudziński, *Podróż do Burmy*, 64–65.

39 Rudyard Kipling, “Mandalay,” in *A Bibliography of the Works of Rudyard Kipling*, ed. David Alan Richards (New Castle: Oak Knoll Books 2010), 113.

40 Correspondence with Dr. Jan Mrázek.

41 Herling-Grudziński, *Podróż do Burmy*, 79.

das not for aesthetic joy, but for their magical purposes and, as it appears, they have no artistic skills or ambitions. Their rare ivory sculptures cannot compete with their Chinese counterparts.”<sup>42</sup>

### Insightful observer

As seen in the previous part, Herling at times succumbed in one way or another to some colonial clichés. His approach to colonialism, however, is much more complex and intriguing. For example, he observes his host’s household:

One needs to list three features that probably shaped the mentality of the emancipated intelligentsia in this part of Asia: the deeply rooted orientalism in family life customs; the thinner veil of colonial snobbism in Victorian interior décor and furniture; and the thin varnish of Europeanism in attempts to adapt the house to the requirements of a modern bungalow... We live just like in the West, but at the same time we still have not met the host’s wife (even though she is a leading Burmese writer); guests come and go into our room without knocking, for it is difficult to knock on a curtain of linen doors; we don’t hear the servants, although we know they constantly circle around us in silent expectation; and we eat meals in an empty living room, where the household members never come.<sup>43</sup>

Herling’s “orientalism” in this passage is itself orientalist—what he probably meant by this word is Asian conservatism. His own orientalism blends with astute observations about surface level Westernization (the superficial adoption of European manners) coupled with “colonial snobbism.” The latter is more interesting; indeed, the Burmese postcolonial elites were staunchly pro-independence, if not outright nationalists. Yet, even if they adopted Western manners only superficially, they were “culturally Anglicized,” and their elite status was based “on their enlightened British style.”<sup>44</sup> They used English in official correspondence and sometimes in private as well, read British classics, and sent their children to British schools. These Anglophone, “culturally bilingual,”<sup>45</sup>

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42 Herling-Grudziński, *Podróż do Burmy*, 91.

43 Herling-Grudziński, *Podróż do Burmy*, 41.

44 Manuel Sarkisyanz, *The Buddhist Background of Burmese Revolution* (New York: Springer, 1965), 9, 130, 165.

45 Edmund Leach, “Buddhism in the Post-colonial Order in Burma and Ceylon,” *Daedalus*, 102 (1973): 51.

“bureaucratic elite of British education”<sup>46</sup> represented the Burmese postcolonial establishment with certain international ambitions—hence Burma’s active role in the non-alignment movement—and some of them (UN Secretary General U Thant) became globally recognizable. They were hybrid elites who espoused “Buddhist modernism,” which “emphasized and affirmed the cultural and spiritual superiority of Asia over the West, yet it did not urge a retreat from Western institutions or technology.”<sup>47</sup> As Melford Spiro noted, the Westernized Burmese elites wanted all things the West had (“and more!”) yet “without having to acquire them from this hated (because envied) model.”<sup>48</sup>

Herling portrayed this sentiment quite accurately.<sup>49</sup> As one commentator of his book noted, “anything that nails the Empire’s coffin is dear to them, but sending their children to England remains their ultimate ideal.”<sup>50</sup> Herling, invited by his host to the Union Club—a former “whites only” colonial club—observes insightfully that by establishing the institution of a club, “the English built their traditional shrine of racial exclusiveness, which for them was the symbol of the white man’s burden, while for the Burmese intelligentsia it was the symbol of contempt and the most painful thorn of colonial rule.”<sup>51</sup> Herling moves on to depict the role of a club (invoking Orwell, who left a poignant image of a club in his *Burmese Days*)<sup>52</sup> and to comment that “nothing hurts as much as racial contempt, so one may, without exaggeration, say that the institution of exclusive colonial clubs undercut the roots of Empire as deeply as colonial economic exploitation.”<sup>53</sup> This is indeed a brilliant observation which foreshadows postcolonial studies’ reading of the decolonization process as one fueled by wounds inflicted by racist attitudes of the colonialists.<sup>54</sup> Herling, however, does not stop here. He asserts:

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46 Sarkisyanz, *The Buddhist Background*, 229.

47 Winfield, “Buddhism and the State in Burma: English-Language Discourses from 1823 to 1962” (PhD diss. University of Melbourne, 2017), 183.

48 Spiro, *Buddhism and Society*, 184.

49 I have also analysed this part of Herling’s diary from a different angle in Michał Lubina and Magdalena Kozłowska, “Unwillingly Orientalist: Gustaw Herling-Grudziński’s Travel Diary to Burma as an Example of an Unusual Postcolonial Eastern European Account,” *East European Politics and Societies*, 37(3) (2022): 789–812 <https://doi.org/10.1177/08883254221116800>.

50 Bolecki, *Posłowie*, 153; Herling writes about this in the section concerning Pakistan; although Burmese and South Asian elites differed significantly, in this regard they were indeed quite similar.

51 Herling-Grudziński, *Podróż do Burmy*, 51.

52 Orwell, *Burmese Days*, 12.

53 Herling-Grudziński, *Podróż do Burmy*, 52.

54 Kavala M. Panikkar, *Asia and Western Dominance: A Survey of the Vasco Da Gama Epoch of Asian History 1498–1945* (London: Allen & Unwin 1953), 230–48; Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (London: Profile Books, 2021) (reprint of 1964), 163–84; Thant Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps*, 191.

But nothing is as infectious as contempt. The Orient Club in Rangoon, established at one time by people, who in protest and out of wounded pride, wanted their own club, is now bashfully avoided by ministers of the Burmese government, journalists, writers, and intellectuals, who frequent only the Union Club. This ectypal snobbism is not without a certain zest: the Europeanized Burmese go to the Union Club, the orthodox Burmese and a couple of people of the likes of On Kin go to the Orient Club, while—in a country ruled by socialists—ordinary people don't go to any club. All people are equal, but some people are more equal than others; all Burmese are brown, but some Burmese are more brown than others. The moon looks at itself in the flat surface of the water as if in proof that nothing will ever change and cannot change in this best of worlds.<sup>55</sup>

This is one of the best parts of the book, with profound observations that help us to understand why Herling was a great writer. The clear reference to Orwell's "more equal" catchphrase helps Herling to accurately depict the mechanism of Burmese "internal colonialism," which is indeed very human. But the truly universal social hierarchization, elite one-upmanship, hypocrisy, and contempt for the lower classes aside, Herling's thoughts are an insightful reading of Burma's class situation. In this traditionally "status-oriented society,"<sup>56</sup> the Anglicized elites of the 1950s called themselves "educated" to distinguish themselves from the "primitive" masses while presenting themselves as "secular, cosmopolitan Westerners" when dealing with foreigners, and believing in being "international citizen-laypersons," or "world/planetary citizens."<sup>57</sup> Attending the Union Club was part of this unwritten class credo.

### Anti-colonialism and the colonial burden

Part of this article speaks about Herling's unconscious orientalism, so it is only fair to present how he ended his diary. On his way back home via India he stayed in Delhi for a day or two and was hosted by local socialist politicians with whom "political discussions were not pleasant."

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55 Herling-Grudziński, *Podróż do Burmy*, 52.

56 Maung Maung Gyi, *Burmese Political Values: The Socio-Political Roots of Authoritarianism* (New York: Praeger, 1983), 42.

57 Winfield, *Buddhism and the State*, 193, 197 and 208–209.

For a visitor from the West—especially for an emigrant—the key for everything is Russia. For an intelligent Indian, brought up in the memories and traditions of British rule, it is “white imperialism.” I do not advise to tell Indian patriots about Soviet prisons and labor camps without checking ahead if they themselves had not spent a few, or several, years in British prisons; in such cases, the main role is played not by the difference in judicial procedure and living conditions in the prisons, but by the very fact of incarceration. From communists through socialists and the Congress Party of Pandit Nehru to rightist religious associations, the major political slogan of India is neutrality. In the eyes of the majority of educated Indians our civilization’s dilemma is not *The Yogi and The Commissar* (essays by Arthur Koestler – ML) but “The Yogi and the White Sahib.” There is nothing sadder and more thought provoking than hearing how even the most Europeanized Indians repeat all the time during a conversation “We, Asians.” What remains, then, is to lower one’s eyes, blush because of somebody else’s sins, and recall the final scene from Forster’s *Passage to India*, where, after all the humiliations met by the Indian physician, Aziz, at the hands of the British, his only true English friend Fielding asks him to keep their friendship. “Not now—the Indian answers—not now and not here.”<sup>58</sup>

In these words, we can see Herling’s reluctant but genuine understanding of the colonial burden. Although he is not happy with anticolonial sentiments—he would prefer his hosts to be anti-Soviet, not anti-Western—he understands them and does not criticize it. What is more, although it is not his guilt, he—as a white European—acknowledges colonial faults and their consequences. He doesn’t judge his hosts, despite the “unpleasantness” of his discussions with them. Instead, he empathizes with them in a way. After all, he was a political prisoner too. He was unfairly convicted and sent to the Gulag. So he is able to understand the feeling of being unjustly deprived of freedom. Here, Herling’s traumatic past in the USSR gives him a moral and intellectual advantage over many Western writers who, by virtue of living in the free world, couldn’t identify with the emotional roots of anti-colonialism in quite the same way.

