

Diary of Abraham Ulrikab: A Labrador Inuit Gives an Account of His Experiences in Europe (1880)

Abstract

The historical significance of this diary by the Labrador Inuit Abraham Ulrikab derives from the supposition that it is the only extant account by an “ethnic” (i.e. non-white) participant in one of Carl Hagenbeck’s “ethnological exhibitions” [*Völkerschauen*], which started in the 1870s. Its value is enhanced by the diary of the Norwegian ethnographer/explorer Johan Adrian Jacobsen (1853–1947), who brought Abraham, along with family members and other Inuits, from Labrador to Germany in September 1880. Jacobsen organized the tour that took the group from Germany to Prague to Paris before the Inuits died tragically, one by one, from smallpox in December 1880 and January 1881 since Jacobsen had neglected to have them vaccinated.

Written in the Inuktitut language, Ulrikab’s original diary cannot be located today. Fortunately, before the diary went missing, it was translated from Inuktitut into German by Brother Carl Gottlieb Kretschmer, a Moravian missionary in Hebron, Labrador. English and French translations were issued in nineteenth-century publications by the Moravian Church. But then the tale fell into oblivion until Abraham’s diary—in the form of Kretschmer’s German translation—was rediscovered by a Canadian ethnologist, Dr. James Garth Taylor, in the archives of the Moravian Church in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

Source

[...]

In Berlin, it is not really nice since it is impossible because of people and trees, indeed, because so many children come. The air is constantly buzzing from the sound of the walking and driving; our enclosure is filled up immediately.

It was not until the 22nd of October that we heard that the *Harmony* had arrived, when two acquaintances from Hlawatschek came to us. They were two teachers (missionaries), and they were so happy when they saw us that they knew us immediately and called our names, told us to sing, and because there were some things we were not [...] they were very happy and even thanked us greatly and invited us to their house and their church. We really want to, either, but are not able to, as there are too many people. Indeed, going out by daytime is impossible because of all the people, because we are totally surrounded by them, by many very different faces.

On Oct. 23rd, snow was falling all the time, the Kablunat [*white people*] are freezing; even we are freezing very much.

[...]

Oct. 27th. Storm and rain. Yesterday on the 26th, we went to church, and prayed and sang together. We were all very greatly cheered, also all our Kablunats, very greatly we have been inspired. We people sang together in the church, “Jesus ging voran” (“Jesus led the way”), we also spoke the Lord’s Prayer. The assembled were greatly inspired by our voices. And again, we were recommended pleadingly to the Lord. And again, there was choir: “Wir stehen getrost auf Zion fest” (“We rely confidently on Zion”). Then we were at a loss because of all the blessings, even the Kablunat, too. When the choir had finished, the man

at the table called upwards, then the trumpets started playing: “Kommst Du, Jesu, vom Himmel herunter auf Erden” (“Come ye, Jesus, down from Heaven to Earth”) and other melodies. When we had finished we were given an enthusiastic welcome, our hands were shaken greatly. Before the table we sat.

After this event, the teachers often appeared in our house (in the zoo) and sang (and prayed); even women who came into our hut have joined in the singing and recommended us greatly to Jesus.

One day in the evening, us wearing big coats and shoes, we went to see things (the wax works) exhibited in a large house, we drove there (sitting) in a house. When we arrived, we went in and saw many people gathered there, – but – they only looked like people; they looked so much like real people that you did not notice anything. Yes indeed, some of them even took breath, and some were moving, and all kinds of things, indeed, to name all is impossible. We also saw Napoleon’s wagon, it had been brutally snatched from him during the war. And all sorts of rifles, indeed, manlike, of great variety. Nubians, Africans we have also seen, and Chinese and Indians and Americans and Californians, yes indeed, the inhabitants of the earth, very many did we see in Berlin.

[...]

All Sundays there were violin concerts in front of us, in a great house.

Our fellow men, the fox family (Terrianiak) stopped to be cheerful, because they are tired of the people. And we in the other house have been very patient, although we have also been greatly tired. Constantly in the evenings, we pray, wanting to be helped. This thing (our praying) also seems to achieve something within us.

Some Kablunat some (Catholics) [...] laugh at us, but this did not make us tired, as their souls are also to be laughed at. To some of them, who were talking about us, I have even given answers often, as they could speak English. Some of them were even horrified by our Northlanders often. Every day I have consistent work drawing people, Labrador and Nain.

[...]

7. Nov. Had sorrow again. Our companion, the unmarried Tobias, was beaten with a dog whip by our master, Jacobsen. Mr. Jacobsen was immediately furious because, as he said, Tobias never obeyed him and had got himself into trouble too often. He was nearly not taken and sent away. If Mr. Jacobsen does that twice I shall write to England as I am told. Afterwards, he was very friendly towards me so that I don’t write. Even our two wives were immediately bought silken ribbons. If Tobias is frequently as stubborn, he won’t get paid, but if he is nice, he will get greatly paid. After this incident, Tobias was very sick.

