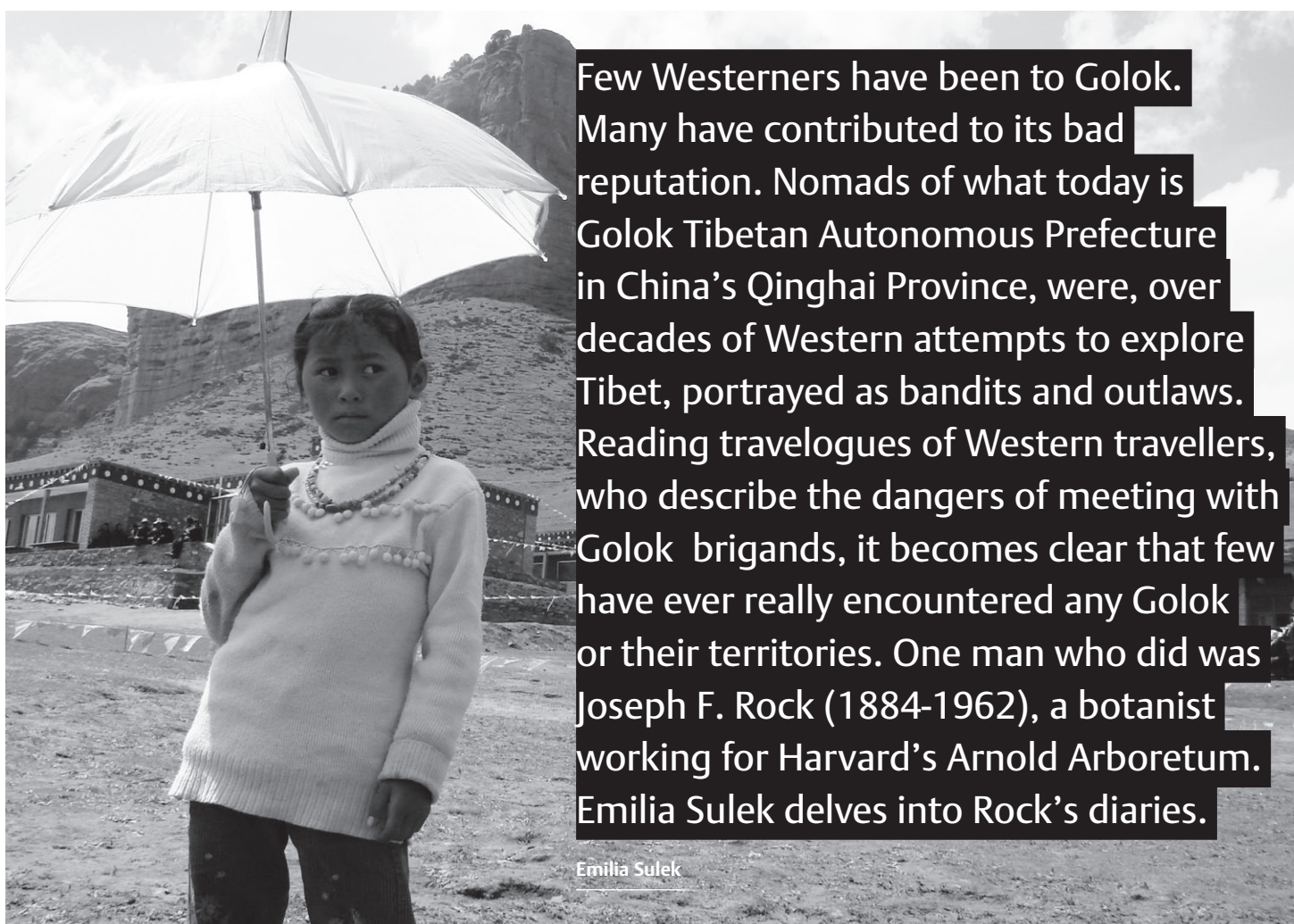


# A trip to Amnye Machen

The diary of Joseph F. Rock



Emilia Sulek

Few Westerners have been to Golok. Many have contributed to its bad reputation. Nomads of what today is Golok Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in China's Qinghai Province, were, over decades of Western attempts to explore Tibet, portrayed as bandits and outlaws. Reading travelogues of Western travellers, who describe the dangers of meeting with Golok brigands, it becomes clear that few have ever really encountered any Golok or their territories. One man who did was Joseph F. Rock (1884-1962), a botanist working for Harvard's Arnold Arboretum. Emilia Sulek delves into Rock's diaries.