Understanding and empathy is one thing. Herling, however, stops short of endorsing his hosts’ pro-socialist leanings. Otherwise, he would have to contradict his own anti-communism, and thus somehow find himself on the same

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58 Herling-Grudziński, *Podróż do Burmy*, 111–12; the words in the actual text of Forster’s *Passage to India* are slightly different: “No, not yet”, and the sky said, ‘No, not there.’

side as the communists. In Asia, where anticolonial movements were often accompanied by pro-communist sentiments and sometimes directly led by communist parties, this political reality “might have been something of a conflict for him, because—to simplify—anti-colonial sentiments put him on the same side as the communists.”<sup>59</sup> By not commenting further—Forster’s book quote ends Herling’s diary—Herling escapes from resolving this sort of internal ideological conflict.

It is not only here that Herling stops halfway. Roughly in the middle of the diary, Herling recalls that after his first anti-communist lecture in Rangoon, he received questions from the audience written on pieces of paper. One of these “deserves to be noted: ‘I am a poor postal clerk. Why did you come all the way here from the other side of the world to take away my last hope?’”<sup>60</sup> Herling did not have to mention this poignant anecdote. Nevertheless, clearly empathizing with the clerk, he did mention it, but without endorsing it—otherwise he would have to admit the “last hope” of communism. This, alongside the above-mentioned examples, perhaps suggests that stopping halfway might have been Herling’s half-cautious way of dealing with his internal ideological conflict between socialist, anticolonial leanings and anticommunism. The “postal clerk” anecdote ends that subchapter.

### **Remembering his “Kakania”**

Herling was a political emigrant who had his way back home to Poland blocked. This did not mean, however, that he did not think of his homeland. The book was intended for Polish readership and he made many comparisons with Poland in order to make Burmese conditions more comprehensible for Poles. Yet, there are more intimate moments as well.

Rain hangs in the air, saturating it with its grey clarity, so typical for the local climate on cloudy days. When it finally rains, and instantly turns into a rapid storm, the world seen from under the eaves of one of the stores reminds me for a moment of the rainy autumn sceneries of my childhood, observed for fun through the sooty glass of an oil lamp.<sup>61</sup>

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59 Dr. Jan Mrázek, email correspondence, April 16, 2020.

60 Herling-Grudziński, *Podróż do Burmy*, 59.

61 Herling-Grudziński, *Podróż do Burmy*, 83.

A few pages later, during a rainy night, Herling was at a hotel in Moulmein:

I was lying in a low Burmese bed, watching how, in the yellowish light of the only lamp, two rats, frantic from fear, sped round and round on the beams of the roof. Burma and this, inaudible in London, beating of the raindrops on the wooden tiles were needed for me to suddenly feel the first fit of nostalgia in many years.<sup>62</sup>

Twice the rain reminded Herling of his homeland; rain and “economic underdevelopment”—wooded tiles were rare in brick London while being common in 1920s countryside Poland. It is intriguing that Herling’s observation matched popular Burmese images. “Burmese are rather inclined to indulge in nostalgia,” along with their “sentiment about the sadness of falling rain,” as Burmese Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi claimed in one of her *Letters from Burma*.<sup>63</sup> She wrote:

As a child I would stand on the veranda of the house where I was born and watch the sky darken and listen to the grown-ups wax sentimental over smoky banks of massed rain clouds. When the rain came down in rods of glinting crystal, a musically inclined cousin would chant, “Oh, the golden rain is brown,” a line from a popular song .... I was ready to accept that it was an apt description as I had often seen raindrops shoot out sparks of gold when hit by stray sunbeams against a sky bruised with shades of brown. I was also quite willing to go along with the adult contention that falling rain stirs undefined yearnings for times past .... It seemed very grown up to regard a softy grey day of the monsoon with an appropriate expression of inexplicable sorrow.<sup>64</sup>

Thus, Herling’s unspoken yearning for home and Suu Kyi’s “inexplicable sorrow” come as an unexpected cultural connection between countries seven thousand kilometers apart.

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62 Herling-Grudziński, *Podróż do Burmy*, 92.

63 Aung San Suu Kyi, *Letters from Burma* (London: Penguin, 1997), 115–16.

64 Suu Kyi, *Letters from Burma*, 115.

## Conclusion

Herling was a complex and conflicted writer who struggled to understand Burma, for him a far away, exotic country. He came to Burma with his (Eastern) European emotional baggage—for good and bad. In some parts of his diary he echoed colonial, orientalist stereotypes, but he was no Polish Kipling. Herling was not an imperialist, let alone a jingoist. He was an empathetic observer, without a boastful superiority complex. He had an eye for details and was often able to summarize the Burmese reality surprisingly accurately, such as when he described the superficial Westernization of the upper-class Burmese or their elite one-upmanship. In doing the latter, Herling may perhaps be compared to early Orwell.

Comparisons with Orwell stop short here, however, as Herling developed his own style and take about Burma which reflects his complicated Polish-Jewish background and conflicted ideological stance. Therefore *A Travel to Burma* presents a vivid, controversial, and complicated patchwork from a truly ambivalent author. Herling's writing is disturbing and emphatic, insightful and contradictory, with rich overtones and many layers.





## DOUBLE VISION

### Yugoslav Travelers and the Conflicting Images of Southeast Asia in the Era of Late Colonialism

*Nemanja Radonjić*



In 1938, Slavko Batušić, a famous Zagreb theatre scholar, writer, and art historian educated at the Sorbonne and the École de Louvre (earning his doctorate in 1927) published a book of poems. A prolific writer, Batušić wrote many travelogues and dramas, but his vision was established as predominately European—his interests lay mostly in traveling to Scandinavia, studying Shakespearean theatre, and frequenting Parisian art circles. However, in a book titled simply *23 pjesme* [23 poems], written between 1922 and 1934, his imagination took a turn toward the global. In a poem describing his wanderlust, ‘Okeanske tendencije’ [Oceanic tendencies], he longs to spend his days at a trans-oceanic warehouse of “Chinese silks,” “cinnamon,” and “pearl-white rice”; in another, “Kineska minijatura” [Chinese miniature], he skilfully uses Chinese porcelain as a social commentary on contemporary China; finally, in a demonstration of the depth of his wanderlust for “exotic” parts of the world, he writes a letter to the traditional master of Rurutu, the northernmost island of the Austral Islands of the Pacific, titled “Pismo za gosp. Tamatangu. Na Rurutu, Koralom Atolu Polinezije” [Letter to Mr. Tamatanga. On Rurutu, the coral atoll of Polynesia]. Asia is most prominent in his imagination, following Europe, and he wrote a song titled “Caru Japana” [To the emperor of Japan] in 1922, glorifying the Japanese emperor and the culture of emperor-worship. He created an essentialized image of a powerful Japan, as a land of authentic culture that he, a European, bows before. His songs were not static artefacts of orientalism, though, and he includes a footnote in his book:

The song “Caru Japana” [To the Emperor of Japan] was written in 1923. However, when in the spring of 1932 the Japanese squadron headed by the battle-

ship *Izumo* bombarded Shanghai, I publicly renounced the song in my novela “Pred kineskim ratnim sudom” [In Front of a Chinese Military Tribunal].<sup>1</sup>

Southeast Asia features prominently in a song titled “Légion étrangère” [Foreign legion], where the region’s “poisonous yellow rivers” making a lasting impression on the reader:

Your life is the trumpet’s call,  
– And the ship’s horn blares in the harbors of the Bay of Bengal ...  
– Oh brothers,  
– I long for the song of jackals,  
– The southern constellations,  
– To march with you.<sup>2</sup>

However, Batušić makes a surprising twist in this song, a subversion verging on a dangerous flirtation with communism (outlawed and persecuted in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia). He transforms what starts out as a youthful longing for escapism and adventure into an exhilarating socialist revolutionary song about members of the Legion, “spartakists, the wretched of the world, legionnaires, mandarins, mulattos, pariahs and pirates,” turning their weapons around and striking at Paris, Rome, Beijing, and Berlin with “red banners.”<sup>3</sup> The tension between orientalism and solidarity with the oppressed, between the shadow of Western Europe and the traditional Yugoslav political and cultural alliance with France and Great Britain, on the one hand, and the humanization of and solidarity with Asian colonies and independent Asian countries, as seen in this short book of poems, on the other, is a fitting introduction to the topic of this paper. I argue that there existed a “double vision” of Southeast Asia in the culture of Yugoslav travelogues and general literature.

