

„WELCOME TO THE DESERT“

With Alfred Brehm in Kazakhstan 1876 / 2021

Presse Kit

An exhibition by BREHM WORLD - ANIMALS AND HUMANS

at the National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Nur-Sultan

Made possible by funds from the Foreign Office of the Federal Republic of Germany

THE EXHIBITION

In 1876, the naturalist and animal book author Alfred Brehm travelled through the east of what is now the Republic of Kazakhstan. Brehm was a participant in the West Siberia Expedition, which was commissioned by the Bremen Association for the German North Polar Voyage to explore possibilities of trade connections between Europe and Siberia and to conduct scientific and ethnographic research in the process. The BREHMS WELT - TIERE UND MENSCHEN museum is following in Alfred Brehm's footsteps 145 years later and dedicating a special exhibition in the National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan in Nur-Sultan to the West Siberian voyage.

"'WELCOME TO THE DESERT'. With Alfred Brehm in Kazakhstan 1876 / 2021" presents Alfred Brehm to an international audience for the first time as part of an exhibition. It deals with a chapter of German-Kazakh history, which is about the German public's perception of West Siberia and the Central Asian region. In Alfred Brehm's life, the trip to Western Siberia is an important milestone. It shows that the naturalist was not only interested in the life of animals, but also in people in foreign regions of the world. The starting point of the exhibition is Brehm's unpublished travel diary, which visitors can use to follow the course of the journey with an audio guide.

KAZAKHSTAN REVISITED

In spring 2021, photographer Volker Kreidler sets off for Kazakhstan together with cultural journalist Ina Hildebrandt. They have Alfred Brehm's travel diary in their luggage to visit exactly the places Brehm describes in his notes. Volker Kreidler documents this three-week round trip through the regions of Almaty, East Kazakhstan and Pavlodar with his camera and Ina Hildebrandt interviews people they meet on the way. Together they report on this journey in the continuously updated blog www.kasachstan-revisited.de. With Kreidler's work, the exhibition bridges the gap between the 19th century and the present. He confronts the view of the traveller of that time with artistic-documentary photographs of the present.

THE EXHIBITION IN THREE STAGES

The prologue of the exhibition contextualises the starting conditions of the journey, introduces the protagonist Alfred Brehm and his travel companions and then leads to the first section of the itinerary. The main part of the exhibition takes up the travel section of the expedition through the regions of present-day Kazakhstan and confronts the view of the travellers of that time with the perspective of photographer Volker Kreidler on today's Kazakhstan. The epilogue widens the focus of the exhibition again, looks at the further course of the itinerary and sums up the results of the expedition.

1 THE WAY TO WESTERN SIBERIA

Prelude to the expedition

Alfred Brehm's trip to Western Siberia, led by the naturalist Otto Finsch, pursues a double goal: the natural scientists are to conduct geographical and ethnographic research and at the same time examine the economic usability of the regions visited. The linking of scientific expeditions with economic interests is not new. Alexander von Humboldt already owes his trip to Russia in 1829 to the financial support of Tsar Nicholas I. The Russian ruler expected the famous German geologist to provide him with information on the extraction of his empire's mineral resources.

The expedition of 1876 is an undertaking of the Bremen Association for the German North Polar Voyage. It found a financial sponsor in the Siberian merchant Alexander Michailowitsch Sibirjakow and was supported by Tsar Alexander II. The merchants from Germany and Russia pursue a common goal here. They want to promote trade between Europe and Siberia. However, this is not the primary interest of the expedition members. Neither Finsch nor Brehm nor their companion Karl von Waldburg-Zeil are concerned with promoting trade relations. They hope for scientific finds and new knowledge that they can use for themselves. So Brehm embarks on this journey with the expectation of receiving "material for a work" and "above all, material for new public lectures".

[BU]

Oskar Neumann, The members of the Bremen Expedition to Western Siberia, in: Die Natur. Newspaper for the dissemination of scientific knowledge and views of nature for readers of all classes, issue 13, Halle 1876

2 WELCOME TO THE DESERT

From the Steppe to the Altai

The part of the journey through the east of present-day Kazakhstan is the most productive for the German scientists. In the following one and a half months, the enthusiastic hunters get their money's worth and their botanical-zoological research interests are also satisfied here. In addition, they experience varied and impressive landscapes in a border region that is undergoing cultural and political upheaval. In all this, the Germans do not forget their mission on this leg of the journey: they describe the economic potential of fertile soils and mineral-rich mountain regions and let their Russian hosts convince them of the progress made in colonising the country. The explorers also report extensively on the people of the country. Alfred Brehm, in his characteristic combination of zoology and ethnology, devotes extensive descriptions of the relationship between people and their animals to the nomadic Kazakhs.

On this leg of the journey, Finsch, Brehm and Waldburg-Zeil are guests of Governor Vladimir Alexandrovich von Poltoratzky (1830-1886). The Russian general and cartographer served as military governor on the southern border of Western Siberia from 1868 to 1877. From his official residence in Semipalatinsk, he makes annual inspection trips to the Altai on the Chinese border together with his wife and children. The family helps the three Germans with their local knowledge and accompanies them for long stretches of the way to the Altai. In their reports and diaries, the travellers emphasise

the Poltoratzkys' European education and hospitality. Organised hunts, yurts provided on the way as night camps, gifts of hospitality and hospitality by the family offer comfort to the travellers.

