

Sugata and Rachel Kellett. 2004. *Bird of Passage*. Kathmandu: Mandala Publications.

I bought this book reluctantly, thinking that I would quickly skim its more than four hundred pages for bits of information on Karl Heinz Wagner who, in 1954, became the first westerner to be ordained a Buddhist monk in Nepal, taking the name Sugata. Despite my best intentions, however, I quickly found myself engrossed in the book, reading every word and eagerly turning page after page. This is the story of a German anti-Nazi war resister whose struggle to find meaning led eventually to Nepal where he lived and later visited many times. But intriguingly, it is also the story of Sugata's relationship with Rachel Kellett, a Briton half his age who offered to help him transfer his life onto the written page. The result is an elegantly written book that is somewhere between autobiography (told in Sugata's voice) and biography (Kellett's framing and interpretation of Sugata's experience). The autobiography is interspersed within the story of Sugata's relationship with Kellett, their many meetings and travels together, and most pointedly, their clashes over how to present Sugata's story. This beautifully conceived project offers us a well crafted and moving life story, but also a fascinating account of the struggle between two people—autobiographer and biographer—to resurrect and tell a life.

Karl Heinz Wagner was born in Germany in 1911, the illegitimate son of an unknown father and a Swedish German mother who handed him over to a sister and her husband to be raised. The rise of National Socialism (Nazism) in the 1920s and 30s, combined with Wagner's own

insecurity over being a "bastard" in the home of step parents, made his childhood a time of growing alienation. An outsider, he naturally fraternized with other outsiders in his school, notably Jews whom he saw being increasingly humiliated and finally, brutally abused. A Jewish school friend introduced Wagner to the writings of Gandhi which convinced him to become a pacifist, and sparked a life-long interest in South Asia. While a teenager Wagner came to despise Hitler and Nazism, even while his own step parents became party member, an act that finally drove him from their home at a time when the German economy had collapsed and hundreds of thousands of people were without work. Rather than succumb to the humiliation of endless labor queues, or worse, joining the Nazis for food, Wagner became a *wandervogel*, a wandering bird or, as it is translated by the authors, a "bird of passage." The rest of Wagner's life would be a combination of restless wandering in search of meaning and stability, and a desire to be alone, rooted in a familiar landscape.

Part one begins with an account of Sugata and Kellett's meeting at a Buddhist meditation retreat in Bodhgaya in 1998 when Sugata was already in his late 80s. As the two get to know each other, and as she learns that Sugata has already written a good bit in German about his early life, Kellett (a published writer) suggests a collaboration. Sugata's German notes, written decades before, along with recorded reminiscences, become the material that Kellett translates and beautifully crafts into the English text.

The bulk of part one is a fascinating account of Wagner's attempts to flee from his hated "homeland" while at the same time being inexorably drawn back to it by the forces war and nationalism. After a few happy but poor months wandering aimlessly through Switzerland with friends in the early 1930s, Wagner was arrested for vagrancy, separated from his friends (whom he never saw again), and deported. He next travels to Sweden, his mother's ancestral home, only to again be deported when the Nazis expel foreigners from Germany, and other countries retaliate in kind. In desperation he flees to Turkey, hoping to get a job, but discovers that without training or experience of any kind, employment is impossible. Reluctantly he returns to Berlin where, with the help of an anti-Nazi administrator, he enrolls in school for art and design. Because of his art (and specifically cartography) background, when he was inevitably drafted into the Nazi army, Wagner was able to secure a non-combatant role and when Germany invaded Norway, he was recruited to serve as a translator (having picked up some "Scandinavian" before the war). The

final chapters of part one are an exciting account of Wagner's covert work with the Norwegian resistance, his assistance in passing Nazi war secrets to the British, and his dangerous mid-winter, cross-country escape to Sweden in 1943. In supposedly neutral Sweden Wagner was arrested and spent the rest of the war in prison.

Part two recounts Wagner's post-war life, and his journeys to the East. After the war, in spite of his status as a resister, Wagner had to live with the stigma of being a hated German in Sweden, even while refusing to go back to his "native" Germany. Eventually able to more or less "pass" as a Swede, Wagner worked in graphic design in Stockholm, exhibited paintings, and married a Swede, Ingrid. Because of his deeply ingrained counter-cultural instincts, Wagner soon met Swedish Theosophists and became a life-long vegetarian. Describing himself as "150% Theosophist" (p. 269) Wagner reveled in a philosophy and world view that upheld his strong anti-Christian, anti-Western antipathies. Via Theosophy Wagner soon found the works of Lama Angarika Govinda—a.k.a. Ernst Lothar Hoffman—a German Theosophist who in the 1930s had traveled to Tibet and India where, in Darjeeling, he claims to have been ordained a monk in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition.¹ Inspired by Theosophy and a growing fixation on Buddhism, in 1953 Karl and Ingrid Wagner traveled overland to India, among the first of hundreds of thousands of westerners who in the coming decades would traverse the same route in search of Eastern wisdom.