The image of Eastern Europe in Western Europe and America, and specifically the image of the Balkans and Yugoslavia, has been the subject of research for quite some time, with an upsurge in publications at the time of the fall of communism and the era of the Yugoslav Wars. Analyses of travel accounts feature

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1 Slavko Batušić, *23 pjesme* [23 poems] (Zagreb: Matica Hrvatska, 1938), 50.

2 “Legion Etrangere,” in *23 pjesme*, 23.

3 It is interesting to note in this regard that Batušić later became quite a successful figure in the cultural life of socialist Yugoslavia. Batušić, “Legion Etrangere,” in *23 pjesme*, 23.

prominently in the classics of the field.<sup>4</sup> In the last decade, however, the “gaze” has been reversed and Eastern European travelers have become the subject of inquiry.<sup>5</sup> Only in the most recent years, however, have travel accounts of Africa, Asia, and Latin America become the focus of systematic research. In the case of Yugoslavia this subject has only recently generated some serious interest.<sup>6</sup>

Ties between the South Slavs, that is, between Yugoslavia and its predecessor states, on the one hand, and Southeast Asia, on the other, were extremely rare, and travelers to this region came from two very distinct classes right up to the end of the twentieth century. The first class, the nobility, had mostly followed the example of their European peers, and traveled to Southeast Asia as if on a *grand tour* or in the direct service of European imperialism and colonialism. Examples include the younger brothers and cousins of the kings from the Serbian royal dynasty of Karađorđević. Prince Božidar Karađorđević, a resident of Paris and a close friend of the famous traveler and writer Pierre Loti, traveled to India in the late nineteenth century and left a travelogue filled with artistic impressions of Asia (*Notes sur l’Inde*).<sup>7</sup> The younger brother of the Serbian King Peter I, Prince Arsen Karađorđević, while in exile, served as a cavalry officer in the *Légion étrangère* and earned a medal for his role in crushing an uprising in the French colony of Indochina.<sup>8</sup>

The second class of travelers consisted of adventurers, colonial clerks, and sailors. One of these men, Milan Jovanović, a former personal doctor of the Montenegrin ruler Prince Nikola I, worked for an Austrian shipping company and acquired the nickname “Bombajac” (Serbian: “of Mumbai”) after his travels to South and Southeast Asia.

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4 Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1994); Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, updated edition).

5 Wendy Bracewell and Alex Drace-Francis, eds., *Under Eastern Eyes: A Comparative Introduction to East European Travel Writing on Europe, 1550–2000* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2008).

6 Zoran Milutinović, “Oh, to Be a European! What Rastko Petrović Learnt in Africa,” in *Under Eastern Eyes*, ed. Wendy Bracewell and Alex Drace-Francis, 267–91; Milica Naumov, “Potraga za Istokom. Egipat u putopisima srpskih žena u prvoj polovini XX veka” [The search for the East. Egypt in the travelogues of Serbian women in the first half of the twentieth century], in *Egipat u sećanju Srbije* [Egypt in Serbian memory], ed. Emilia Epštajn (Beograd: Muzej afričke umetnosti, 2011); Nemanja Radonjić, “From Kragujevac to Kilimanjaro: Imagining and Re-Imagining Africa and the Self-Perception of Yugoslavia in the Travelogues from Socialist Yugoslavia,” *Annual for Social History* 2 (2016), 55–89.

7 Bosiljka Jankovic, *Božidar Karađorđević. Izložba povodom dana biblioteke* [Božidar Karađorđević. An exhibition on the occasion of library day] (Belgrade: University Library, 2010), 4.

8 Kosta St. Pavlovic, “Dvadesetpetogodisnja prepiska s knezom Pavlom (1950–1976)” [Twenty-five years of correspondence with Prince Paul (1950–1976)], *Glasnik* 44 (June 1980), 51.

Southeast Asia went through an era of tumultuous colonization, Japanese aggression and occupation, liberation, and finally decolonization. These eventful six decades or so were succeeded by another two that made the region a Cold War flashpoint because of the Vietnam War. These dynamic changes created shifting views of the region in Yugoslavia. However, the “gaze” was most strongly influenced by divisions in Yugoslav society itself. For Yugoslavia went through revolutionary changes from its creation in 1918 through World War II to an authentic socialist revolution after 1944.<sup>9</sup> The divisions, ambiguities, and contrasting images of Southeast Asia in the period of late colonialism and early decolonization (c. 1930–c.1965) will be the focus of this paper.

### **From the Balkans with a colonial looking glass**

The depictions of Asia and Africa in the travel accounts written in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (1919–1941) mostly reflected the orientalist and colonial discourse that was established in Western Europe to describe the vast areas of European colonization. European colonizers—the Dutch, British, French, and Americans—held almost all of Southeast Asia in the first half of the twentieth century. The travel accounts and culture of travelogues in the various imperial metropolises served the purpose of strengthening the colonial imagery.<sup>10</sup> There was, of course, a great diversity within the Western literary canon, with some writers subverting the colonial discourse, while others became the favorites of empire-builders.

The strongest discourse of this age was associated with the Yugoslav political elite and its close alliance with France—one of colonial desire, social Darwinism, and a superiority complex. The main newspapers, owned and tightly bound to the interests of the overwhelmingly French-educated bourgeoisie, reflected this. In 1938, contributors to one of the main newspapers, *Pravda*, wrote about the success of the French management of Indochina. In an article titled “Indochina, the Land of Progress, Welfare, and Two Thousand Native Millionaires,” the author wrote: “French culture and civilization created

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9 For a brief survey see Marie-Janine Calic, *A History of Yugoslavia* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2019).

10 Mary Lois Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992); Laura Franey, *Victorian Travel Writing and Imperial Violence: British Writing on Africa 1855–1902* (London: Palgrave, 2003).

[... ] a rich and advanced state.”<sup>11</sup> These laudations of French colonialism and the *mission civilisatrice* in Southeast Asia were supplemented by similar treatment of the Dutch and British mandate in the area.<sup>12</sup>

In the most famous travelogue of interwar Yugoslavia, *Africa*, published by the modernist writer Rastko Petrović in 1930, the author describes French West Africa and its “natives” in a way that presents himself, a Yugoslav traveler, as more firmly rooted in Europe than the Western European tradition was usually ready to admit for the Balkan peoples.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, the Far East was seen as *terra fantastica*, an older derivative of the European image of the area with its roots in the seventeenth century, mixed with later layers of European missionary and traders views of the “East.”<sup>14</sup> Travel writer Aleksandar Vitorović recorded his early childhood impressions of Southeast Asia:

One of the images that I conjure in my mind about this *terra incognita* is the jungle, which my childhood, in my desire to escape to where the cheap booklets lured me, filled to the brim with adventures of French missionaries in Indochina, wanderings of sailors in the seaports of Malaya, of the rebel De Tham, and of the cunning which helped the adventurer Brook to become the “Rajah of Sarawak” in Northern Borneo.<sup>15</sup>

This passage is an excellent illustration of the way in which Western European notions of Southeast Asia were reflected in Yugoslav images of the area.