The pond on which we kayak around is very cold; we always have to get rid of the ice first before we can kayak. At times there is a great cold. We also saw the animals of the Berliners, fish, a seal [...] and nearly all kinds of sea animals. Meat (of seals) we miss very greatly, let be, some of it is probably not very good, but that’s what we mostly eat: coffee and rusk in the morning, codfish, potatoes, beer and ship bread for lunch. Coffee and bread at 4 p.m. herring, beer and bread at 6 p.m. The Kablunat audience always take delicious things with them to treat us with; all kinds of things to chew, which they give to us, and big fruits, which have even juice. On some days I have also demonstrated outdoors, as the Kablunat wished it so greatly, even if I am not very good at it they don’t mind.

I was constantly told to write my name, occasionally, there very many voices, one always took it away from the other, to please them all was impossible, there were too many.

10. Nov. It was snowing greatly, even in Berlin.

Daily we heard the voices of the canons very loud. But it is very easy to get sick with a bad cold; I am still quite well, although I have a badly running nose. But the daily work is getting hard due to indisposition, because our child Sara is ill, and because we all have to suffer; that is certainly difficult. That (Sara) has to stay is regrettable, but she herself is not reluctant, because she is already able to understand that it can't be any different.

Sometimes we are given some money, sometimes two pence, sometimes one mark, sometimes 50 pence, sometimes 20 pence, also cigarettes every day. It is too long until the year is over because we would very much like to return to our country, because we are unable to stay here forever, yes indeed, it is impossible! It buzzes and roars day and night because of the rattling of the sleighs and the constant voices of the steam whistles.

When we were traveling with steam, we were faster than flying. We always used such places as grand gentlemen are wont to use. The train was so long that there was a great distance between both ends. We were in the middle in a very nice house (wagon), we could not close the windows in order to see, looking out was impossible because of the wind; my eyes were bad and swollen with seeing, although I hardly stuck my head out [...].

[Brother Kretschmer crossed out the following passage in square brackets, perhaps with an eye to readers in Europe. It is also possible, however, that it was crossed out in the original.]

[While we were traveling, our countryman Fox (Terrianiak) worked magic quite exceptionally, although he was in the beautiful steam wagon, he was extremely distraught by his witchcraft and couldn't smile at anyone, when we arrived.]

[...]

Saturday, the 15th or 16th Oct. We arrived in Berlin by means of the marvellous steam. At 9 p.m. we had left Hamburg, at 6 a.m. we arrived in Berlin at our house that we built ourselves; a beautiful house although only of boards. To wipe the floor of our house was nearly impossible because of all the people. Although they were thrown out by our masters, others quickly took their place. Between some trees we have a house. Nearby is a music house, a cause for astonishment. A lot of people wish to see our house, but it is impossible to be seen by all of them. Only a few have seen it, our masters even did not know whether we should ask someone in. When the teachers came they went in for the first time, but not immediately, because it was impossible due to all those people. Our enclosure was often broken by the throng. One day a great gentleman from Berlin came to see us and had many gentlemen with him. They all came into our enclosure to see the kayak but immediately everything was filled with people and it was impossible to move anymore. Both our masters Schoepf and Jacobsen shouted with big voices and some of the higher-ranking soldiers left but most of them had no ears. Since our two masters did not achieve anything, they came to me and sent me to drive them out. So I did what I could. Taking my whip and the Greenland seal harpoon, I made myself terrible. One of the gentlemen was like a crier. Others quickly shook hands with me when I chased them out. Others went and jumped over the fence because there were so many. Several thanked me for doing this and our masters also thanked me very much. Ulrike had locked our house from the inside and plugged up the entrance so that nobody would go in, and those who wanted to look in through the windows were pushed away with a piece of wood.

The 11th Nov. Few people. We got no money, because they were too few.

The 11th Nov. I saw Elsner, who (from Bremen) came to see us. He came with (Emperor) Wilhelm's teacher (court preacher Stöcker) and another one. They prayed because of us that we don't turn from the Lord and may not get lost. Also some religious women came to our hut and sang and led the prayers very greatly. Yes indeed, we have the believers here in Germany as our brothers and sisters, they even called

us brothers and sisters, even cried in front of us that we might not get lost through the Satan, they even knelt down in front of us reverentially, by greeting they often strengthen us greatly; and thought at the same time to tell our souls something strengthening by doing so.

