

Bjørn Berge

Nowhere lands. Lost Countries of the 19th and 20th Century

sample translation

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Heligoland 1807–1890

From cherished archipelago to stark bombing target

The two small islands that form Heligoland - "The Holy Land" - situated 70 kilometres off the German West Coast are probably the remains of a larger archipelago. According to the ethnographic work *Germania*, by the Roman Tacitus, from ca. year 98, it stretched out across the Elbe estuary, with only a narrow passage on each side. And according to myth, during the Christian era there were nine parishes and two monasteries on Heligoland.

The North Sea has incessantly gnawed off tiny bits - at times mouthfuls - as in 1720, when a powerful storm divided Heligoland forever into two. The smallest part ended up as a mere sandbank of shells. The second faltered on as a perpendicular sandstone crust towards the swell from the northwest - one square kilometre in size, sixty meters at its highest and with some sparse tufts of grass on top.

Heligoland appears at first glance to be quite worthless. But because of the location at the entrance to the mighty Hanseatic cities and several of the major German rivers, the archipelago has increasingly been sought after. First it was used as a base for pirates, later for pilot boats and fishing. And after having been alternately possessed by Denmark and various German coalitions throughout several centuries, Heligoland was taken by England in 1807 without resistance, following Denmark's alliance with Napoleon. For the British, it was an important outpost whereby they could maintain contact and trade relations with the European continent.

The island was once a centre of espionage against Napoleon's troops, who eventually mastered the entire coastal strip within. The activities of the marine pilot boats had stopped, and several of the pilots took assignments as guides for the English. Many could navigate the coast blindfolded. They knew the sandbanks and how they constantly moved and changed shape. Brunsbüttel, Cuxhaven or even straight into the Elbe estuary to Glückstadt - Geen probleem!

In 1850, an English officer's daughter published the book *Heligoland* based on childhood experiences on the island during the years around 1820. She must have

been an exceptionally modest woman, because her full name is nowhere to be found, neither on the cover nor elsewhere.

The book tells primarily a painful story about how she and her sister were orphaned after their parents died of pneumonia, with a particularly moving portrayal of their final days. But it also describes a safe upbringing on the island, with good living conditions for the officer families who owned their own small houses with servants and cooks. The mail boat brought them two meals of fresh meat per week and more flour, oats, peas, rice and rum than a "moderate" family managed to consume. Moreover, there was a plentiful supply of exotic goods. Many of the former pilots had begun smuggling British colonial articles into Germany, and even more delicious German products out.

Furthermore, she describes the two villages on the main island: *Oberland* on the summit in the west and *Unterland* on the sandy banks down towards the port in the southeast. The docks in *Unterland* were reserved for larger ships, while the fishermen dragged their boats up on the beach after use. The settlement was compact and consisted of narrow houses with three to four storeys with gabled windows facing the narrow streets. Unlike the traditional Frisian building style in red brick, there were many wooden houses here. The reason was the lack of local material supplies, apart from rather unreliable sandstones. Everything was brought in by boat from the mainland, and bricks were heavy.

Much of the life on the island takes place on a steep staircase between the two villages, where men laze about, smoking cigar and chatting, while the women hurry up and down laden with bread baskets and heavy water buckets, or to milk the goats and sheep that graze on the hillside to the west. The women wear long scarlet gowns, and in winter a second skirt serves as a cloak, which they pull over their heads and tie it so tightly across the forehead that just the tip of the nose and the eyes are visible. "The men dress in very coarse cloth, sewn so wide that the trousers look like petticoats, enormous wooden buttons, their throats much exposed, and little tight caps on the very top of their heads."

When meeting each other on the street, they first exchange a "Good evening" followed by "Forget me not," as they pass on. They often speak in the local dialect called *halunder*, which is a version of Frisian. What is also special is that female names consistently end in O, as in Catherino, Anno and Mario.

One of the few events that can disrupt the unhurried daily rhythm, are flocks of thrushes, starlings and woodcock that use the island as a stopover in spring and autumn. During this period the inhabitants let go of everything to go hunting. Young and old, women and men take whatever they have at hand, yarn, picks and shovels and hurry up the hills or beyond towards the lowland.

The Napoleonic Wars was a prosperous time for the islanders. But after the *Kiel Treaty* was signed in 1814, the smuggling slowed down. And when the last British

soldiers left the island in 1821, trading activities also came to an abrupt end. The storehouses were emptied, and the merchants sailed off.

