

Diary of Johan Adrian Jacobsen: Labrador Inuits on Display (1880–81)

Abstract

The diary of Norwegian ethnographer and explorer Johan Adrian Jacobsen (1853–1947) provides a moving and historically valuable complement to the diary of Abraham Ulrikab. For seven years, beginning in 1867, Jacobsen was a member of a whaling crew on the Spitsbergen and Murman coasts. In 1876/77 he traveled along the western coast of South America. When he returned to Hamburg in 1877, he was hired by Carl Hagenbeck to recruit Greenlanders for his “exhibitions” of indigenous peoples [*Völkerschauen*]. In 1880, once again on behalf of Hagenbeck, Jacobsen recruited a group of eight Labrador Inuits, among them Abraham Ulrikab. In mid-1881, Jacobsen was engaged by the Berlin Museum für Völkerkunde to gather ethnographic and other specimens from the west coast of North America. For the next two years, he traveled through the Canadian province of British Columbia, the Yukon Territory, and what is now the U.S. state of Alaska. The museum later sent him on expeditions to Korea, Japan, Siberia, and the South Sea Islands. In 1885, Jacobsen traveled again to British Columbia, where he and his brother hired a group of nine Nuxalk (Bella Coola). Jacobsen brought them back to Europe and traveled with them until 1887. Subsequently he made ethnographic collections in Germany and Norway.

Source

[...]

Monday (November) 15

Departure from Berlin at 8 o'clock in the morning after a tender farewell from all acquaintances. The evening before, we had drunk the farewell toast with all acquaintances here at a restaurant.

Arrived in Prague in the evening. In Prague, our Eskimos^[1] were in Kaufmann's Menagerie, where two huts had been built, one for the Christian family and one for the heathens, just as in Berlin. Now it was better in so far as the huts had been built inside the menagerie tents or booths, so we had nothing to fear from weather. The working time for the Eskimos was from 11 to 12, 3 to 4, 6 to 8 o'clock in the evening. Visitors (numbers) in Prague were not bad, only that staying in a menagerie is anything but comfortable – after all, you are dealing with menagerists.

On margin: Since Eskimos had never been shown in Prague before, the interest was quite strong. The press especially showed a lively interest in us. One day we conducted a mock seal hunt on a pond near the city with a few seals that had been brought there. There were a lot of spectators present, to whom paddling a kayak and throwing the seal harpoon were demonstrated.

Monday (November) 29

Departure from Prague. Kaufmann's Menagerie also departed to travel to Munich, so we travelled together as far as Schwandorf, where we separated and continued our journey to Frankfurt, where we arrived on the 30th. On the 31st we set up our exhibit and prepared everything.

Tuesday (November) 30

Here, also, two huts were built for the Eskimos.

Wednesday (November) 31^[2]

The whole time in Frankfurt, the weather was highly unfavorable, with unrelenting rain and fog – which of course affected visitor numbers very much.

[Stay in Darmstadt]

Sunday, December 12

Today Noggasak (daughter of the old heathen Terrianiak from Nachvak) began feeling sick. Today is our last. In the evening things were packed. The Eskimos and Mrs. Jacobs travelled to Darmstadt in advance with a moving van.

Monday (December) 13

I and Mr. Schoepf dispatched the collection, etc., to Crefeld (because we are only staying in Darmstadt for three days, and from there, we go to Crefeld). At noon, left for Darmstadt where we found the sick Noggasak in a worse condition. But she refused to take any medicine.

Tuesday (December) 14

At 8 o'clock in the morning we awoke to the shout "Noggasak is dead!" You may well imagine our shock. The physician diagnosed a rapid stomach ulcer as having caused the death. The poor parents did not stop crying from morning until evening. Of course it also had a very depressing effect on the others and on us as well.

Thursday (December) 16

Schoepf had meanwhile departed for Crefeld. Mr. Walter had been sent by Hagenbeck to attend the burial, which took place at 4 o'clock in the afternoon. It had been advertised among the public by the registrar's office, and on our arrival at the cemetery, we therefore found several thousands of curious people who had come to see the burial. I had the parents and Abraham in a hackney carriage. I had the hackney coach drive up to the grave to avoid the throng. I led the parents to the grave. But since the mother broke out in loud crying, I let them board the hackney coach again and drove them home.

[Stay in Crefeld]

Friday, December 17

Departure for Crefeld in the morning at 8 o'clock. The parents were quite composed and even became talkative while we were traveling the beautiful route from Mainz to Crefeld. I showed them the vineyards. The Rhine was very choppy because it ran very high, and at several places it had caused damage (by flooding). Arrived at Crefeld at 7 o'clock in the evening. [...]

Friday, December 24

Christmas Eve. Had an order from Mr. Hagenbeck to buy varied Christmas presents for the Eskimos. The ballroom of the restaurant had been made available to us, and there we prepared a beautiful Christmas tree. After everything was ready we let the Eskimos come in. They were quite heartily delighted, both at the tree as well as the gifts. [These consisted of underpants, vests, etc. and for Abraham a violin and for Tobias a guitar. In addition, each family received a large group picture that had been photographed in Prague). We ordered wine and were together until 11 o'clock at night, not knowing which cruel blows

fate had in store for us. The weather had meanwhile improved a little, because in the previous week, it had been raining constantly.

