THIRTY YEARS IN THE GOLDEN NORTH

WELZL

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JAN WELZL

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FOREWORD

A POLAR CZECH

I must confess that I used to look forward to the evening edition of the paper containing the instalments of the memoirs of Jan Welzl of Zábřeh, the Czech adventurer and chief of the New Siberian Islands. The memoirs begin with a naïve account of how Welzl followed the "call of the North," and record an amazing life of thirty years amongst the trappers and gold-miners, Eskimos and whalers, hermits and vagrants of the remotest North. I had already read plenty of books on arctic travels, containing scientific or heroic narratives of triumphant and tragic polar expeditions; but I have found none so informative or so revealing as the garrulous chatter of old Jan Welzl; none ever gave me such a good idea of what marvellous colours icebergs have, or how loudly the sea detonates when it freezes, or how people live up there. No Jack London could have described more impressively the psychology of those polar outcasts who shoot themselves when they have toothache, fall madly in love with white girls on soap advertisements, and suffer hardships which seem beyond human endurance; and nevertheless they return again to the icy North, whenever the ups and downs of life have thrust them back for a while amongst men. There is a great difference between travel and life; Eskimo Welzl knows his North, if anything, too well,

so well, that perhaps it would never have struck him to record all this charming medley of enthralling and intimate detail, if he had written the memoirs himself. Fortunately, the pen was not in his line. Two inquisitive and enterprising men appeared on the scene, who managed to put leading questions to him such as: What about women in the North, Welzl? What do you do when your fingers freeze? How does a Polar settler spend his time during the Polar night? Only in this way could such a unique book have come into being, crammed as it is with raw but delectable experience. It is a book which, I do not doubt, will make its way through the world.

And with it old Jan Welzl himself will make his way through the world, with all the typical characteristics of one of our people. Shrewd and cautious, unassuming, proceeding by rule of thumb, hard-working and plodding—a humble and dogged trader who, throughout all his wanderings, retains the level-headedness and caution of the Czech peasant: a type, who, for all his cunning simplicity, is so charged with vitality, so sterling and so full of grit, that he can become a sort of chieftain amongst the white-skinned and the slant-eyed dwellers in those wild parts. Our President, with a smile, called him "colleague," when they brought this most northerly countryman of ours to see him. Surely, if the good soldier Švejk has, to a certain extent, become an international type of our native breed, we shall be glad to see Eskimo Welzl range himself beside him, as another type of sturdy, matter-of-fact Central European; cannily enterprising,

with an eye to the main chance, painstaking in the management of his little job, endowed equally with horse sense and patience, which native qualities have had an irresistible influence in the Arctic wilds where savage standards of life still prevail.

I have said "wilds"; but old Jan's racy narrative shows, more clearly than any professional travel book, that even such a life, on the very frontiers of human society, has an order of its own, its rigid morality, its necessarily savage justice, its relationships involving trust, mutual help and solidarity. An order which does not allow the helpless to be destroyed, nor permit the poor Eskimo to be robbed. Solitary dwellers, separated by several days' journey over impassable roads, come together on the footing of neighbours and members of the same community, with all the obligations which unite neighbours and citizens. In these respects Welzl's memoirs are a genuine revelation: this is no mere description of eternal ice, but of eternal humanity, however harsh its surroundings have made it.

KAREL ČAPEK

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The amazing record of Welzl's life was secured in its present form primarily as the result of a mishap. In the year 1924 Welzl was carrying supplies from San Francisco to his friends in the New Siberian Islands on board the small Polar vessel *Seven Sisters*, when he was wrecked on some rocks off the Pacific coast of the United States. He had no identification papers and being, as the chief of New Siberia, a citizen of Soviet Russia, he was deported from the United States to the country where, in the view of the American authorities, he had the right of domicile, namely Czechoslovakia, of whose existence he was not even aware, because he had left his birthplace, the small town of Zábřeh in Moravia, at the age of twenty.

Welzl's first stopping-place on his forced journey from America was at the Czechoslovak Consulate in Hamburg, where he obtained proofs of his nationality together with a passport and visas for the purpose of getting back to New Siberia, where he had a considerable amount of property stored up in his cave. He also owned a number of whaling vessels jointly with some of his friends. As it was unlikely that he could communicate with the latter and get them to send him funds for the return journey, he had to start earning his fare. He worked in the harbour of Hamburg as a day labourer. His European adventures are too numerous to be included in the introduction to this book. They deserve a whole volume to themselves. Here only a

brief outline can be given of what happened to him in Europe.