Soon there were 2,200 people living on the island, and no one wanted to move away. That was when someone got the seemingly wild idea to invest in tourism, though it was not taken straight out of thin air. Just a few years' earlier, British doctors had found out that bathing in salt water was one of the most salutary treatments one could get. And the water should be cold. If there was anything Heligoland had in abundance, it was salty, cold water, year round. The population ventured, and already in 1826 the island was fully operative as a spa and seaside resort for affluent citizens from England, Prussia, Poland and Russia.

Under the political conditions that dominated Europe beyond the 1800s, the island gradually lost its strategic importance to the British. Nonetheless, in due course they issued their own stamps. As usual with British possessions, Queen Victoria was used as motive. What is special is that the stamps are two coloured - which required both additional operations and exceptional accuracy - and were always in red and green on white paper. "Green is the country. Red is the cliffs. White is the sand. Such are the colours of Heligoland." In addition, Victoria's white profile was embossed in relief. To do this, they put the paper on a leather surface, while pressing down the pressure plate with extra weights. My copy is shredded and greasy after a great deal of handling. I can sense a rancid smell when I heat it between my hands and gently scrape the surface. It is a first edition from 1867, with postage specified in English schilling. After 1875, this changed to German pfennig, which reflects a gradual approach to the German mainland.

In 1890, like in a game of Monopoly, the English decided to offer Heligoland to Germany in exchange for the island of Zanzibar off the coast of East Africa. The Germans accepted the offer and immediately simplified the name to Helgoland - without the "i." Later they established a naval base that would play an important role in both the First and Second World War. Meanwhile, tourism kept them going. It is said that nuclear scientist Werner Heisenberg, who initially was greatly troubled by pollen allergy and hay fever, first managed to finalize the quantum theory during a longer spa stay on this barren island in 1925.

In the final phase of World War II everything was bombed to smithereens during the British air raids. And after the war the British took over the islands again. Helgoland was by then more like a lunar landscape, greenish yellow and completely lifeless, at best functional as artillery range for aircrafts and warships.

In 1952, the islands were once again returned to Germany. By that time they were totally cleansed of historical traces except for an occasional bomb crater. And I reckon that the smell of my stamp - whether it comes from fish entrails or rancid

massage oil - must be one of the last tangible traces of civilization that once existed there.

BOOK

M. L'Estrange & Anna Maria Wells (1850): *Heligoland Or Reminiscences Of Childhood: A Genuine Narrative Of Facts*

Alex Ritsema (2007): *Heligoland, Past and Present*

Manchukuo 1932-1945

The heart of evil

With his macabre experiments on prisoners in Auschwitz during WWII, the Nazi doctor, Josef Mengele, has been the epitome of extreme human cruelty. But his deeds were still no more than a faint copy of the scenes that had taken place in the East Asian country Manchukuo a few years earlier.

Few people were aware of what was to come when the new state was born in the spring of 1932, the year after the Japanese invasion of Chinese Manchuria. Chinese historians have subsequently insisted on calling Manchukuo as "the false Manchurian government," because from the outset it appeared as a pure Japanese puppet state. It was nevertheless recognized by El Salvador and the Dominican Republic. Soon after came the future Axis of powers Germany and Italy, including the Vatican, which had a flock of missionaries in the area.

Manchukuo was the size of Sweden. It stretched from the subarctic areas along the Amur River in the north to the fertile plains towards the Bo Hai in the south, bordering China at the foot of the Great Wall, which had been built to protect against Mongol raids between the 13th and 16th centuries.

Until the 1900s, the area had been a purely agricultural district divided into prefectures under the control of the Chinese emperor. The population lived in villages that had sprung up without any overall plan. Straw roofs had generous cornices that protected the exterior walls from intermittent heavy rainfall. And the lightweight wall constructions were completed with flimsy boards and sliding doors, which with simple measures could open up large wall panels on hot summer days. A modern European would still be puzzled over the complete absence of insulation since winters could be harsh. But the inhabitants had their own strategy. When the cold set in, they retired to a smaller room in the centre of the house. Here the seating on the floor was heated with wood burners, and outer clothes were kept on.

With the construction of the Manchurian railroad in the late 1800s, several of the villages along the route were extended to cities, partly large cities. Polish and Russian engineers contributed in the planning of these cities and consequently left their European imprint.

The advanced urbanization gave the Japanese a flying start. The population in the new state quickly increased from 30 to 50 million, mainly by Japanese immigrants. The propaganda claimed that the cooperation across the Sea of Japan would contribute to peace between fraternal peoples. My stamp also shows a restful crane swerving in the air across the waters. But at the bottom - just above the text field written in Hanzi font - we can see the flag masts of a warship.