Yugoslavia, while not being a direct subject of the colonial project, and never being an imperial power with overseas territories, still had its own specificities in its depictions of “Eastern” cultures. We can see glimpses of a more humanizing view of Southeast Asia in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia; nevertheless, the colonial discourse predominated in travelogues, literature, and the press. Newspaper reports perpetuated the relations of colonizer and colonized.<sup>16</sup> The abundance of stories concerning slaves, princes, sultans, harems, jungles, and the adventures and misadventures of white men and women in this part of the

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- 11 H.H., “Indokina, zemlja napretka, blagostanja I dve hiljade urođeničkih milionera” [Indochina: Land of progress, welfare, and two thousand native millionaires], *Pravda*, July 12, 1938.
  - 12 “Zemlja u kojoj devojke obožavaju muškarce” [A country where girls worship men], *Vreme*, February 10, 1934.
  - 13 Milutinović, “Oh, to be a European! What Rastko Petrović Learnt in Africa,” 181–204.
  - 14 David Weir, *American Orient: Imagining the East from the Colonial Era through the Twentieth Century* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011), 2.
  - 15 Aleksandar Vitorović, *Zeleno i granate* [Green and grenades] (Belgrade: Duga, 1972), 7.
  - 16 See Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (London: Beacon Press, 1991).

world were embellished with such descriptions as “exotic peoples,” “Babylon of races,” and “odd customs.”<sup>17</sup> The West was pictured as a shining beacon of science and medicine, and the East as a relic of a bygone era, with its inhabitants appearing in the West as if directly from the past. In one such story, a Borneo sultan is said to have “traveled 10,000 miles in his silk pantaloons with an entourage of 25 in order to find a cure in London.” Photographed with his son dressed in a European manner, with only a hint of the East in the fez adorning his head, the sultan was represented to the Yugoslavs as a relic of South Asian history which needed to modernize in order to survive, both figuratively and literally.<sup>18</sup> This image is important because it speaks to the Yugoslav desire to be more westernized; being that the country, one of the poorest in Europe and with a long history of Ottoman rule, was often orientalized in the western travelogue and had even developed a cascading discourse describing the eastern and southern provinces and countries of the Balkans as more oriental, in a process that Milica Bakić-Hayden calls “nesting orientalism.”<sup>19</sup>

In a heap of articles celebrating white masculinity by virtue of encounters with “native girls,” one account of a Belgradian ballerina in Borneo stands out. This Russian émigré, Taiba Omerova, a permanent resident in Belgrade, was enticed via an elaborate scam to become, at the age of sixteen, the wife of a Dutch citizen by the name of “Brunwayd.” The exciting tabloid account continues with “Brunwayd” supposedly going on a mini-war with a local rajah named “Murovik” over Taiba. In a romantic tale spun by the dancer herself for the Belgrade tabloid, the rajah defeats the Dutchman, but turns out to be a cannibal of sorts. Both of these men were described as sexual perverts. The dancer escapes with the help of Queen Wilhelmina of Holland herself, and lives to tell the tale of crooked men with insatiable desires in the jungles of the East.<sup>20</sup> This image stands out from the image of the Orient, usually tied to the feminine, but fits the pattern of Southeast Asia as part of a wild, unexplored world

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17 “Zemlja u kojoj su mladenci jedan dan kraljevi” [A land where newlyweds are kings for a day], *Pravda*, May 8, 1934; “Šest miliona robova žive danas na svetu” [Six million slaves live in the world of today], *Pravda*, February 23, 1930.

18 “Sultan u svilenim pantalonama prešao 10.000 kilometara sa pratnjom od 25 ljudi da bi tražio leka u Londonu” [A sultan travelled 10,000 miles in silk pants and with an entourage of 25 to seek a cure in London], *Vreme*, October 9, 1938,

19 Douglas Chandler, “Kaleidoscopic Land of Europe’s Youngest King,” *National Geographic*, June 1939, 698–738; Consult: Milica Bakić-Hajden, *Varijacije na temu Balkan* [Variations on a theme of the Balkans] (Belgrade: IFDT, Filip Višnjić, 2006).

20 Jovan Običan, “Neobične avanture jedne Beograđanke na ostrvu Borneo” [Unusual adventures of a Belgradian in Borneo], *Vreme*, December 12, 1937.



Figure 14.1. "Unusual adventures of a Belgradian in Borneo," Vreme 1937.

of primal urges and desires, places where “a man can raise a thirst,” found most famously in Kipling’s poem, “Mandalay.”<sup>21</sup>

In the 1930’s we can locate the embryo of one of the two most important auto-images of Yugoslav travelers to Southeast Asia. It is the image of a “small god” in the guise of a member of the French Foreign Legion; these were Yugoslavs who became the closest thing to colonizers. The aristocratic days of Serbian royalty earning command in exile were over, and the *Légion étrangère*, al-

21 On the feminine aspect of the Orient see Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 1994); Andrew Selth, *Kipling, “Mandalay,” and Burma in the popular imagination* (Hong Kong: SEARC, 2015).



most wiped out in World War I, now attracted much more insidious types, both from across the world and from Yugoslavia.<sup>22</sup> One Yugoslav interwar reporter wanted to know what life was like for Yugoslavs in the Legion, and many legionnaires in 1939 spoke about their experience in Southeast Asia. Firstly, they presented “Indochina” as a battlefield fit only for the “most able, the strongest,” They readily adopted the colonial discourse considering themselves as equal to the French and ranked Yugoslavs “among the best legionnaires.” Their views of the local population of “Anamites” betrayed disdain and racism, with the colonial relation forming the basis of their understanding of relations with the Asian *Other*.<sup>23</sup> The Legion itself was popularized, as in other East European countries, through movies and booklets.<sup>24</sup>

However, the specificity of the Yugoslav position *vis-à-vis* Europe aided in creating glimmers of alternatives to the colonial discourse. This was the case with the “mutual recognition” of Balkan and Asian cultures as “non-western” yet “powerful” and “authentic.” A good example of this connection is the visit of Rabindranath Tagore to Belgrade in 1926. The Indian was represented favorably as a wise poet, able to pass judgment on the merits of “Western civilization.” He met with the most famous Yugoslav poets, was lauded by the Belgrade masses, and received laudatory press coverage. One caricature showed him talking *tête-à-tête* with the prime-minister, Nikola Pašić, pondering on the troubles of interwar Europe. Tagore, however, was most remembered for his statement that the Yugoslavs were not like “people in the West,” that they are full of “creative energy” and “had still not reached the peak of [your] civilization.”<sup>25</sup> Like their American colleagues, the Yugoslavs recognized certain aspects of Asian cultures, be they aesthetic, poetic, or mystic, and held them in high regard as a source of inspiration and self-reflection.<sup>26</sup> However, both Yugoslavs

22 Douglas Porch, *The French Foreign Legion: A Complete History of the Legendary Fighting Force* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2010), 299–355.

23 Mil. Rakočević, “Kako žive Jugosloveni u Legiji stranaca?” [How do Yugoslavs fare in the Foreign Legion?], *Vreme*, July 23, 1939.

24 Eric Burton, Zoltán Ginelli, James Mark, and Nemanja Radonjić, “The Travelogue. Imagining Spaces of Encounter: Travel Writing between the Colonial and the Anti-Colonial in Socialist Eastern Europe, 1949–1989,” in *Socialist Internationalism and the Gritty Politics of the Particular: Second-Third World Spaces in the Cold War*, ed. Kristin Roth-Ey (London: Bloomsbury, 2023).

25 “Brige belih brada” [Worries of the whitebeards], *Politika*, November 1926, “Tagore u Jugoslaviji 1926” [Tagore in Yugoslavia 1926], *Dečije novine*, February 1975, reprinted online at <http://www.yugopapir.com/2017/09/rabindranat-tagore-u-jugoslaviji-1926.html>.

26 Petar Križanić Pjer, “Nekorisna žrtva” [An unwanted sacrifice], reprinted in *Pjer*, ed. Radivoje Bojičić (Belgrade: Službeni Glasnik, 2010), 76; Miloš Crnjanski, “Svaka je civilizacija pre svega deo mere” [Every civilization is first of all in the nuance], *Ideje*, June 22, 1935 reprinted in Milo Lompar, *Crnjanski: Biografija jednog osećanja* [Crnjanski: Biography of a feeling] (Belgrade: Prava slavna reč, 2018), 191; cf. Weir, *American Orient*, 121–75.

and Tagore himself reflected some western views of each other, such as the reference to “stages of development” of nations, as seen in Tagore’s civilizational discourse and the Yugoslav acceptance of this statement.

Some imaginary aspects of Asian cultures were used by Yugoslav artists and poets to enhance their poetic expression. The most famous example is “sumatrim,” the literary direction promoted by Miloš Crnjanski, a famous Serbian interwar poet who also published and edited Chinese and Japanese poetry. He himself explained that his poem, titled after the island of Sumatra, was an attempt to create a universal language, with the island symbolizing universalism for him.<sup>27</sup> As was the fashion in Europe at the time, Yugoslav writers and poets painted Asia in contrast to “tired, old Europe.” Some Yugoslav writers used their own internalized *otherness* of “the Balkans,” its in-betweenness, to paint themselves as closer to Asian civilizations. This demonstrates that even in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, various visions of Southeast Asia could coexist, and even in some writings that seem completely focused on colonial discourse, the Balkan in-betweenness emerges as a specific factor. This colonial looking glass, with glimpses of socialist solidarity and genuine interest in Southeast Asian cultures emerging here and there, will turn into a kaleidoscope of images in the wake of the disaster that was World War II.