Saturday, December 25

Beautiful weather, but in spite of it, no audience. The old Paingo has fallen ill overnight, quite suddenly, the same symptoms as with her daughter. We immediately called for a physician (Dr. Jacobi), who gave us the assurance that it was only rheumatism and that we need not worry.

Sunday, December 26

This morning two physicians were here who examined the woman most carefully, but could not arrive at another conclusion but that it was indeed rheumatism (the physicians came in the morning and afternoon). Today, little Sara also fell ill, complaining about being cold and vomiting. [...]

Monday, December 27

The woman is seriously ill, and may it not go with her as with her daughter, Sara is also ill. How will it all end? We were supposed to depart tonight, but cannot travel under these circumstances.

Tonight at 7 o'clock the old Paingo died. We all stood next to her. Ten minutes earlier the physician had examined her and gave us the assurance that it was not dangerous. We all then went down the steps to the coach, where we stood talking about the patient, when Mrs. Jacobs approached and told us to come immediately, because the woman was lying dying. She died one minute after we had returned. Peace with her. She was a good old woman. The husband is very sad, of course, and expressed his wish to be able to accompany his wife and daughter soon.

[...]

Tuesday, December 28

Today the woman was dissected by three physicians, [...] nothing was found however that allowed diagnosing a specific disease. She was buried in Bockum^[3] in the evening, attracting a large number of people. Her husband and Tobias attended. It is a dreadful time for us. I feel directly responsible for the people.

On margin: There, the physicians removed the upper skullcap with the hair, to expose the brain. After the examination I took the skullcap with me and kept it.

Wednesday, December 29

The collection was packed and in the evening, everything was loaded (at the train station). Today the physicians diagnosed that little Sara is suffering from smallpox, and a transfer to the hospital is absolutely necessary, which was achieved the same evening – I first had a hard fight with the parents, who did not want to part from their child. Had to seek Schoepf to help. Eventually, Abraham let himself be persuaded to hand over the child to the hospital; he followed her there himself, prayed with the child and parted in tears. Mrs. Jacobi stays with the child as a nurse. At 10 o'clock in the evening everything was loaded.

[...]

[Stay and Death in Paris]

Thursday, December 30

Were at the station at 8 o'clock in the evening. Did not depart before 9 o'clock. I was almost surprised at the calm shown by the Eskimos. [...]

Friday, December 31

Arrived finally at Paris at 5 o'clock in the morning. [...] At 11 o'clock Mr. Schoepf received a telegram from Hagenbeck which announced the death of little Sara. I must admit that it had a devastating effect on all of us. In the first moment I was totally at a loss because one thing had now become certain: the smallpox were among the unfortunate Eskimos, and it became clear to me at last that the two others had also died of smallpox – only that they did not break in a rash – the more dangerous. [...] The first thing we will do tomorrow is to have the people vaccinated, because none of them were vaccinated in their old homeland, because there are no physicians there. Thus ended the old year.

On margin: Upon arrival in Hamburg, none of us had thought of having the people vaccinated. In 1877, I had the Greenlanders vaccinated in Greenland, but this time, it was forgotten. It probably had to do with my being sickly all summer, as reported before, and that upon our arrival in Hamburg, I had to go to the hospital myself.

[...]

Thursday, January 13

[...]

Tonight at 9 o'clock our dear Abraham died. I can hardly say what I feel. He, as well as Tobias, have given me the errand to deliver their assets to their relatives in Labrador. Hagenbeck has faithfully executed this testament and added miscellaneous.

Sunday, January 16

Ulrike died this morning at 2 o'clock – the last of the eight – horrible. Should I be indirectly responsible for their death? Did I just have to lead these poor honest people from their home to find their graves here on foreign soil? Oh, how everything became so totally different than I had thought. Everything went so well in the beginning. We had only now gotten to know each other and begun to hold each other dear.

[...]

On margin: When I saw to Ulrike shortly after midnight, I noticed that she too would end her struggle soon. I tried to comfort her, but she waved me off with her hand, as if she did not want to see me at all. That was no surprise, because she knew that all the others had gone before her. I felt guilty to a certain degree for the death of these unfortunate people, even if unintentionally. Had I not come to Labrador, they would still be alive like all their relatives.

[...]

NOTES

[1] Please note, the term “Eskimo” has been carried over from the original German/Norwegian diary from 1880–81. The term has been used historically to denote Inuits (as in the present text) as well as Yup'iks, indigenous people from Alaska. The term is considered derogatory in current usage and is preserved here only because it was included in the original historical source—GHDI.

[2] Invalid date, November has 30 days.

[3] Bockum is now a district of Krefeld (in the north-east section)

Source of English translation: Johan Adrian Jacobsen, *Voyage with the Labrador Eskimos 1880–1881*, translated (from the German and Norwegian) by Hartmut Lutz and Dieter Riedel. Gatineau, Quebec: Polar Horizons, 2019, pp. 153–75.

Source of original German text: Johan Adrian Jacobsen, *Tagebuch*, Jacobsen-Archiv, Museum für Völkerkunde, Hamburg; excerpts reprinted in Hilke Arora, “Das Eskimo-Tagebuch von 1880: Eine Völkerschau aus der Sicht eines Teilnehmers,” *KEA: Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften*, volume 2 (1991): pp. 87–115, here pp. 97–106.

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