

## Waldemar Jochelson – His Life and Work in Light of Newly Accessible Sources

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With his extensive volumes on the Yakuts, Yukaghirs and Koryaks, Waldemar Jochelson (1908; 1910–26; 1933) – together with the other two members of the so-called *Etnotroika*, Waldemar Bogoras and Lev Shternberg – provides us with the most comprehensive ethnographic information on northeastern Siberia at the turn of the 20th century (Kasten 2018). Although he spent only parts of his life in Russia itself, he is today mostly seen as a “Russian” scientist – which raises questions that could ultimately be answered only by himself. However, at least his biography may suggest that he most likely had little reason for Russian patriotism. After his long exile to Siberia for resistance against the Tsarist regime, he was still under surveillance by the secret service during his research there many years later. He expressed his disappointment about the results of the Revolution, whose implementations he saw as a failure, and after the turmoil of the Civil War he decided to emigrate to the United States. He later thought of returning to Russia, but after considering his many difficult experiences there, finally decided against it (Vakhtin 2004: 45).

Reasons for a reassessment of the question that is raised here are his early writings in German (Kasten 2017) and the letters (Sirina and Shinkovoi 2007) and diaries of Jochelson, which have only recently become accessible and which are discussed together with his detailed biographical account in a forthcoming volume (Kasten and Sirina 2022). All this directs the focus to his “formative years” and what significance they might have had for his later work.

Jochelson grew up in the city of Vilnius in Lithuania, which was Polish at the time and had no genetic or cultural ties to the Baltic provinces of Russia.<sup>1</sup> His mother tongue was apparently the Lithuanian East Yiddish dialect, also called Northeast Yiddish. Even though, in Igor Krupnik’s opinion,<sup>2</sup> traditional Jewish religious upbringing in general, and Orthodox Lithuanian Jewry in particular, were deeply antagonistic to modernization and everything German, the strong affinities of Yiddish with the German language nevertheless prevailed.

Only later did Jochelson learn Russian as his first second language from his Russian tutor. The Orthodox Jewish religious school (kheder) education in particular may have influenced Jochelson in other ways as well – namely, his early experience with textual exegesis based on his advanced Talmud studies (Slobodin 2005:96). This could also explain his later interest in working with texts (see below).

A starting point of Jochelson’s later ethnological approach practiced by him during the Sibiryakov expedition, which was remarkable for the time, was apparently, in addi-

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1 Tammiksaar E., personal communication.

2 Krupnik I.I., personal communication.

tion to his initial Jewish school education, his studies in Switzerland with representatives of the scientific tradition in the spirit of the Humboldt brothers. Their worldview was also shaped in turn by explorers and their broad interests. Among them was the Siberian explorer G. W. Steller, who expressed his empathy towards indigenous people and often – along with many other explorers – took a stand against the respective authorities (Kasten 2020b). In addition, there was Jochelson's socio-political commitment based on his revolutionary activities and his acquaintance with the German Social Democracy and Karl Kautsky.

Based on these mindsets, shaped by Western cultural and social traditions and his initially still fragmentary scientific knowledge, Jochelson developed his methods autodidactically with the help of further literature during the Sibiriyakov expedition (1894–1897). These sources already contained approaches that later became influential in Western social and cultural anthropology. They include *participant observation*, even if this was practiced rather spontaneously by Jochelson and in rudimentary form already by G. W. Steller, and was later made one of the basic ethnological methods by Malinowski (1922).

Already at the time of the Sibiriyakov expedition, both Jochelson and Bogoras recognized the importance of collecting and studying texts in indigenous languages (Jochelson 1900). This was probably not due to Jochelson's knowledge of the then widespread romantic tradition – based on the Brothers Grimm – but rather because of his interest, shared by other exiled *narodniki*, in the culture and folklore of rural ethnic groups.<sup>3</sup> He initially pursued this approach independently of Franz Boas, before the latter made the analysis of texts recorded in indigenous languages one of his ethnological methods (Dürr 1992: 103f.).

Jochelson's often expressed sympathy for the precarious living conditions of indigenous people that later became the guiding principle of *Action Anthropology* or *Advocacy Anthropology* (Tax 1937). With his initial explicit appreciation of the contribution of his indigenous informants, he anticipates what is now becoming the model of *co-production of knowledge* between foreign and indigenous researchers.<sup>4</sup> Some of this was lost again in Jochelson's later scientific work under the guidance of Boas. Jochelson's character also seemed to harden as he grew older, placing (or having to place) greater priority on funding opportunities and his own authorship, which is evident from his letters (cf. Vakhtin 2004).

Overall, it can be stated that the complexity and heterogeneity of Jochelson's work suggests transnational imprints and orientations (elaborated below) when juxtaposing his early German-language writings with his subsequent Russian-language works, as well as his later main works in English written in the style of American cultural anthropology. However, these were not merely translations, but – as can be seen above all from his German and English-language publications – different ways of scientific

3 I thank Igor Krupnik for this assessment, which I also think is closer to the truth here.

4 Lavrillier and Gabyshev 2017; Krupnik and Bogoslovskaya 2017; Kasten 2020a.

ically elaborating and presenting the same content. His publications thus reflect different stages in his development, while only one particular phase of his work was directed at his colleagues in Russia.