### **The looking glass fractured—World War II in Europe and Asia**

The beginning of Japanese aggression in Asia brought forth news of the distant clamor of war, which aroused some interest in the Yugoslav press in the mid-thirties. With the Axis attack upon the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in April 1941, following a military coup organized to reject a pact with Hitler on March 27, Yugoslavia was partitioned between its Axis neighbors. However, during the summer of 1941, the population of Yugoslavia, mostly in the German controlled occupation zone of Serbia and the Croatian puppet state, rose up against Axis control, forming two liberation movements—one royalist and the other communist. Puppet regimes and homegrown fascist movements joined the fray in a long and bloody civil war and war of liberation. All these forces also produced reportages of the global struggle which meant that the pre-war im-

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27 Lompar, *Crnjanski*, 388, 444–45; Miloš Crnjanski, “Objašnjenje Sumatre 1920” [Explanation of ‘Sumatra’ 1920], Klub Putnika, July 22, 2014, <http://www.klubputnika.org/zbirka/vremeplov/3759-objasnjenje-sumatre-1920>.

age of Southeast Asia was quite fractured. The colonial discourse was, thus, being dismantled from multiple sides.

The collaborationist press churned out propaganda reports celebrating Japanese victories. While the Japanese successes were lauded, the will and well-being of the “native” populations and state-entities were mentioned only in the context of glorifying the Japanese ally.<sup>28</sup> The “freedom” of subjugated peoples, liberated from colonial rule yet under Japan’s thumb, was “confirmed” through ironic representations of colonial holdings such as Dutch (East) India, which was “neither Indian nor Dutch, since it is exploited by the English,” and India, where “the only thing that does not grow is freedom.”<sup>29</sup> A flashpoint for ridiculing the Allies and their mandate in Southeast Asia appeared with the fall of Singapore to the Japanese in February 1942. It was seen as evidence of British military mismanagement.<sup>30</sup>

The gloating of the collaborationist press can best be observed in the weekly satirical magazine *Bodljikavo prase* [Porcupine]. The fall of Singapore was described as a “bitter pill for England to swallow.”<sup>31</sup> A mock debate in the British parliament was “transcribed.” Churchill, Lord Essex, and other high-ranking British commanders were shown to be “not so surprised by the fall of this fortress ... which we erected to scare the Malay and the Indian ... being that we are used to failures in our Empire.” “Shock” and “fright” were only observed when Churchill “reveals” to the members of the House of Lords that the “makeshift jaw of our Lion does not scare the Japanese” and that “Singapore is located on the Malay Peninsula and represents the gateway to India.”<sup>32</sup>

The communist resistance, at first modestly, but then more and more stalwartly, reported on the successes of the Allies in Asia, but also became interested in the fate of the subjugated peoples.<sup>33</sup> Led by Josip Broz Tito, they liberated the country with the help of the US, Great Britain, and the USSR, defeated the local fascists and the royalists, and took absolute power in Yugoslavia in 1945. Only the advent of the Cold War allowed the victorious Yugoslav communists to let loose the full extent of their anticolonial propaganda. In a clear

28 “Sijam. Zemlja slobodnih ljudi” [Siam: The land of the free], *Kolo*, May 29, 1943,

29 “Holandska indija” [Dutch India], *Bodljikavo prase*, February 28, 1942, 4.

30 Winston Churchill, *Second World War, Volume IV: The Hinge of Fate* (London: Cassel and Co, 1951) 81–94.

31 “Oskudica pilula u Engleskoj” [A scarcity of pills in England], *Bodljikavo prase*, May 23, 1942, 1.

32 “Oštra debata u gornjem domu. Povodom pada Singapura” [Fierce debate in the Upper House: On the fall of Singapore], *Bodljikavo prase*, February 21, 1942, 2.

33 “Izjalovljene nade” [Failed hopes], *Borba*, October 1, 1942.

signal of what was to become the dominant discourse in Yugoslavia in 1944–1948, the new, moderately equipped, and fully ideologically sovietized press began pumping out simple, yet strongly anticolonial messages in mid-1945.<sup>34</sup>

A new magazine, titled *Ošišani jež* [The trimmed hedgehog], took up the mantle of propaganda cloaked in satire. Humor was a vehicle for promoting the party line, so in a short article styled “Portrait of an Ex-emperor,” Yugoslavs could read about the ex-emperor Bao-Dai’s desire to sell off Vietnam to a French investor; however, as the magazine pointed out, the emperor did not represent Vietnam and could not sell it.<sup>35</sup> *The Trimmed Hedgehog* ridiculed “Western democracies” and “imperialist” politics in Southeast Asia.<sup>36</sup> The anticolonial propaganda criticized the silence with which the uprisings in Indonesia and other colonies were met with in the Western capitals. In a hint of the post-colonial chaos, a poster for a movie called *Gathering Storm* was printed with an image of modern airplanes bombing the ground and the sub-heading “A true story from Indonesia.”<sup>37</sup>

### Southeast Asia—a distant mirror?

The beginning of decolonization, a “perfect storm” (as Odd Arne Westad puts it), and the start of the Cold War in Asia brought the continent into increased contact with the rest of the world.<sup>38</sup> The battlegrounds of the Cold War combined with the advent of air travel, tourism, and overall increased mobility of people after the war meant that images and impressions gained traction much faster. From America, “hundreds of thousands of ... soldiers, diplomats, foreign aid workers, missionaries, technicians, professors, students, businesspeople, and tourists” travelled to Asia.<sup>39</sup> These contacts created diverse geographical imaginaries, including musicals such as *The King and I*, official documents pertaining to American defense systems, and newspaper reports noting Ameri-

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34 “Kulturna delatnost u kolonijama” [Cultural developments in the colonies], *Ošišani jež*, December 8, 1945.

35 “Eks-imperatorski portret” [Portrait of an ex-emperor], *Ošišani jež*, January 10, 1948.

36 “Rat na Dalekom istoku” [War in the far east], *Ošišani jež*, October 10, 1945; “Samurajska demokracija” [Samurai democracy], *Ošišani jež*, November 30, 1945.

37 *Ošišani jež*, December 8, 1945, 6.

38 Odd Arne Westad, *The Cold War: A World History* (London: Penguin Random House, 2017), 129–58.

39 Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945–1961* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 2003, 5.

can “friends” in the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, the Eastern bloc began its push into Southeast Asia. As Robert Gáfrík and Martin Slobodniak have shown, orientalism and colonialism were supposedly shattered with the helping hand of dialectical materialism, and exoticism was suppressed in favor of proletarian internationalism. This inevitably created new dichotomies of ideological *Others*, of oppressors and oppressed, and of the past and the future.<sup>41</sup>

The new Yugoslavia was the most trusted Soviet satellite in the period 1945-1948, but after the Yugo-Soviet split in 1948 the country began its independent journey, which would culminate in the formation of a non-aligned Yugoslavia. Beginning in the late 1940's, Yugoslav travelers appeared on the Southeast Asian scene in larger numbers and more regularly. These were the “new people” that communist Yugoslavia now sent out into the world to represent its new system and fresh outlook on geopolitical problems. Their outlook very often reflected their own history, geography, and ideology in a phenomenon Debbie Lisle names a “geographical anchor.”<sup>42</sup> Since the late forties, as Dejan Jović has shown, Yugoslavia had two main radical *Others*. The first was “dogmatic” and “hegemonic” Soviet communism, while the second comprised the “defeated” and “backward” forces of Yugoslavia's past.<sup>43</sup> Having supposedly buried all aspects of the past, the remnants were only to be found in isolated individuals from those “awful times”—political émigrés, stateless persons, war criminals, and members of defeated armies, scattered throughout the globe; a fitting fate for the vanquished. This played an important role in the image of Southeast Asia.

The expanded Yugoslav interest in Southeast Asia began at the time when President Tito went on a much-heralded trip to India and Burma in 1954, legitimizing ties with these distant countries.<sup>44</sup> Aleš Bebler, a high ranking com-

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40 See more in Klein's excellent study, *Cold War Orientalism*.

41 Martin Slobodniak, “Socialist Anti-Orientalism: Perceptions of China in Czechoslovak Travelogues from the 1950s,” in *Postcolonial Europe? Essays on Post-Communist Literatures and Cultures*, ed. Dobrota Pucherová and Róbert Gáfrík (London: Brill, 2015), 299-315; Robert Gáfrík, “Representations of India in Slovak Travel Writing during the Communist Regime (1948-1989),” in *Postcolonial Europe?*, 283-299.

42 Debbie Lisle, *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 137.

43 Dejan Jović, “Communist Yugoslavia and its ‘Others,’” in *Ideologies and National Identities: The Case of Twentieth-Century Southeastern Europe*, ed. John R. Lampe and Mark Mazower (Budapest-New York: CEU Press, 2004), 277-91.