Estraige (Austria) I am writing in Prague here far away, in Austria, in the country of Catholics, in a big city. We are here for two weeks, inside a big long house. To go out is impossible, so that we may not be caught by the Catholics. Yes indeed, we are highly regarded and have a house in the big house. It also has a seal, coming from Holland for us to eat, but it only is allowed to be stabbed with the seal harpoon. But until now I still have seen few believers, those, which are not from us. They sang with little voice because of shyness of the Catholics. We only alone with little voice can we sing and pray here to get help from the Lord, so that nothing happens to us through the Catholics, because they are permanently asking if we are believers, so we are unable to deny and testify it constantly and only expect that they will do us harm. Yes indeed, because it is frightening here, so that we feel our being helped greatly. One day in the afternoon at 4 o'clock countless soldiers came; the big ways were totally filled. They carried fire as well as lanterns supplied with a handle; the horses had fire as well. [...]

Nov. 27th Have purchased a seal (Netsek) in Prague in a pond, while there were enormously many people, yes indeed countless. When I harpooned it with the seal harpoon, everybody clapped their hands greatly like the Eider ducks. When I had it ready, the voicemakers sang greatly with violins, drums, trumpets, and flutes. Yes indeed, to talk to each other was impossible because of the many voices.

From Prague, we left for Frankfurt, where it has many people. There we had two houses in the open in an enclosure. In our whole village grove, we were guarded day and night by soldiers, which took turns. It has many Jews there; the Catholics are very greatly despised there. But there we often paddled kayak even on a pond.

From there, we went away again in a sleigh with wheels and horses in the night, all of us, to Darmstadt.

[...]

In Darmstadt, we have had a beautiful house in a beautiful big round house, which is a playground for ice-skating on wheels. There we often sleighed round and round inside the house, all of us sitting on it. There one of us, Terrianiak's daughter, Nochasak, stopped living very fast and suffered terribly greatly. After her, in another country, in Krefeld, her mother also died, greatly suffering as well. After her, also little Sara stopped living in peace with a great rash and swellings, because she was swollen all over. After two days of being sick, she died in Krefeld.

While she was still alive she was brought to hospital, where I went with her. She still had her mind, while I was there. She still prayed the song: "Ich bin ein kleines Kindelein" ("I am a child so small"). When I wanted to leave, she sent her greetings to her mother and little sister. When I left her, she slept; from then on, she did not wake up anymore. For this we both had reason to be thankful. While she was still alive, we went away to Paris and travelled the whole day and the whole night through.

[...]

(On January 8, 1881, five days before his own death, Abraham wrote once again to his friend and teacher Br. Elsner, this time from Paris. This letter was published in Missionsblatt der Brüdergemeinde in March 1881.)

My dear teacher Elsner!

I write to you in a very despondent mood and I am even very distressed, due to my relatives; because our child, who I loved so much, is also not living anymore, she had died of the evil smallpox; four days after the outbreak of her sickness she passed away. My wife and I will be very soon reminded through the

death of the child that we also have to die. She died in Krefeld, although she had many doctors. Those indeed could not do anything; we especially wanted to have Jesus as our doctor, who died for us. My dear teacher Elsner! We kneel down in front of him all days, bent because of our presence here and ask him that he will forgive our aberration; we also do not doubt that the Lord will hear us. All day we cry mutually, that our sins will be taken away by Jesus Christ. Even Terrianiak, who is now alone, when I say to him that he should convert, desires to become a property of Jesus, sincerely, as it seems. He constantly takes part in our prayers until this day, such as my child Maria. But even her life is doubtful, because her face is very swollen, also Tobias is sick, although many doctors come they cannot help. I remember very well that only one can help when our death time comes, yes indeed. He is everywhere we too are. I really wish I could tell my relatives, who are over there, how friendly God is; indeed, my wife also sheds easily tears because of our sins. Our superior does buy a lot of medicine, no doubt, but all this still does not help; but I trust in God that He will answer my prayers and will collect all my tears every day. I do not long for earthly possessions but this is what I long for: to see my relatives again, who are over there, to talk to them of the name of God as long as I live. I hadn't grasped this before, now I understand. I shed my tears fast, but the words uttered by Himself console us very much again and again.

My dear teacher Elsner, pray for us to the Lord that the evil sickness will stop if it is His will; but God's will be fulfilled. I am a poor man who's dust.

Also in Paris it is cold, in fact very cold; but our superior is very kind to all of us now. I'll write again soon. I send you my regards, and my wife sends hers as well to everyone in the unity of Bremen.

I am Abraham, Ulrika's husband

If you write to the great teachers, tell them that we send our greetings to them.

The Lord be with you all! Amen.

Source of English translation: *The Diary of Abraham Ulrikab. Text and Context*, translated (from the German) by Hartmut Lutz and students from the University of Greifswald, Germany. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2005, pp. 11–65. Reproduced with permission from the University of Ottawa Press.

Source of German text: Hartmut Lutz with Kathrin Grollmuß and Greifswald students, eds., *Abraham Ulrikab im Zoo. Tagebuch eines Inuk 1880/1881*. Wesel: VdL Verlag, 2007, pp. 29–45.

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