Igor Krupnik also attaches little importance to Jochelson's subsequent formative years in Western Europe, mentioned at the beginning of this article. For him, his real preparation for fieldwork began only after reading the Russian ethnographic literature available to him in Yakutia. In this regard, Peter Schweitzer<sup>5</sup> points to the foreign experiences of Anukhin, Kovalevsky, Kropotkin, Miklukho-Maklay and others in raising the question of whether there was a "real Russian tradition" ("istinno russkaya traditsiya") in ethnology at all at that time. It is also worth mentioning here Friedrich Wilhelm Radloff, who, after his studies at Humboldt University in Berlin, moved to St. Petersburg, where, despite changing his name to Vassili Vassil'evič Radlov (Василий Васильевич Радлов), he certainly remained attached to the German research tradition in which he had been trained.

Therefore, it seems appropriate to me to emphasize that an essential basis for Jochelson's later unique methodological approach and ultimately his work as a whole lay in experiences during his earlier "formative" phases of life. It was during these experiences that he acquired his later personality traits such as skepticism and criticism of authorities as well as empathy for other people and the sometimes precarious situations in which they lived – whereas the importance of later acquired knowledge from Russian writings seems rather secondary. His human character, which had already been consolidated by the time he came into contact with these works, was thus presumably decisive for their interpretation and his later scientific work.

Jochelson had further encounters with Western European scientific traditions after his return from the Sibiryakov expedition in 1898, when he completed his university studies in Switzerland and met his future wife, Dina Brodskaya, who was studying medicine there. She accompanied Jochelson on his subsequent expeditions, and her contributions were reflected in his subsequent publications. It remains unclear what influence she had on the later directions of Jochelson's work. For presumably countless conversations about developments in Western science and society at that time are of course not documented, as would be possible to research subsequently in letters, for example.

Since this is a short assessment from a broader perspective, some brief personal notes seem to me acceptable and appropriate. The accents I have set here can presumably be better understood in light of the subjective interpretations of facts occasioned by each researcher's individual life experiences.

During initial studies and stays of several years with the Sami of northern Scandinavia and with First Nations communities in Canada, I came into contact with self-government movements afoot at that time. Simultaneously, collaborative projects shaped my sense of sharing and giving back research results to local communities I

5 Schweitzer P., personal communication.

had worked with. In the early 1990s, I further developed these experiences into methodological concepts together with my students at the Freie Universität, among them Stephan Dudeck, Otto Habeck, Michael Rießler, and Aimar Ventsel. Since then, the focus has been on co-productions of knowledge with indigenous partners, combined with a general skepticism of any kind of national appropriation of indigenous cultures and research.

Based on the methodological approach thus formed and consolidated during my “formative” years, I began my field research in the Far East of Russia in 1993. There I also devoted myself to extensive reading of Russian ethnological literature – just as Jochelson came into contact with it first during his stay in Siberia. Even though the respective field research conditions can of course by no means be compared, essential methodological-conceptual foundations for it were in both cases previously laid. For me, similar to Jochelson, these were based on earlier encounters outside Russia with international socio-political movements and scientific traditions.

Until the end of the 19th century, Siberian explorers were still mainly active in different types of international cooperation, one of their last prominent representatives apparently being Jochelson. Thus, in Sergei Kan’s view, Jochelson was neither a Western European nor a Russian scholar – but both, as were many other researchers of the time.<sup>6</sup>

Those explorers were less likely to be drawn into the national or imperialist interests of the respective governments, and thus often formed a moral and humanistic counterweight, especially with regard to the treatment of indigenous peoples (Kasten 2019). Thus, Jochelson was obviously on the leading edge of a turning point in time. For just as parts of Western ethnography were thereafter in the service of the national interests of colonial powers and totalitarian regimes (Lentz 2020), independent ethnological research in the Soviet Union that did not follow the political directives of the authorities was hampered (Tumarkin 2002). But since perestroika in the 1990s, many projects in Russia have increasingly taken up the traditions of earlier international research (Kasten 2002, 2004, 2005). Since then, however, there have again been occasional noticeable national undertones,<sup>7</sup> as was sometimes also arrogance on the Western side, especially during the perestroika era.

However, a new generation of younger ethnologists trained in the West, similar to Jochelson, has for many years been conducting field research in Siberia with local partners and is active and sometimes resident in Russia, just as many Russian researchers are also part of international networks. This enables broad and balanced views and the overcoming – also in research – of occasionally occurring nationalisms, and which gives hope for the continuation of former common traditions rich in results.

6 Kan, S., personal communication.

7 “[this] publication helps fill the vacuum of anthropological material about Russian [sic] indigenous peoples presented in English by a team composed largely of Russians, [where] the voices of these Russian anthropological colleagues have still been little heard in the West” (Beach, Funk, and Sillanpää, eds., 2009:17 f.).

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