44 Dragan Bogetić, *Nova strategija jugoslovenske spoljne politike* [The new strategy of Yugoslav foreign policy] (Belgrade: ISI, 2006), 8; Jovan Čavoški, *Distant Countries, Closest Allies: Josip Broz Tito and Jawaharlal Nehru and the Rise of Global Nonalignment* (New Delhi: NMML Occasional Paper, 2015); Jovan Čavoški, *Arming Nonalignment: Yugoslavia's Relations with Burma and the Cold War in Asia (1950-1955)* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2011).

munist and one-time Yugoslav representative to the UN, traveled through the region extensively in the 1950's and published one of the first travelogues pertaining to the wider world in socialist Yugoslavia. In *Putovanje po sunčanim zemljama* [Traveling through the sun-drenched lands], Bebler described, with the notable euphoria of discovery, his days in Indonesia, Burma, and Singapore. The most important part of this travelogue relates to the days when three high ranking Yugoslav communists (the party ideologist Milovan Đilas, Tito's "court biographer" Vladimir Dedijer, and Bebler himself) were representatives of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia at the Asian Socialist Conference held in Rangoon in 1953, where they took an active role.<sup>45</sup> The Southeast Asian socialists were viewed as equals and sometimes with admiration, certainly in the spirit of ideological camaraderie. These visions were part of a wider view, a global imaginary which Yugoslavia began to adopt, of a nonaligned world, which included many post-imperial nation-states in the Global South.<sup>46</sup>

Bebler himself saw the role of his travelogue thus: "This book will, hopefully, fill a substantial gap in our travel literature ... and, in addition to arousing new interest among the readership, will also serve as an educational device, as it will be composed of previously unknown information."<sup>47</sup> This political meta-narrative, with strong roots in Yugoslav internationalism, was so firm that even travelogues written at the end of the 1960s and the start of 1970s were in complete harmony with Yugoslav foreign policy. This is the reason why a famous collection of travelogues from the 1960s, written by the radio and TV news reporter Aleksandar Vitorović (curiously named *Zeleno i granate* [Green and grenades]), is supplemented with an afterword by the President of the Yugoslav Co-ordination Committee for Aid to the Peoples of Indochina, one Gustav Vlahov.<sup>48</sup>

From the mid-1950s, travel writing became a job that was most readily accepted by Yugoslav foreign correspondents. This is the era when the second most important auto-image of "the Yugoslav" in Southeast Asia appears; that of the communist-internationalist journalist, highly mobile, venturing forth into guerrilla camps, foreign embassies, and colonial headquarters. These travelers represented at once the Yugoslav in-betweenness that was to become nonalignment, as well as the strong anticolonialism and solidarity rooted in the fresh

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45 Aleš Bebler, *Putovanja po sunčanim zemljama* [Traveling through the sun-drenched lands] (Belgrade: Udruženje novinara Srbije, 1954), 115; Čavoški, *Arming Nonalignment*, 6.

46 Nemanja Radonjić, *Slika Afrike u Jugoslaviji* [Image of Africa in Yugoslavia] (Belgrade: INIS, 2023).

47 Bebler, *Putovanja po sunčanim zemljama*, 5.

48 Gustav Vlahov, "Pogovor" [Afterword], in Vitorović, *Zeleno i granate*, 196–201.

experience of hard liberation struggles and tumultuous social revolution. As in the more famous case of Ryszard Kapuściński, these Yugoslav travelogues were informed by Cold War divisions and socialist and anticolonial solidarity.<sup>49</sup>

The descriptions of lands, cities, peoples, and individuals, inherent to travelogues, also bore the stamp of the new ideology, with equidistance shown towards America, which began supplying money and weapons to Yugoslavia, and the Soviet Union, with which Yugoslavia achieved a rapprochement in 1955. Đorđe Radenković, editor of the most influential Yugoslav daily, *Politika* [Politics], traveled through Asia extensively in the 1950s and 1960s. He mapped the early-sixties American views of “the Orient”:

The American seeks an Asia which is exotic enough to excite his spirits and yet Americanized enough to sooth him; towards *her* he can be moody, but *she* must be tame. He searches for an Asia which is easily bought for dollars and smiles mysteriously. *This* Asia is not easily found. It's getting ever so hard. Saigon is dangerous, Jakarta unpredictable, Phnom Penh touchy, New Delhi serious, Rangoon unavailable, and Kathmandu uncomfortable. Still, here lies Bangkok. The Thai capital is politically close [to America], and has readily catalogued its colorful offerings to its guests ... this is what endlessly thrills the tourist from Ohio and the “tired heroes” of Vietnam .... It's almost as if the Siamese capital is an experienced strip-club dancer.<sup>50</sup>

Speaking of his own impressions of the Southeast Asian cities, Radenković reveals his own image:

Jakarta is a city onto itself, and this is a virtue. You may not like her, but you cannot forget her. Jakarta hasn't got the rhythm of Bombay, the hustle and bustle of Calcutta, the westernization of Bangkok, the neatness of Singapore, or the peace of Phnom Penh.<sup>51</sup>

Other travel writers, such as the aforementioned Vitorović, employed insightful narrative twists to provincialize Europe, which still bore hints of orientalism:

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49 Marla Zubeł, “Black Stars, Red Stars: Anti-colonial Constellations in Ryszard Kapuscinski's Cold War Reportage,” *Postcolonial Studies* 19, no. 2 (2016): 131–49.

50 Đorđe Radenković, *Džungle i ljubavi Azije* [The jungle and lovers of Asia] (Belgrade: Slovo ljubve, 1971), 50–51.

51 Radenković, *Džungle i ljubavi Azija*, 53.

For Europe, everything related to Indochina starts with Marco Polo; for Asia, this is just one moment when a world of upstarts arrived ... the little boats and colonies of these strangers were insignificant drops in the vast ocean of the East, slow, peaceful, and eternal.”<sup>52</sup>

These hints are more visible in passages such as:

Singapore kept the essence of the East: overpopulation ... the Babylonian mix of races, languages, and religions.<sup>53</sup>

The main correspondent of the party newspaper *Borba* [Struggle], Dušan Simić, traveled through Southeast Asia at the end of the fifties and described it thus:

Southeast Asia is that corner on the right-hand side of the map of Asia. Eight vibrantly colored spaces, eight states: Burma, Thailand, Malaya, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Someone said that Southeast Asia is “the sum total of all the political and economic systems of the past and present.”<sup>54</sup>



Figure 14.2. Map representing part of Southeast Asia (1964)

52 Vitorović, *Zelena i granate*, 64.

53 Aleksandar Vitorović, *Putopisi i susreti* [Travelogues and encounters] (Belgrade: Beogradska knjiga, 2004), 255.

54 Dušan Simić, *Eksplozivni Laos* [Explosive Laos] (Belgrade: Sedma sila, 1962), 12.



The maps of the area are an odd combination of old colonial visual codes and fresh attempts to establish the boundaries of new, modern political entities.

The basis for the connection between these distant countries, popularized by their political elites and perpetuated by travel writers, was located in the battle against oppressors. The aforementioned delegation led by Bebler laid flowers at the grave of the Burmese leader and revolutionary Aung San. They compared the Japanese invasion of Burma to the German invasion of Yugoslavia.<sup>55</sup> Yugoslav travelers and politicians talked among themselves about the liberation wars being similar to certain phases of the “National Liberation Struggle” in Yugoslavia, but also noted that “time flows differently in Asia ... years or even decades can pass between ’43 and ’44.”<sup>56</sup>

Aleksandar Vitorović met with Southeast Asian liberation fighters who recognized the Yugoslav antifascist struggle.<sup>57</sup> Liberation fighters traced the smallest similarities in order to forge connections. Showing the reader he knows the limits of his own “views,” that is, he rejects the position of the travel writer as an “absolute authority,”<sup>58</sup> Vitorović makes an odd connection between the Southeast Asian present and the Yugoslav past after meeting with Vietnam’s Nguyen Thi Binh, the chief negotiator at the Paris Peace Conference:

The first meeting, the first step towards the Asian southeast was done, but, alas, I found out nothing new about the truth of poverty and slaughter. “For a plate of rice we lived, for a plate of rice we died.” This is an old Chinese song about twelve dead villagers. We used to sing it in the partisan camps and in the village squares. We would stand tall and religiously recite the verses as if we knew what they meant, and the villagers, they didn’t even know what “rice” meant .... Tonight I am obsessed with this “plate of rice” that is the whole of the Asian Southeast.<sup>59</sup>

Through the years, Yugoslav reporters and politicians left numerous travel stories about their anticolonial pilgrimages.<sup>60</sup> Yugoslav press bureaus in the

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55 Bebler, *Putovanja po sunčanim zemljama*, 132; Repeated in Aleš Bebler, *Malezija* [Malaysia] (Belgrade: Sedma sila, 1965), 49–50.