[BU]

"Lepsa im Alatau", watercolour by Moritz Hoffmann, after a drawing by Otto Finsch, Fürstlich Waldburg-Zeil'sches Gesamtarchiv Schloss Zeil

3 FINALE AT THE CARA SEA

Results of the expedition

The last leg of the journey takes the three Germans along the Ob River into the subarctic tundra in the north of Western Siberia. As the German expedition approaches the bay on the Kara Sea, it has long been clear that their exploratory goal will be negative. A canal between the Schuchya and Baidarata rivers, which could connect the Kara Sea with the Ob, seems impossible due to fluctuating water levels and unfavourable soil conditions. But according to the researchers, this circumstance is not the only obstacle to a future trade connection between Europe and Siberia. In his diary, Alfred Brehm repeatedly devotes himself to the great economic potential of the country and concludes: "The gold lies in Siberia on the land as well as in the water", but according to him, there is a lack of people who could mine this gold. For Brehm himself, the trip to Western Siberia is nevertheless a great enrichment. He used his notes in popular lectures and processed his observations of the animal world in the second edition of "Brehm's Life of Animals".

[BU]

"Nördlichste erreichte Stelle an der Podaratal mit Blick gegen die Kara Bai", watercolour by M. Hoffmann, after a drawing by Otto Finsch, Fürstlich Waldburg-Zeil'sches Gesamtarchiv Schloss Zeil

EXHIBITS IN THE EXHIBITION

The exhibition presents exhibits from Alfred Brehm's estate. BREHM WORLD at Alfred Brehm's birthplace still contains, among other things, Brehm's passport issued by Kaiser Wilhelm I, numerous postcards that Brehm wrote to his wife Mathilde during the journey, his notebooks and a large-format wall map showing the route of the West Siberia journey, which Brehm used for his popular lectures to illustrate for the interested German audience.

Visitors follow the journey through Western Siberia with Alfred Brehm's words from his diary. Together with pictures and introductory texts, they can be called up on the visitor's own smartphone via the multimedia guide BREHMS HÖRWELT [Brehm's Listening World]. Actor Jan Andreesen speaks Brehm and conveys his view of the regions he travelled through and their inhabitants. In addition to these texts, the exhibition is based on pictorial records of the journey. The leader of the expedition, Otto Finsch, made numerous drawings during the journey that served as models for the travel report he published. His drawings were also executed as watercolours. Photographs from the 1870s and 1880s provide a contrast to these romantic drawings. Photographs by the American explorer George Kennan (1845-1924) show the conditions of the Siberian exile system, glossed over by Brehm, in a different light. The archives of the Russian National Library contain unique photographic documents of Lidia Konstantinovna Poltoratskaya, who accompanied the three Germans to the Altai. The photographs taken by the wife of the Russian governor offer visitors to the exhibition a supplementary picture of the landscape in what is now eastern Kazakhstan at that time, as well as of the people whom the German travellers also met there.

[BU]

Alfred Edmund Brehm, notebook written in shorthand, kept on the journey through Western Siberia, 1876, Brehm World, Renthendorf

[BU]

Passport for Alfred Edmund Brehm, Berlin 22.2.1876, Brehm World, Renthendorf

[BU]

Alfred Edmund Brehm to Mathilde Brehm, postcard written in shorthand, Nizhny Novgorod 19.3.1876

[BU]

Wall map, used by Alfred Brehm for his popular lectures on the journey through Western Siberia, c. 1876, Brehm World, Renthendorf

[BU]

From the North Pole to the Equator: popular lectures by Dr. Alfred Brehm, ed. by Horst Brehm, Stuttgart u. a. O. 1890, Brehm World, Renthendorf

Photographs by George Kennan (Library of Congress, Washington)

George Kennan (1845-1924), Siberian posting sledge with three horses, photograph, 1880s, Library of Congress

George Kennan (1845-1924), Exiles and convicts boarding a barge in Tyumen, 1885/86, photograph, Library of Congress

George Kennan (1845-1924), Kazakh Horsemen, 1885/86, photograph, Library of Congress

George Kennan (1845-1924), Kazakhs with a local Russian governor and his wife, 1885/86, photograph, Library of Congress

Lidia Konstantinovna Poltoratskaya (Russian National Library, St. Petersburg):

View of an Aul

Buktharma, or Black See

Mosque in Semipalatinsk

Tau Tekele mountain ridge in the Buktharma Valley

Adorned Bride

Kazakhs with hunting birds (Golden Eagle)

All pictures are from the "Album of Types and Views of Western Siberia, Taken by L. K. Poltoratskaya" (1879), Russian National Library, St. Petersburg, Э АЛТ63/3-А521

TOURING EXHIBITION IN KAZAKHSTAN
"WELCOME TO THE DESERT" ON TOUR

The special exhibition will also go on tour through Kazakhstan. It brings the protagonist of the exhibition, Alfred Brehm, closer to a larger audience and conveys the key points of the exhibition in condensed form. The itinerary, the historical photographs and the recordings by Volker Kreidler are shown. Visitors to this exhibition can listen to the audio texts via the audio guide on their own smartphones.

OPEN AIR EXHIBITION IN RENTHENDORF

"WELCOME TO THE DESERT" IN RENTHENDORF

The photographs by Volker Kreidler are also to be exhibited at Alfred Brehm's birthplace in Renthendorf. The museum BREHM WORLD - ANIMALS AND HUMANS presents the photographs as large-format prints around the former home of the Brehm family. Thus, the multifaceted landscape of Kazakhstan meets the hills of the valley village of Renthendorf in Thuringia. Visitors to the open-air exhibition can also listen to the audio texts on their smartphones and learn more about the famous animal writer Alfred Brehm and his family on the grounds of BREHM WORLD.

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Exhibition Venue

National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Nur-Sultan
<https://kazmuseum.com/en/>

KASACHSTAN REVISITED:

Blog about the trip by Ina Hildebrandt and Volker Kreidler
www.kasachstan-revisited.de

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