While he was in Hamburg he ran across a professor, who compiled dictionaries of unfamiliar northern languages, and, in return for the information with which Welzl supplied him in the course of a few evenings, he paid him so liberally that Welzl suddenly realized how valuable his experiences were. At the time when columns upon columns of the Press were filled with accounts of Amundsen's Polar flights, Welzl, who saw copies of the Czech newspaper, *Lidové Noviny*, at the Czechoslovak Consulate, summoned up enough courage to write to the paper about himself and his familiarity with the Polar regions. The sequel to the correspondence which was exchanged between him and Rudolf Těsnohlídek, of the *Lidové Noviny*, was his first book: *Welzl, the Eskimo.*

When Welzl had earned enough in Hamburg to enable him to sail to Quebec on board a cargo-boat in charge of a consignment of cattle, he left Europe without even visiting his native land. In company with a casual acquaintance in America he started doing business with beaver skins and earned enough to get back to Europe. He hoped that he would be able to live more cheaply in Czechoslovakia than in America. And so, at last, he got back to his old home, where he soon became such a favourite that every child knew who Jan Welzl was. At Prague, where he spent two months, he was received in audience by President Masaryk. Then he took a trip to his native Zábřeh, where he waited for the spring, when he intended to leave

Europe once and for all. It soon turned out, however, that his money would not last nearly as long as he had supposed. Lectures were badly paid, they were few in number, and, moreover, the stories he told were so fantastic that people were disinclined to believe him. To make matters worse, his knowledge of Czech was very defective, and in every sentence he found difficulties in expressing himself.

Realizing that he must get hold of the money which he had put aside, he again wrote to the *Lidové Noviny* enclosing a muddled and unintelligible document, which he himself styled a register. In it he described in a disconnected manner a Polar hunting expedition. It was impossible, however, to print a single word of this register in any shape or form. Nevertheless the journalist who happened to open the letters when the register arrived, and who in this way got hold of the register, paid a visit to Welzl and, on terms favourable to him, arranged to work with him at a detailed account of Welzl's life in the North from the beginning of his stay there. In this way the book *Thirty Years in the Golden North* was composed at Brno, and to it was added a second volume: *In the Track of the Polar Treasures.*

It may be asked how this work was produced. There was no attempt made at a connected narrative. It was not the product of office routine. It came into existence little by little as the result of friendly chats in Welzl's home over a cup of coffee or tea, or a glass of rum, amid clouds of smoke. It may, in fact, be described as an interview which lasted for two months.

But it was no casual chatter. The two journalists who collaborated with Welzl in this book took down word for word in shorthand everything he said, so that the main outlines of his life should be recorded on a uniform plan. The book was produced by means of countless questions. It should be remembered that Welzl had lived for thirty years amid surroundings which were quite unfamiliar to the average European, but they had become so much a part and parcel of his existence that many of the things which were so amazing to us he scarcely thought worth while mentioning or explaining, unless he was directly asked about them.

The work involved numerous difficulties. In the first place there was Welzl's defective knowledge of Czech. In this respect a certain number of gaps have still been left, particularly as regards the exact description of terms in natural history. A second obstacle was Welzl's absolute ignorance of geography. Welzl, who had tramped all over the world, was quite unable, when confronted with a map, to distinguish the North Pole from the South. It was comparatively easy to trace Welzl's movements on the mainland between places whose geographical position was precisely defined. The matter, however, became much more difficult where his wanderings in the most northerly parts of the Arctic Ocean were concerned, for then there was no definite point of reference to go upon, more particularly as these areas, being unexplored territory, consisted mostly of blank spaces on the map. What made matters worse was that, although Welzl was able to indicate

latitude from memory, he attached no importance whatever to meridians of longitude, and evidently left them entirely out of account.

A further difficulty arises from the necessity of drawing a distinction between Welzl's actual experiences from the things which he knew only by hearsay, and which, with a child-like simplicity, he believed in, for all their apparent absurdity. Where Welzl's credulity is at once obvious, the tribute to his simple faith was allowed to remain, as it enhanced the charm of his narrative. Welzl never knowingly uttered an untruth. His collaborators had ample opportunities of satisfying themselves on this point. They would get him to resume the most complicated stories after weeks had elapsed, and to approach them from a different angle. In all these cases the accounts which he gave were identical, and wherever it was possible to trace his movements on the map, he gave proof of what was sometimes an almost incredibly intimate acquaintance with every inch of the Polar regions.

It may be added that Welzl left Czechoslovakia in June 1929 and travelled back to the Arctic Ocean via London, Quebec, Prince Rupert Island, Dye, Dawson City and Nome, and it is apparently his intention to remain there for the rest of his life.

EDVARD VALENTA
B. GOLOMBEK