56 Vitorović, *Zelena i granate*, 9.

57 Vitorović, *Putopisi i susreti*, 127, 132.

58 Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Traveling and Transculturation*, 1, 217.

59 Vitorović, *Zelena i granate*, 14.

60 See for example Vitorović’s collection of travel stories about the Vieth Minh in *Putopisi i susreti*, 322–356 or the travels of Nenad Stavjel, who spent time with the Pathet Lao in Laos: Nenad Stavjel, *Zelena pakao Indokine* [The green hell of Indochina] (Belgrade: Sedma sila, 1964).

1950's and Belgrade itself teemed with an anticolonial *zeitgeist*. French officials asked for transfers from the Yugoslav capital because of this highly contagious spirit.<sup>61</sup> The main party publications such as *Struggle* regularly published texts, opinions, and caricatures that heavily criticized colonialism, and among these topics was the issue of the French war in Indochina.<sup>62</sup> In *Tanjug*, the main press bureau, journalists dealing with the East Asia region affectionately nicknamed their editor "Uncle Ho," referring to the Viet Minh's famous leader.<sup>63</sup> Encountering three "Vietnamese princes" at a Paris locale, travel writer Vaso Popović describes an imaginary battle between the colonizer and the colonized, Europe and Asia, which takes place only in his head:

And I thought, this is so peculiar ... these three youngsters are princes and cousins of Bao Dai ... but, they work for Ho Chi Minh ... an agent appears and makes them an offer of a "lesbian show" ... they went after him, and I thought to myself ... will Paris "brew" these three small, classy boys into its mush? Will it? No, I don't think so. I remembered that, as they were leaving, they gave each other three, yellow, superior smiles of fore-knowledge.<sup>64</sup>

Travel writers often included short history lessons about the countries they visited. Vitorović paints an especially vivid picture of Jakarta during the trial of Sukarno in 1930, connecting it to a series of "peasant rebellions against Dutch rule" and the history of anticolonialism.<sup>65</sup> In this anticolonial tradition of Yugoslav reporting, a curious edition of pocket guides was printed in the early sixties. It combined reports on domestic and foreign "flashpoints," key issues, and contemporary phenomena, and was written by a group which included diplomatic officials and professional journalists. Books such as *Indonezija na raskršću* [Indonesia at the crossroads], *Malezija* [Malaysia], *Zeleni pakao Indokine* [The green hell of Indochina], and *Eksplozivni Laos: Šta se događa u jugoistočnoj Aziji* [Explosive Laos: What is happening in Southeast Asia] combined first-hand travel reports and political analysis. The texts, as well as visual materials, presented an image of Southeast Asia as a world region waging

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61 Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954-1962* (New York: NYRB Classics, 2006), 175.

62 Lidija Bencetić, *Komunizam u slici: Društveni i politički život Jugoslavije u karikaturama Vjesnika i Borbe (1945-1962)* [Communism imaged: The social and political life of Yugoslavia in the caricatures of *Vjesnik* and *Borba*] (Zagreb: Hrvatski institut za povijest, 2017), 126.

63 Interview with Borislav Korkodelović, September 24, 2018.

64 Vaso Popović, *Priče iz belog sveta* [Stories of the world] (Zagreb: Znanje, 1980), 38.

65 Vitorović, *Putopisi i susreti*, 204.



14.3. Cover of a booklet written by the Yugoslav correspondent to Southeast Asia showing the guerillas of Pathet Lao, whom he visited in 1961. Nenad Stavjel, *Zeleni pakao Indokine* [Green Hell of Indochina], Belgrade: Sedma Sila, 1964.

a hard-fought battle against imperialism, but at the same time a space seeking to modernize itself. These booklets informed the Yugoslav readership about the “New Asia,” providing brief historical accounts, especially highlighting the anticolonial struggle. These booklets, as well as travelogues and newspaper reports, painted a favorable image of Southeast Asia.<sup>66</sup> However, these images also reflected Yugoslav views of their own past and present, projected onto the map of Southeast Asia.

### **The other Yugoslavs and the clash of visions of Southeast Asia**

At the same time, however, a hidden discourse—and one that fuels our argument about a “double vision” of Southeast Asia—found its protagonists among anti-communists, political exiles, war criminals, legionnaires, and various stateless persons. This vision can best be explored through stories about Yugoslavs serv-

66 Slobodan Obradović, *Indonezija na raskršću* [Indonesia at the crossroads] (Belgrade: Sedma sila, 1965), 6, 27, 28, 72; Bebler, *Malezija*, 9, 56–62.

ing in the French Foreign Legion, which was heavily engaged in the First Indochina War. Many officers of the defeated armies of the former Yugoslav fascists and royalists found gainful employment in the Legion after the war in Europe.<sup>67</sup>

The crucible of conflicting images can best be observed in the descriptions of the French-Indochina War and especially the Battle of Dien Bien Phu. In the spring of 1954, the opposing forces of the Vieth Minh and Pathet Lao, on the one side, and the French army aided by the French Foreign Legion and Senegalese and Algerian auxiliaries, on the other, fought a difficult battle for this strategic point between Laos and Vietnam. After two months of siege, with desperate and brave fighting on both sides, including airdrops, attacks, and counterattacks, the French surrendered and were promptly escorted to prisoner-of-war camps in the Vietnamese hinterland through punitive death marches. Eventually, most of the Legion returned to Algeria.<sup>68</sup>

Yugoslav travel writers tried to paint Dien Bien Phu as a kind of a catalyst for a wider array of changes in Southeast Asia, noting the role of units from Laos in the struggle, and presenting the battle as a key victory against colonialism in Southeast Asia.<sup>69</sup> The defeat of the French was attributed to the bravery of the Viet Minh, with the aid of the Pathet Lao, and was hailed as the victory of a partisan army against a superiorly armed occupying force.<sup>70</sup> This was the official discourse in Yugoslavia, and it neatly reflected Yugoslavia's own struggle for liberty.

Those who were on the "other side," such as in the French Foreign Legion, mostly had their say after Yugoslavia fell apart. Zvonko Čikvari was a former legionnaire who fought at Dien Bien Phu. Interviewed after Yugoslavia's breakup, he spoke of joining the Legion supposedly naively in the 1950's, fleeing Yugoslavia in his youth. Soon, in 1953, he found himself in Algeria, and not long after that in Indochina, where he was paradropped into Dien Bien Phu in 1954. He was taken prisoner after the defeat, and spent six months in a prisoner-of-war camp in the Mekong Delta. Čikvari reveals that his motivation was purely materialistic and that the Vietnamese were a kind of sport for him, in which he didn't even believe they were capable of military action. Having rejected socialism and escaped illegally to France, he made the Legion, where

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67 Živko Milić, *Koraci po vatri* [Stepping into fire] (Belgrade: Kosmos), 56; <https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/125/drustvo/3817491/vek-valtera-heroj-koji-nedostaje.html>.

68 Porch, *The French Foreign Legion*, 408–12.

69 Miodrag Avramović, *Žarišta krize: Kongo, Laos, J. Vijetnam, Angola, Z. Irifan* [Crisis hotspots: Congo, Laos, S. Vietnam, Angola, W. Papua] (Belgrade: Sedma sila, 1962), 24, 36.

70 Simić, *Eksplozivni Laos*, 43; Vitorović, *Putopisi i susreti*, 305.

“the only thing we learned was to hate the enemy, without any politics,” seem like an ideal apolitical formation. Čikvari presented himself as a kind of reckless mercenary, undesirable in Yugoslavia. “Grenades were aplenty, and the three of us didn’t even aim, because wherever you struck, you killed someone, there were so many of [the Vietnamese at Dien Bien Phu].<sup>71</sup>

Thus, the true, radical *Other*, present at Dien Bien Phu and in Indochina, was someone whom the Yugoslavs had already “met”: their own former compatriots who rejected the new political formations and the radical *Others* from ground-zero of the building of Yugoslav socialism the anti-fascist struggle of 1941-1945. The climax of the clash of these two worldviews can be found in an excellent travelogue by a journalist of the *Politika* newspaper Živko Milić. Here, the auto-image of a socialist travel writer, an internationalist, an ex-fighter overwhelmed with solidarity with the guerrillas and the oppressed, met with the auto-image of the stateless person, the legionnaire, the ex-Yugoslav, the *Other*. Already in 1954, before the end of the Battle of Dien Bien Phu, Milić made a journey into the “heart of darkness,” the main camp of the French Foreign Legion in Sidi Bel Abbes, in French Algeria. A clear prejudice against these men is seen even before his former compatriots appear before him:

A Yugoslav in the French Foreign Legion? What kind of a man awaits me? His face will reveal to me all I need to know. Who can this man be? Some miserable bastard who roams the world? ... Or worse, a villain, a war criminal [ ] I was afraid of this encounter, afraid that his past would overwhelm me and I wouldn’t be able to take it .... Then I met Adam Vodeničar, whose face was that of an actor or a painter [ ] He was cold and distrusting at first. [ ] His face only emitted some hope and light when the guide [in the camp] talked about King Peter I [ ] He was interested in the king-legionnaire [ ] perhaps he was not just a miserable bastard who slogged through the swamps of Indochina .... Kings served in the Legion. Perhaps he wondered: “Why couldn’t I, Adam Vodeničar, tomorrow, perhaps become someone....<sup>72</sup>

Milić finds out that Vodeničar has just returned from Indochina, where “he bought his second wife, Helen, or Tee Look.” However, Milić cleverly interpolates Vodeničar’s narration of “his Indochina” to inform the reader that the

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71 Aris Angelis, *Ljudi XX stoljeća. Od Smirne do Saigona* [People of the twentieth century: From Smyrna to Saigon] (Zagreb: Disput, 2015), 330–45.