In India Karl and Ingrid lived in Sarnath, guests of the Theravadan Mahabodhi Society. There Wagner met a young Nepali monk (who was reading a book by Lenin which sparked their initial conversation!) who invited Karl and Ingrid to come to Kathmandu to study under his master, the Newar abbot and pioneering Theravadan, Amritananda. Intrigued by the prospect of traveling to the remote mountain kingdom *and* studying under a renowned teacher, Karl and Ingrid accepted Amritananda's invitation and flew (the road had yet to be opened) into Kathmandu in April 1954. There they lived in Amritananda's Theravadan monastery (Ananda Kutī) on the Swayambhu hill. Fascinated by what he found, Wagner spent most of his time wandering around the Kathmandu valley photographing religious sites, festivals, and events, including Tribhuvan's death rites at Pashupatinath. It was also at Pashupatinath that Wagner met

1 For a discussion of the debate over Lama Govinda's Buddhist credentials, see Donald S. Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-la: Tibetan Buddhism and the West* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 59-62.

the Shivapuri Baba, a Hindu yogi, hermit, and guru, then reputed to be 128 years old. Ironically it was this Hindu guru that Wagner identified as the person for whom "I had been awaiting" (p. 309) and who he visited frequently during his almost three years in Nepal. (The book is dedicated to the Shivapuri Baba.) It was also during this time, from January to March 1955, that Wagner hiked from Kathmandu to Tengboche in Kumbhu (and back) making him again a pioneer in the yet-to-be-named enterprise of "trekking." There are also interesting accounts of Wagner's friendships with Kathmandu Newars including Tirtha Narayan Manandhar and Karkat Man Tuladhar.

In June 1955 Amritananda ordained Ingrid Wagner a Theravada Buddhist nun making her, in fact, the first westerner to be ordained in Nepal. (Shortly thereafter Ingrid, now Amita Nisatta, returned to Stockholm where she amicably divorced Wagner, retained her vows, and spent her life intrepidly teaching and promoting Buddhism until her death in 2001. She deserves her own book.) In November 1955 Karl followed Ingrid's lead, taking ordination from Amritananda and adopting the name Sugata, which he retained for the rest of his life. Sugata remained in Kathmandu studying what he could (often at the Kaisar Library), but because he spoke no South Asian languages (in fact he learned English from Amritananda and fellow monks!), in January 1957 Sugata left Nepal, partly at the suggestion of Amita (Ingrid) who told him that there was a demand for Buddhist teachers back in Europe. Sugata returned to Europe in full monk's habit and began several years working as a lecturer, traveling all over Europe giving illustrated talks (using the thousands of slides he had shot) on India, Nepal, and Buddhism.

Interestingly, in 1960 Sugata again returned to Nepal, but this time at the invitation (and funding) of Shamsheer Man Sherchan. Sherchan was the well-educated and cosmopolitan son of a wealthy Thakali family that had for generations controlled the salt trade through the Kali Gandaki valley. With the salt trade finished (due to the Chinese invasion of Tibet), by the late 1950s Shamsheer Man Sherchan was looking for new ways of attracting business to his home district and his thoughts turned to (what we would now call) cultural tourism. Aware of the fact that Indian dance was being publicized and spread to the west, Sherchan decided to invite Sugata—a photographer who was also a Buddhist monk and a popular public speaker in Europe—to come to Tukucho in order to document and publicize the so-called "Devil Dances" held annually at the Buddhist Kyupar Gompa. Sugata made the trip to Nepal (again overland) and took hundreds of photos of the Sha Na dances. Whether or not Sugata's trip

had any immediate impact on tourism in Nepal is perhaps less important than the fact that it was Sherchan who instigated the whole project. This is one of the clearest and earliest examples I know of a Nepali very consciously promoting tourism. Foreigners typically take the credit for inventing "trekking" in Nepal but this story shows that the origins of "adventure tourism" are not as clear cut as some have imagined. As Kellett says, Sherchan "had seen a potential new imprint on the old salt route: tourism" (p. 353).

The final chapters recount Sugata's life in Europe from the 1960s to 2001. With the spread of television in the 1960s Sugata found his illustrated lectures less and less in demand. By this time he had moved to Norway where he used his artistic skills to create traditional painted wood objects. These both brought in money and allowed him to indulge in an increasingly reclusive Buddhist life style. Sugata bought a small property overlooking a mountain lake in rural Norway where he built a simple cabin, raised vegetables, and lived year round mainly on his own. Although we don't learn much about it, in the late 1960s Sugata entered a "secret marriage" (p. 368) with a local woman, broke his monk's vows, and gave up his yellow robes. Why he left his Theravadan order seems to have been a difficult topic for Sugata to discuss but it was tied both to his desire for companionship (and sexuality) and the exhausting reality of having to endure the stares and questions that his monk's robes invited. Late in the book Kellett explains, "When he discarded his monk's robes, he said that he no longer needed them: he was a Buddhist as he felt, and that was sufficient" (p. 401). There is also an account of a trek to Muktinath that Sugata and Kellett took together in 2001, during which Sugata celebrated his ninetieth birthday, and reflected on his life as a Buddhist.

Those looking for information on Nepali history, society, or culture will not find a lot in this book, though there are a few gems. What we get instead is a fascinating story of a man whose life wove in and out of Nepal for decades. Students of Buddhism will find an account that is refreshingly free of the kind of karma/dharma narratives ("I was destined to become a Buddhist," etc.) that are common in many Buddhist conversion stories. Best of all, this book is about a Buddhist man, not a Buddhist saint. Through Kellett, Sugata emerges as a passionate person driven by ethical ideals, but also a man with plenty of flaws and failures, tossed about by the tides of history and his own very human desires. There is no trace of hagiography. *Bird of Passage* should be read for its insights into the interplay between history and human nature, its account

of what "the East" and Nepal meant to westerners in the early- to mid-twentieth century, and for its fine writing.

Mark Liechty
University of Illinois at Chicago