'What a secluded and lonely existence in this most isolated and inaccessible spot.'

JOSEPH F. ROCK IS A SCHOLAR remembered, principally, for his studies on the writing and belief systems of the Naxi people of China's Yunnan Province. Travelling through the eastern reaches of the Tibetan Plateau, it is hard to find a place that Rock did not visit or did not plan to include in his itineraries one day. A few years ahead of the journey described in Rock's diary, George Pereira, a British Military Attaché to Beijing, set off on a trip to Lhasa. He is famous as one of the first Westerners to see the peaks of the Amnye Machen mountain range in Golok, and he estimated that they are over 7000m high (GJ 1923: 125). Having read this account of the unknown mountains, in 1926 Rock decided to go and measure them himself, and collect botanic specimens for his Arboretum. In 2003 a diary from this trip along with selected letters Rock sent to America were published by Hartmut Walravens in his book, *Joseph Franz Rock. Expedition zum Amnye Machen in Südwest-China im Jahre 1926.* (Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden).

Fig. 1 (above)  
The once unoccupied Amnye valley is now home to the Snowland Nomad Girls' school. Photograph courtesy of author.

This book is important for several reasons. First, it gives information about places that Rock visited in Tibet, including the monasteries of Labrang, Tsangar and Ragya and the great expanses of grassy highlands stretching from Labrang to Golok. Some of these descriptions are so detailed that one could use them instead of a map. Take, for example, his description of the road from Ragya at the Machu or Yellow River to the lands of the Yonzhi tribe:

*'To our right cliffs of red conglomerate such as are found back of Ragya. These cliffs culminate into a tall, rocky, red bluff a little distance ahead. This promontory crowned by a few juniper trees is called Ge-tho and is the mountain god of the Ja-za clan. At its base, on the left of the trail, is an Obo, a conglomeration of sticks and rocks where the clan burns its incense to the mountain god of Ge-tho'* (p.108).<sup>1</sup>

Fig. 2 (below)  
Obo (collection of sticks and rocks where the clan burns its incense to the gods) at the foot of Amnye Keto mountain which Rock writes of in his diary. Photograph courtesy of the author.

The view of the obo (or *laptse* as Tibetans call it) and the mountain, popularly called Amnye Keto, is unchanged. Only the valley is not as empty as it was during Rock's expedition. Today it houses the Snowland Nomad Girls' School. Given that the road from Ragya to Dawu was destroyed in 2008 due to the construction of an expressway, this alternative route described by Rock could save modern travellers much time and effort.

Rock's expedition to Golok was not the most propitious, to say the least. Botanical findings disappointed him. He was unable to approach Amnye Machen due to the area being criss-crossed by a network of intertribal feuds, and finding a guide willing to cross the conflicted territories was impossible:

*'It is exceedingly difficult to move about here as each tribe is at feud*

*with the other, and one does not dare go into the territory of the other'* (pp.102-103).

Even though Rock did not dwell long among the nomads of Golok, he is a valuable source of information on them. Many of the names he mentions in the diary are appearing for the first and only time in Western literature. Also significant is that Rock recognises that the area is home to a number of tribes that don't fall under the 'Golok' label for linguistic, historical and complex cultural reasons. These groups see themselves as distinct, only sharing the place they live with the Goloks. This was the case with the Yonzhi tribe, attacked by the Ma clan's armies in the decades following Rock's arrival. In one of the battles Yonzhi Aba, the tribe's chief, was killed. 'They acknowledge no authority, pay no taxes and are absolutely a law unto themselves' (p.110), Rock says. The Ma's incursions were indeed about the Yonzhis refusal to pay taxes. Rock's people passed through the valley where the tribe's chief was encamped. A foreign traveller who searched for plants in the highlands is remembered by today's Yonzhi chief. A man in his eighties, he was born around the time when Rock was trying to get to Amnye Machen.