72 Milić, *Koraci po vatri*, 49–52.

“red, bloody” flags of the Legion are actually “the flags of little Tee Look, the girlfriend of Adam Vodeničar, a child of of humid Shandong, a Chinese woman who was sold, who follows after the camp and builds tents to survive and eat. These are her flags. Adam does not get it.”<sup>73</sup> In this way, the colonial and racist outlook of the Yugoslav legionnaire is subverted by the fate of an Asian woman.

Milić then realizes that Vodeničar is going back to Indochina and listens flabbergasted:

I am going back to Indochina. Another five years in the Legion. It's better pay—eighty thousand francs. Here it's thirty. In Indochina we don't need any discipline—it's a slaughterhouse. In Indochina I am a God.<sup>74</sup>

The journalist then uses the image of the solidarity of the oppressed to note the ideological difference between him and Tee Look, on the one hand, and Vodeničar, “who does not understand the red banners,” on the other. He masterfully quotes the poet Batušić, connecting the interwar and post-war solidarity of the oppressed and the wretched of the earth.<sup>75</sup> The internationalism of the interwar poet serves the purpose of subverting the legionnaire's testimony. In the meantime, Batušić's imagined worldwide solidarity became the cornerstone of Yugoslav foreign policy—first in the form of socialist solidarity, then in the form of emerging nonalignment, which soon encompassed a position of firm anti-colonialism, anti-racism, and anti-imperialism.

Further encounters with these “former Yugoslavs” prompted Milić to make an even greater distinction between him, a former partisan, and them, whose past they did not want to disclose. “What did you do during the war?—We won't talk about that,” goes one forbidding conversation.<sup>76</sup> He meets another pair of Yugoslavs, Nikola Mamula and Sava Kosanović, who, as NCO's in the Legion, consider Indochina the best place to be in the world:

When the going gets tough, when no one can handle the panic created by Ho Chi Minh's men, they send us, the Legion. And we clear the field. And we die. I ended up wounded. It's been, what, a month. And we'll still go back, willingly. I have nothing to lose, so I'm not afraid.<sup>77</sup>

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73 Milić, *Koraci po vatri*, 54

74 Milić, *Koraci po vatri*, 54.

75 Milić, *Koraci po vatri*, 55.

76 Milić, *Koraci po vatri*, 61.

77 Milić, *Koraci po vatri*, 63.

Another legionnaire paints a vivid picture of his Indochina:

Indochina is the best country in the whole world, sinister, scorched with fire, torn, yet I feel good there. In my little “post” I am *the* commander, everything. Under *my* watch the legionnaires sleep, under *my* orders they carefully leave their bunkers. I lead the patrols through the swamps, I hear the forest with their ears ... and when the attack comes I fight to the last. Indochina is the place for a soldier to be. A legionnaire in Indochina is a different sort. We hold it together. We might lose ground, but we’re still there in the bunkers, at the posts, and behind the machine guns.<sup>78</sup>

As the Yugoslav “French” legionnaires prepare to return to Indochina, Milić becomes fearful of these words, of the past: he senses that in Indochina, “it will turn into our [Yugoslav] 1941, 1942, and 1943.” He takes a letter to take back to a legionnaire’s sister in Yugoslavia, but makes a mental note to himself, striking out these men from the new Yugoslav socialist community, once again echoing Batušić:

“You will never return to Gomirje [the legionnaire’s home village].... Never see the mountains of Lika and Kordun [ ]You will never return. You stand for contempt, betrayal, and crimes? Never come back, not even in a casket [ ] You cannot be forgiven. You are forever gone. Down the poisonous river.”<sup>79</sup>

### **Conclusion—from the colonial looking glass to the red banner**

As other chapters in this monograph have also shown, Southeast Asia was fertile ground for Eastern European ambiguities and “double visions.”<sup>80</sup> The victory of the internationalist image of Southeast Asia and the auto-image of the “anticolonial reporter” can best be viewed in the aftermath of the war in Indochina—the Vietnam War. This war served as the climax of Southeast Asia’s liberation because it was an anti-imperialist war and a direct continuation of the anticolonial war.<sup>81</sup> Yugoslavia pledged its support to the Southeast Asian

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78 Milić, *Koraci po vatri*, 63.

79 Milić, *Koraci po vatri*, 63–65.

80 For example, see the chapter by Rafael Pankowski in this volume.

81 Edward H. Judge and John W. Langdon, *The Struggle Against Imperialism: Anticolonialism and the Cold War* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 37–71.

struggle against imperialism throughout the sixties and seventies, offering its political, military, and diplomatic assistance, and contemporary travelogues reflected this.<sup>82</sup> Unlike American or any other “Western” travel writers, the Yugoslav reporter, be he a journalist, travel writer, or cameramen, often used their own experience from the National liberation struggle of 1941-1945 to align themselves with Vietnam’s guerrillas and build connections.<sup>83</sup>

These images were often so sudden that it seemed that they were presented as a natural continuation of the same struggle:

The land of Vietnam seemed to me, I don’t really know why, identical to the forests around Belgrade. From those dense groves, our company observed in late April as columns of Germans and Ljotićists [Serbian collaborationist auxiliaries] crept forward. They searched the area with their binoculars. We waited for the grenades. I clutched my machine gun. And the day went on. I observe how, in the mud of Vietnam, I feel transported back to that place, as the grenades burst open the ground’s pinkish substance.<sup>84</sup>

The new travelogue culture of the 1950’s paved the way for the victory of a world-view based on socialist internationalism, anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, and non-alignment. A new template of the travel writer was also created; it was a reporter who risks everything to portray the struggle for the national liberation or economic development of a friendly country, and who in these attempts finds himself experiencing “flashbacks” to his own country’s past. Upon meeting the Yugoslav *Other*, he is quick to dismiss him as a sad remnant of the past, which incidentally was the official Yugoslav position on colonialism. With respect to Southeast Asia this culture created an image of solidarity with the oppressed that pushed all other visions into the background and replaced colonial stereotypes with affirmative images of dynamic nations fighting for survival, not unlike Yugoslavia herself.

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82 Avramović, *Žarišta krize*, 44. Vitorović, *Zelena i granate*, 8; See more in Milan N. Stevanović, “Vijetnamski rat i odnos Socijalističke Federativne Republike Jugoslavije prema Sjedinjenim Američkim Državama 1964–1968. Godine” [Vietnam War and relations of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia with the United States in the period 1964–1968] (PhD diss., Belgrade University, 2017); Vitorović, *Putopisi i susreti*, 157.

83 Interview with Stevan Labudović, November 16, 2016; Vitorović, *Travelogues*, 175.

84 Vitorović, *Putopisi i susreti*, 168–69.





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# Index



The book, and hence this index, uses historical names for cities, countries, islands, etc. (e.g., Batavia, Celebes, Indochina). Many of the terms here (geographical, ethnic, etc.) have changing, contested and/or overlapping definitions/applications. In the case of countries, empires, geographical areas, etc., see also under individual cities/places.

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*Escaping Kakania* is about fascinating characters—soldiers, doctors, scientists, writers, painters—who traveled from their eastern European homelands to colonial Southeast Asia. Their stories are told by experts on different countries in the two regions, who bring diverse approaches into a conversation that crosses disciplinary and national borders. The chapters deal with the diverse encounters of eastern Europeans with the many faces of colonial southeast Asia.

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ISBN 978 963 386 665 8



9 789633 866658

**Central European University Press**

Budapest – Vienna – New York

Sales and information: [ceupress@press.ceu.edu](mailto:ceupress@press.ceu.edu)

Website: <https://www.ceupress.com>

COVER DESIGN Sebastian Stachowski