

THE GREAT BEKA 'EXPEDITION' 1905 - 6

Translated and adapted by John Want from a series of articles written by Heinrich Bumb and published in *Der Phonographische Zeitschrift* in 1906.

The following excellent summary of the original series of articles in German by Heinrich Bumb ("*Unsere Reise um die Erde.*") was made by John Want. Wherever you are John, here's to you!

Ernie Bayly's note:

Fred Gaisberg was the pioneer of globe-trotting recording engineers. After him many others working for the Gramophone Company were called upon to travel all over the world. Recording engineers of other companies had similar tasks, but little autobiographical detail survives. Heinrich Bumb, one of the partners owning Beka records started out on a world recording tour in 1905 of which general description was published but it contained few precise details of recordings made. Many of his recordings were issued and one has read in the German press letters complaining that while Beka could issue records of foreign music and song, they could not record the excellent folksongs of Germany! The Gramophone Company also recorded Sheik Jussuf (Yussef) who, it seems, was monetarily astute!

Comments between convex brackets either John Want's or Ernie Bayly's.

Comments in italics between square brackets: Hugo Strötbaum

The 'Beka' expedition left Berlin on 5th. October, 1905, on the long train journey via Vienna and Budapest to the first stop: Constantinople. The journey was uneventful, save for a minor collision near Belgrade in which two people were injured and a goods train wrecked.

The Beka team found Constantinople impressive from a distance but primitive and filthy inside. They saw the sights - the caravans of the numerous pilgrims on their way to Mecca; they saw the bridge across the Bosphorus linking Europe and Asia. There was also a foretaste of today: attempted bomb outrages

against the Sultan led to very tight security control and their recording equipment came under disagreeably close scrutiny. But they made a number of vocal recordings, accompanied by original Turkish instruments.

From Constantinople they travelled on the '*Ismailia*', via Athens, to Alexandria where they caught the train to Cairo. In that city the efforts of the British Police to make it a very different place from Turkish cities such as Constantinople, impressed them greatly. The weather at the beginning of November was agreeable: 24 to 26°C in the shade and they took advantage of it to see the city.

Negotiations had been under way for nine months with Sheik Jussuf, the "*Caruso of the East*" and bore fruit. He was contracted to record fifty numbers exclusively for Beka for the not inconsiderable sum of 26,000 Francs. This large fee caused the members of the ensemble who were accompanying him also to stand out for excessively high payment and the Beka team lost more than a week of work through these arguments. As a result they found themselves in Cairo in Ramadan. During this time they could only record at night - from 10 p.m. to 4 a.m.

By means of a bribe they quietened the conscience of a priest who finally consented to sing for them parts of the Koran. These recordings were made in the middle of the night in the greatest secrecy and behind the locked doors of a specially-rented house.

After the recording sessions in Cairo were complete they continued their journey, via Port Said, to Bombay. At Port Said they joined the P. & O. "*Victoria*", which took them through the Suez Canal to the Red Sea with its winter temperature of 35°C in the shade and little difference in temperature between day and night. Life was lively on the "*Victoria*", which was carrying the newly-appointed Vice-consul of India, the Earl of Minto, with his family and staff. Incredibly in this sweltering heat there was a fancy dress ball on boards and deck sports were the order of the day. But in Aden, the Beka team (and the new Vice-consul) had to transfer to the "*Peninsular*" as the "*Victoria*" was bound for Australia. How they loathed this ship, and their first class "*penthouse style*" cabins apparently just over the propellor that took them across the peaceful Indian Ocean to Bombay!

On arrival in Bombay the "*Peninsular*" was greeted with warships, dressed overall and with salutes fired from their guns - greetings of course to the new Vice-consul. Once landed they settled into the Esplanade Hotel only to be wakened early by further noisy greetings to the Vice-consul. But once work started they succeeded in Bombay (and subsequently in Calcutta) in recording a total of over three hundred pieces in a variety of languages. The dealers, who were brought to the recording sessions by the Beka agents, were mostly Parsees. During their stay, the Beka team attended a Parsee wedding.

The agents, who were also the importers of cycles and cars, drove them one Sunday around the outskirts of Bombay. By luck singers from Lucknow and Benares were in Bombay at the end of the main session and the Beka team was spared a journey to these other cities.

From Bombay they took the train across India to Calcutta, a journey of forty-six hours. Calcutta was more impressive: the recordings less successful. Their Bombay agent had recommended a good friend in Calcutta who was a busy man: so he recommended another friend. The latter could not *personally* accomodate their wishes so he placed *his* friend at their disposal and this friend finally engaged a deputy - all at their expense. The deputy should have established the repertoires recommended and engaged the right artistes and have attended the recording sessions to ensure that the right pieces were sung in the right languages, etc. The Germans soon realised that they would achieve nothing in this way - at least not in a foreseeable period. At every engagement long negotiations took place between all the friends, which they could not understand. It was obvious that these negotiations had one purpose: to ensure that disproportionately large commissions would be distributed among the Indians. The Beka people saw they were to be cheated and after a short while decided to terminate the recording programme. They then engaged someone else and set him the task of hiring the artistes - this time working to a maximum price. While he set about his work they paid a visit to Darjeeling. While they were there, the man in Calcutta made the necessary arrangements and when the Germans returned, the recordings were made successfully.