A reader that knows Rock's most famous book, *The Amnye Machen Range and Adjacent Regions. A Monographic Study* (1956), might argue that the information in Rock's diary repeats itself on the pages of his Amnye Machen magnum opus. Why then should one bother to read these passages again? The diary formed the basis for Rock's future writing – the Amnye Machen book, and popular articles for *National Geographic Magazine* (c.f. Rock 1930). Rock felt an urge to share his knowledge with the public, but the diary he wrote largely for himself. Rock's diary is better written than the Amnye Machen book. It is interesting to see how he evaluated his fieldnotes, censored himself and transformed his informal discourse with himself into a more formal one with the readers.

During his days in Tibet, Rock encountered all the problems that a scholar on a field trip can face. Many travellers to Tibet lacked good interpreters. Rock seemed to have worked with a good one, a missionary from Labrang, William E. Simpson. However, Rock complained:

*'I have learned this lesson that missionary business cannot be carried out in conjunction with a scientific expedition. (...) While he [Simpson] is kind and good hearted and willing in many ways, firmness is absolutely lacking in him; its place is taken by too much brotherly love and sweet words while these ruffians here look upon such conduct as becoming to a silly woman and not to a man'* (p.106).

Rock's diary reveals that he was often unnerved by his caravan men's laid-back attitude, and it is clear he had financial problems – his letters in the second part of Walravens' book show how Rock's situation was similar to that of today's scholars' dependent on grants and university funds. Finally, Rock's explorations were affected by China's state of political

flux. Rock did not hide his dislike for the rising Communists. In one letter he informs:

*'I'm sorry to report that even little Choni situated on the edge of nowhere has been ordered by Lanchou to hoist the Red flag. (...) and so we are truly under a Red regime, but the prince has little love for the Reds as I have'* (p.219).

In another letter he promises:

*'I can definitely say that if I ever get out alive, China will see me no more, or rather never again'* (p.176).

In fact, Rock stayed much longer. He shared the fears that many a fieldworker has on the way home:

*'I dread the idea of the lonely life in an American city. I am afraid I shall be much more lonely in America than here in this lovely wilderness'* (p.219).

Rock's diaries show more the more human face of a person that, for many, might have seemed slightly 'inhuman' given his famous preference for European food served on fine china with a linen table-cloth and napkins. Something he only gave up under the most dire circumstances. He played arias of Enrico Caruso to the nomads he met on his way. 'They screamed with laughter at the most pathetic passages', Rock commented (p.36). He could be an archetype for Werner Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo* who dreamt of building an opera house in the city of Iquitos, Peru. Just like the protagonist in Herzog's film, Rock dressed smartly, and liked to wear a shirt, a neck-tie and jacket to meet the local chieftains. In a photo showing him with the prince of Choni he looks as fresh and pressed as if it was taken in a photo atelier on some chic American or European boulevard. However, Rock wasn't always as composed and self-contented as it might have seemed. A story related by William Simpson explains the reasons why their expedition to Amnye Machen was cut short. One day Rock was annoyed by the smoke from some nomads' juniper offerings. He lost his temper and kicked the fire apart. The nomads were enraged, and only Simpson's intervention saved Rock's life, so the story goes.<sup>2</sup> Eventually Rock was forced to say farewell to his dream of approaching the mountain. His only compensation was believing that the land he travelled through had not been trod by other Westerners. Indeed, in his writings he constantly claims to be the first in this *terra incognita* of Golok.

Aside from being an invaluable anthropological source, the value of Rock's diary lies also in its capturing of the poverty of the human condition during such arduous explorations. It's clear from his writings that Rock found himself, at times, to be lost in the world he tried to research, another world, parallel to his own, but unknown.

*'Today I feel as if I had enough of this life, I long for home and a fireside, a cozy corner, an armchair and good books; but alas I must sally forth into the unknown (...). Let the weather do its worst, snow, blot out this miserable bleak landscape, and let me sleep and forget the worries and hardships and the loneliness of life! [Still better would my sleep continue and merge into that unconscious sleep from which there is no awakening]'* (p.27).

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## Notes

1. Except when otherwise indicated the numbers refer to pages of Walravens' book.
2. The story according to Robert Carlson of Wheaton, IL. I owe my thanks to Ray Smith for providing me with it. Another version of the Rock-Simpson cooperation holds that Rock sent his interpreter back to Labrang after only five days of travelling together (Sutton 1974: 135).

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