There is little doubt that it was initially mineral resources that had aroused the Japanese's interest, especially the large deposits of iron ore. To give everything a more legitimate character the former Chinese emperor Pu Yi was brought in as head of state. He was scrawny like a chicken and seemingly lacking a ribcage. The round horn-rimmed spectacles dominated all and had to be balanced with a full uniform perched on him with epaulets, and adorned with ribbons and decorations. Pu Yi did not quite thrive in the role, which consisted primarily of signing Japanese decrees and cutting ribbons for steelworks, road bridges and railway tracks. Nevertheless he stayed on the throne until the Russians took over after the big offensive, Operation August Storm, during the final stages of World War II.

Pu Yi tried to flee to Japan to surrender to the Americans, but was overtaken by the Red Army and sent to Siberia. Later, he returned once again to China and ended his days as a sworn Maoist, if we are to believe the claims in the Bernardo Bertolucci film *The Last Emperor*, from 1987. By that time he had also managed to write his autobiography *From Emperor to Citizen*, where he bluntly admits his guilt: "I shamelessly became a leading traitor and the cover for a sanguinary regime which turned a large part of my country into a colony."

Nevertheless, Pu Yi was probably not aware of the murkiest side of the Japanese actions in Manchukuo. Under the guise of practicing water purification activities, unit 731 had already in 1935 began using the country as a laboratory for the development of chemical and bacterial weapons for Japan's growing war machine.

The director of the project, General Shiro Ishii, towered with his six feet height well above most of his countrymen. He used round horn-rimmed glasses like Pu Yi, but appeared to be far more in tune with body and soul. He was always well dressed and well groomed, and perhaps rather vain - but still his employees loved him. They respected and loved him also despite his occasional bouts of heavy drinking and nocturnal raids in local geisha houses - perhaps even more so.

The plant was established in Ping Fang, a treeless plain just south of the provincial city of Harbin. Here they built 150 large and small concrete buildings in rectangular patterns across an area of six square kilometres. The settlement included a Shinto temple to safeguard the spiritual needs of employees and schools for their children. Shiro Ishii commuted every morning in his armoured limousine from Harbin, where

he lived with his wife, seven children and servants in a mansion from a former Russian era, an idyll that his eldest daughter later described as if taken straight out of the novel *Gone with the Wind*.

The core of their research was experiments on living people. It included the removal and modification of brains and intestines, injecting horse blood, testing in gas chambers, hyperbaric chambers and centrifuges, but most importantly a systematic testing of biological pathogens. They conducted experiments with anthrax, typhoid, dysentery and cholera and a selection of lesser known but equally vicious plague bacteria. And as a carrier they chose flies that were bred in thousands of specially constructed containers.

The subjects - mainly civilian Chinese and Russians - were referred to as "timber" and included children, women and old. In total, more than 10,000 were killed in Ping Fang. None survived. In addition, more than a million people died in other places due to disease-carrying flies that were dropped from planes over Chinese cities. In one instance troops left out hundreds of cakes infected with paratyphoid fever in the bushes around Nanking, which was at that time in the middle of a famine.

In contrast to Pu Yi, most of the staff in the unit 731 succeeded to flee to Japan in 1945. Here they surrendered to US forces and shortly after were given general immunity by the orders of the commander in chief of the Pacific, General McArthur. At the same time, all the evidence from the folders of "war crime evidence" was deleted. And many of them, including Shiro Ishii himself, quickly became associated with the newly formed United States Biological Development Program. Shiro Ishii died peacefully in 1959 and consequently did not see that the US practiced the newly acquired knowledge with great success during the Vietnam War.

In 1945, Manchukuo was reintegrated into China and constitutes today the provinces of Liaoning, Jilin, Heilongjiang and parts of Inner Mongolia. There are few visible remains from unit 731, but under the ground incubates one of the most insidious chemical landfills. So far it seems to be stable. But the combination of higher temperatures and more intense precipitation in Harbin area in near future may awaken the sleeping vampire.

BOOK

Hal Gold (2004): *Unit 731: Testimony*

Simon Winchester & Aisin-Gioro Pu-Yi (1987): *From Emperor to Citizen. The Autobiography of Aisin-Gioro Pu Yi*

Haruki Murakami (1999): *The Wind-up Bird*

FILM

The Last Emperor (1987): script by Mark Peploe, directed by Bernardo Bertolucci.

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Sample translation: Caroline Babayan