On 21st. December, they left Calcutta for Rangoon, joining the "*Palatina*" of the British India Company for the journey down the Hoogly River and then across the Bay of Bengal. They were glad that the sea was calm throughout the

voyage for there were only six lifeboats for some 1300 passengers. The boat dropped anchor in Rangoon on Christmas Day. There they visited the great golden pagoda & saw for the first time working elephants, busy at great woodyards. They came to know the enormous burmese crows that flew into their rooms to steal food, the numerous mosquitoes and long lizards.

Whereas the recordings in India had been of single pieces - as in Europe (then) - complete plays in sets of 50 or 60 records were recorded in Burma [or Birma]. Each theatrical company had its own box office success and a complete comedy was recorded from each of three companies.

The artistes, in terms of their demands were already quite European. For one day's work each company asked for a modest 3,000 rupees. The whole troupe of some 25 persons would come with its own musical instruments to a bungalow rented for the recordings. It took a [great/good] deal of effort to persuade the performers to arrange the instruments in the best way to suit the equipment. After endless tests and frequent changes in the scoring, everything fell into place and the recordings were made when the temperature was 36°C.

After a stay of eleven days, four of which were spent waiting for the Singapore steamer they left Burma on 5th. January, 1906, on the merchant ship "Virawa" which was carrying 40,000 sacks of rice and which (mercifully) only accepted a limited number of passengers. Belonging to the British India Steam Navigation Company they felt it could justifiably claim to be the worst ship which they had so far used. The food was awful, the cabins full of ants and cockroaches. The saloon was at the disposal more of the coolies than of the passengers. Scheduled to reach Singapore on 11th. January, it made a 22-hour stop in Penang and the Beka team spent a welcome day ashore before continuing to Singapore.

Arriving there they found telegrams instructing them to go at once to Batavia in Java and set off the next day, Sunday 14th. January, 1906, on the steamer "De Klerk" of the Royal Dutch Steamship Company. Here the cleanliness, the spacious cabins and the food were greatly to be praised and they enjoyed the ceremony of "crossing the line". After a forty-eight hour journey they reached the harbour of Batavia and a twenty-five minute train ride took them to the city centre. It was just like a big Dutch city. They contrasted the stiff etiquette of British Colonies and

British ships with the apparently agreeable informality of the Dutch. Above all they discovered the joys of "Reistafel" (Rice Table [or "rijsttafel" as we say in Dutch]).

In two days they recorded a number of the so-called "stamboul" songs and a series of Javanese songs with the characteristic "gammelang" accompaniment: and they suffered two days of tropical rain. Then they returned to Singapore on the steamer "Van Swoll".

While they were in Java, preparations for recording were being made in Singapore and they were able in just three days to complete their scheduled recordings. They then set sail on the North German Lloyd steamer "Deli" to Bangkok, finding themselves "once more on German soil; German language; German cleanliness".

Barely was the "Deli" out of Singapore when a north-easterly monsoon set in which lasted until the next day and made them very ill. After a three-and-a-half day journey they landed in Bangkok, capital of Siam. Their stay in that city was short and they were preoccupied with business. Although the rainy season was over by the time they arrived the heat was unbearable the city swarmed with mosquitoes and the hotel conditions miserable. They sought to leave Bangkok as quickly as possible.

On 31st. January, 1906, they re-boarded the "Deli" for Singapore where they stayed a further seven days, during which time they went sight-seeing. On 12th. February they set sail in the P. & O. merchantman "Java": allegedly, as so often in P. & O. boats of that time, the food was miserable and the cleanliness only "moderate". They reached Hong Kong on 18th. February, to be greeted by thick mist and rain. The weather was so cold that they had to change quickly into winter clothing. They admired the business integrity of the Chinese and recalled that in preparing goods for that market the greatest attention needed to be paid to detail - even to achieving the precise colour of record sleeves.

They found in Hong Kong very strong American competition. The Columbia Graphophone Company had just finished its latest recordings - said to be of 1,000 titles for which fees of \$50,000 had been paid. "Victor", "Grammophon" as well as "Zonophon-Records" and "Odeon" were represented in the Colony.

