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Elephant empire: zoos and colonial encounters in Eastern Europe

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ABSTRACT

Whereas zoological gardens and animal collections in North America and Western Europe are well researched from historical, philosophical, and cultural perspectives, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the history and legacy of these modernizing institutions in Eastern Europe. To bridge this gap in scholarship, I investigate the traffic in exotic animals to this region with a focus on a particular species. Historically, elephants have been considered prime symbols of the power and triumph of the colonial empire, and were thus often the jewels of colonial animal collections across Europe. In this article, I explore how the colonial origin of elephants as both big game and charismatic megafauna translates into a geopolitical context without direct overseas colonies, in order to trace the material links between species, race, transnational commodity networks, and structures of identity formation. Based on archival and bibliographic research focused on the Poznań Zoo in years 1871–1945, this article offers a critical analysis of the role of elephant performance in zoos, circuses, and travelling shows in mediating and mobilizing imperial longings. From this vantage point I suggest that studying public zoos in Eastern Europe offers a unique insight into a physical presence of colonial imperialism (via traffic in exotic species) in an area without overseas colonies, through a site where modernist models of citizenship, nationhood, and Europeanness are forged at the interface between science, education, and transnational politics. Given that zoos were crucial for the development of the biological perspective in the West, I posit a reconfiguration of zoos as ‘contact zones’ and primary sites for colonial encounter within the empire from a semi-peripheral perspective.

KEYWORDS Zoos; animals; colonialism; race; Poland; elephants

Introduction

On 19 February 1946, Dr. Wiesław Rakowski, the director of the Zoological Garden in Poznań in Western Poland, sent out a desperate plea to zoos in

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Rotterdam, Amsterdam and London for help in restocking the animal collection. In his letter, he wrote:

The Zoological Gardens in Poznań, the oldest one in Poland, were devastated by the Germans during the occupation and especially when leaving Poznań. Escaping before the assault of the Soviet army, the Germans killed without no reason 66 different very valuable animals. Among them all big beasts of prey, a trained elephant, antelopes and even sheep and small birds. The Polish administration takes care on behalf of bringing the Zoological Gardens to their before-war development. We intend therefore to buy a young Indian elephant, monkeys, lions, tigers, leopards and sea-lions. (Rakowski 1946a)

However, the post-war global trade in exotic animals was stalled and never to recover to its former 'glory'. The superintendent to the Zoological Society of London replied to Rakowski that the London Gardens also suffered from constant bombings during the war and that regretfully, they have no surplus animals: 'We have had no Indian Elephants here in these Gardens since before the war, and we are also looking for them and some tigers and sea-lions ourselves' (Vevers 1946).

After the war, elephants were in high demand as the hallmarks of recuperating animal collections across Europe and a keystone species especially valued by the zoo directors for attracting visitors. Since the fifteenth century, the display of these exotic species, namely the Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*) and the African elephants (*Loxodonta africana* and *L. cyclotis*), mediated multiple meanings and desires connected to their places of origin and prompted imaginations and longings about those distant geographies. Most importantly however, captive elephants in European zoos signalled the power and triumph of colonial empires (Ritvo 1987, O'Harrow 1999, Miller 2013). The correspondence between the Polish and British zoo administrations took place at the outset of post-war decolonization and the Cold War, just when the rules of the animal trade game were about to change and acquiring charismatic megafauna from 'the wild' was becoming more difficult than before. Nonetheless, European publics desired elephant spectacle and rehabilitating zoos wanted to meet this demand, while re-establishing themselves as legitimate scientific and educational institutions.

