

Review of *Polarfahrer—Im Banne der Arktis*, by Theodor Lerner, edited by Frank Berger (2005). Zürich: Oesch Verlag. 317 pp. ISBN 3-0350-2014-0. In German.

Sebastian Gerland

Norwegian Polar Institute, Polar Environmental Centre, NO-9296 Tromsø, Norway, gerland@polar.no.

Theodor Lerner was born 1866 in Antweiler/Ahr and died 1931 in Frankfurt/Main, where he had lived from 1911 onwards. In *Polarfahrer—Im Banne der Arktis*, which can be translated as “Polar traveller—spellbound by the Arctic”, Frank Berger presents Lerner’s original 1930–31 manuscript. The editor has undertaken only some orthographical and grammatical alterations. Lerner’s original manuscript is supplemented with (solely old) photographs, a few maps, an epilogue, a brief biography, the editor’s footnotes to the text and a list of references.

The book relates Lerner’s experiences during seven journeys to Svalbard between 1896 and 1914. A journalist whose accounts were published in magazines and newspapers, Lerner reported on the launch of Salomon August Andrée’s ill-fated bid to reach the North Pole in a hydrogen balloon and the failed airborne expeditions of Walter Wellman. He participated in the rescue of Herbert Schröder-Stranz’s expedition and the grounded tourist ship *Isle de France*. He looked into the mining possibilities on Bjørnøya and he overwintered on Spitsbergen along with Hjalmar Johansen, who is known to many on account of his participation in expeditions led by Fridtjof Nansen and Roald Amundsen). Lerner’s adventures earned him the nickname “Prince of Mist” in the media, because of his knack for finding his way in the fog.

As a sea ice scientist with roots in the Frankfurt/Main area and having worked in Svalbard (I also reside in Tromsø, a northern Norwegian coastal town that Lerner passed through during his travels), I enjoyed reading this book and revisiting the adventures of famous polar explorers from a different point of view than modern retellings or memoirs by the explorers themselves. The book touches on several issues which occupy today’s researchers, such as winter warm spells in the Arctic and sea ice thickness, just to name two. On the other hand, some things were astonishing-



Lerner spent the winter of 1907–08 in a cabin at Kap Boehman, Spitsbergen. (This and other pictures in this review used with permission of the publisher.)

ly different in the early decades of the last century. The Arctic ecosystem and climate processes were poorly understood compared to today, and attitudes toward, for example, property and animals (Lerner describes how four polar bears captured on an expedition were transported in crates; the din they made resulted in a fine during a stop in Arkhangelsk and in censure in the Tromsø newspapers), contrasted markedly to modern ideas. All this makes it difficult and maybe inappropriate to raise ethical criticisms.

Polarfahrer is a compelling and well-written account that not only describes the expeditions themselves, but also the preparations beforehand, including attempts to find sponsors. The descriptions are lively and often flavoured with humour.

What do we know about Lerner from his contemporaries? As pointed out by Reinke-Kunze (1992), Fridtjof Nansen (1920) discussed critically Lerner’s activities on Bjørnøya, the southernmost island of the Svalbard archipelago. Nansen objected to the way Lerner set up property boundaries using poles and rocks, claiming



The cabin in which Lerner and Hjalmar Johansen overwintered at Kap Boheman.

certain areas on Bjørnøya as the personal property of himself and of his friend Kapitän Rüdiger. Hjalmar Johansen (1998), Nansen's partner in the famous sledge journey during the *Fram* expedition in 1895, described overwintering with Lerner in a hut at Kap Boheman, on the northern shore of Isfjorden, Spitsbergen, in terms that contrast so sharply with *Polarfahrer* that one might think that Lerner and Johansen were describing two entirely different events. Johansen's diary contains many negative comments about Lerner; but that is perhaps more indicative of the nature of a personal diary (as opposed to a book intended for public consumption) than of the character of Lerner himself.

Readers of *Polarfahrer* would have benefited from one or more modern maps illustrating travel routes and indicating place names (some of which are different than those in use today) mentioned in the text. An index of old and new place names would have made it easier to recognize and find locations featuring in Lerner's travels. The book contains a number of very interesting black and white photographs. Unfortunately, the reprint quality is not very good, probably because of the paper stock. A photograph on the back of the dust jacket has reproduced significantly better than the same picture inside the book. Some of the picture captions could have been more informative. Not every reader would notice that it is Tromsø Sound in the background of the photograph of the ship the *Expres* on p. 19 or that Lerner is on deck

among the 14 crewmembers pictured on p. 284.

The history of polar exploration is a popular subject internationally. To be accessible to a much larger potential audience, *Polarfahrer* should be translated into English. In that event, the editor and publishers should seize the opportunity to print the photographs on better paper and to add maps and perhaps a section of modern colour photographs of key locations to show how they look now.



The *Lövenskiöld*, trapped in the ice off Nordaustlandet, Svalbard, in 1912.

Interest in Lerner's adventures persists. They provided inspiration for Martin Mosebach's fictional comic novel, *Der Nebelfürst* (*The Prince of Mist*). As reported in *Die Welt* (Kurth 2005), Professor Hans Fricke recently led an attempt to locate—using a submarine—the remains of the *Lövenskiöld*, the ship which transported one of the expeditions in which Lerner participated and later described in *Polarfahrer*. In the grip of ice, the vessel had to be abandoned off the northern shore of Nordaustlandet in 1912. Unfortunately, Fricke's team did not locate the wreck. They surmise that it was pushed out to sea by ice, as suggested by scrape marks on the sea floor in the area where the ship is thought to have gone down.

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