They were able to record for South China in Cantonese of both dialects. They also managed to engage a Chinese theatrical company from Canton for ten days and one from Swatar [= *Swatow*] for four days. They found a suitable house for the recordings, which were made on the second floor between 9 a.m. and 4 p.m. each day. The first floor was used as an opium den! After recordings in Cantonese were completed they recorded a series of women songs and then followed a series "*Artistes from Swatar*".

This "*great artistic pleasure*" came to an end at last and with a light heart they packed up, staring at the comic spectacle of what they had left behind: gongs, basins and the inevitable wooden clappers.

They had to wait two days for the next steamer and used this time to take the boat to Canton, eighty-five miles away in China. They engaged the services of a guide who showed them some of the sights of that bewildering city, and returned on Friday 9th. March - just in time to catch the Japanese ship "*America Maru*" for Shanghai. Its splendid accommodation confirmed their views of the backwardness of P. & O. They reached Wusong three days later and in the tender sailed the twelve miles up the Wusong River to Shanghai, the European quarter of which was in a very tense state and which was training daily its own army of volunteers - a result of the recent Chinese insurrections. As usual they saw the sights of area but found the temples of Buddha and Confucius of little interest.

Negotiations with the various theatrical companies and well known artistes took about a week. Their demands for 300 Tael per song were in no way exceptional. They recorded pieces, partly as single items, partly in series of ten to sixteen records in the three main languages of North and Central China.

Three weeks after arrival - on 6th. April, 1906, they left on the "*Nippon Maru*" of the same Japanese line as the boat that had brought them to Shanghai. Their destination was Japan. They sailed away in thick fog and off the Japanese coast the boat nearly came to grief since it got itself trapped in a very narrow rocky strait. With steep rocky cliffs on each side it dropped anchor for the night, extricating itself successfully the next day and then docking in Nagasaki. Once landed, they visited the Shinto temples and also saw mines, torpedoes and other relics of the recent Russo-Japanese war. They continued their journey by boat to Yokohama, the main port for Tokyo and reached that city after a thirty-minute train ride.

Tokyo was busy honouring the victors from the battlefields of Manchuria and only when the festivities were over could recording begin. For this purpose a small house had been specially equipped. Its ground floor windows had been glazed (rice paper was normal for windows) and this became the reception area for artistes. Upstairs was used for recording. The Japanese recording sessions were the most boring and time-consuming of the whole journey. They were already accustomed to artistes being two to three hours late but in Japan, when the artistes arrived, amid endless bowing, compliments and greetings they first took tea and then smoked a pipe. Only after a further hour were they prepared to think about the purpose of their visit. No sooner were the artistes and their instruments located properly, a test recording made and the reproduction declared "*satisfactory*" by the experts, but endless changes were introduced - either in the placing of the artistes, in the location of the instruments, or in the arrangement of the recording horn - and so on.

Germany had opened its training establishments to the Land of the Rising Sun. It was proud to be able to send its best sons to Japan as instructors in the Japanese Army and Navy as well as to send engineers to establish factories and teachers to educate Japanese youth. It had, moreover, shown the Japanese who came to study in Europe everything that they had wanted to see. But the Beka team found that Europeans would hardly believe that as soon as the Japanese had seen enough, they hurried home to copy. As soon as an article of European origin was imported into Japan in large quantities, factories were set up in Japan using cheaper labour and avoiding the considerable customs duties levied. The result: import of finished goods became impossible.

This had not hindered the continuous growth of trade with Japan. But the pattern of trade had changed with considerable reduction in the import of finished products and a great increase in the import of the semi-finished products and raw materials.

They saw the sights of Tokyo, visited Japanese houses and formed a bad impression of the Japanese businessmen in particular. Interestingly in Tokyo there was an exhibition of booty from the recent Russo-Japanese war. 70,000 firearms were exhibited in pyramids together with several hundred other guns. As far as the eye could see there were munition wagons, as well as pyramids and gates of honour that had been made from Russian weapons.

From Tokyo they travelled by train on its five-and-a-half hour journey to **Nikko** where they made more recordings. At last they could start to think about the journey which was to be via America. After returning to Tokyo they left Yokohama on the "*Hong Kong Maru*" bound for San Francisco via Honolulu. Reaching Honolulu they met the music director, Herr Berger, another Berliner and former musician from the 2nd. Regiment of the Prussian Guards. Berger with a "*Kapelle*" of forty locals conducted music - some classical - in a public park in front of the hotel terrace.

Next day they continued their seventeen day voyage to San Francisco having received news of its earthquake just before they left Japan. The impression of misery and damage there was indescribable - deserted streets, wrecked homes and above all the bewildered population. As quickly as possible they took the Southern Pacific Railroad to Denver, thence by way of Chicago and Buffalo to New York. On 7th. July they boarded the "*Amerika*" and on 17th. June, 1906, almost nine months after starting their journey, they were back home in Berlin.

[courtesy of the *Ernie Bayly Heritage Trust*]