As exemplified by the attempt to bring elephants back to Poland, this trend included the 'Second World', a newly forming geopolitical entity that is persistently overlooked in postcolonial analyses (Wolff 1994, Nowak 2016, Grzechnik 2019a). Therefore, in this article I trace the traffic in exotic animals to Eastern Europe, a region that, on the one hand, largely 'missed out' on securing its own African or Asian colonies, but one that nevertheless nurtured colonial longings, partially through animal exhibition. On the other hand, the history of zoological collections in Eastern Europe remains under-researched. Through a focus on a particular species, this article explores how the colonial origin of elephants as both big game (being hunted for

ivory, taxidermy and meat) and spectacular mammals on display translates into a geopolitical context without direct overseas colonies, in order to trace the material links between species, race, transnational commodity networks, and structures of identity formation. In other words, I ask, what is the role of elephants as animals with such rich reference to colonial dominance in a region caught between the constructions of 'progressive West' and 'backwards East'? What meanings do animals from the 'Third World' carry in the zoos of the 'Second World'? How were these exotic beasts acclimatized and domesticated within the local narratives about wilderness and nature, but also in what ways have they inspired ideas about sovereignty, belonging, and social order? What kinds of naturalistic utopias and desires could be imagined through looking at elephants, feeding them, riding them, and watching them perform tricks?

My empirical case study is the Zoological Garden in Poznań, which since its formal foundation in 1874 served as a hub for various kinds of elephant spectacle. Started as a small menagerie, the zoo was one of the first collections in what is now Poland (earlier East Prussia)¹ to keep elephants already from the late nineteenth century, through the interwar period, up to the present.² Between 1895 and 1945, Poznań Zoo held and temporarily hosted five elephants in its collection (Śmiełowski 2009, p. 27). Additionally, circus and sideshow elephant acts regularly made their way to Poznań. Throughout these years, the geographical proximity of German zoos and the most prominent animal traders not only facilitated the exchange of specimens, but also modelled exhibition and wildlife management practices, technologies, and scientific standards, which further critically impacted larger body politics (Sowa 2011). Moreover, Polish political ambitions for colonial expansion in the interwar period offer a unique case within the region, allowing to test how elephants have been mobilized in rekindling colonial longings. In what follows, I trace the traffic in elephants to a provincial zoo at the turn of the twentieth century in order to uncover imperial presence in the periphery and map out colonial encounters mediated through nonhuman materiality and spectacle. This is a story of these amusing creatures: their lives, deaths, and afterlives, all entwined with stories of their keepers, trainers, and audiences.

The making of the provincial zoo

The elephant house in what is now called the Old Zoological Garden in Poznań, which along with elephants used to accommodate giraffes, zebras, and antelopes, is currently inhabited by ponies, sheep, and donkeys. The shift from 'exotic' to 'domestic' is also visible in the way its architecture has changed. Until the end of World War II, the two-building structure was adorned with Ottoman-style airy domes topped with gilded crescents. Its contemporary roofs are stripped from any oriental aesthetics. This kind of exotic

zoo architecture, displaying animals in buildings representing human cultures from their places of origin and often taking after temples and other places of worship, was a commonplace practice and even a cliché in Western zoos at the turn of the century (Mullan and Marvin 1999, p. 48). Nigel Rothfels describes in detail the spectacular pachyderm building of the Berlin Zoo opened in 1873, with its ornate interiors and an impressive outside design marking '60-foot towers, topped with shining gold suns and surrounded by four smaller towers of just over 40 feet each' (Rothfels and Blau 2015, p. 8). In contrast to the grandeur of the Berlin Zoo in the imperial capital, the elephant house in Poznań was rather modest. And yet, despite its sparse ornaments, it still managed to refer to a mosque and denote the distant 'native land' of the Asian elephants kept there.

The enclosure dates back to 1888 when it was appropriated from an engine house of the Stargard-Posener railway station, the first train line linking Poznań with Berlin from 1842 (Figure 1). Its half-timbered wall structure (in Polish known as the 'Prussian wall') reflects the mandated form of construction for the area that was part of city fortifications known as 'Festung Posen'. The zoo itself was located outside of the city walls on the terrain of the former railway station. In this sense, the building evinces the complicated history of the zoo, built at the periphery of the German Empire, and invokes multiple 'figurative geographies': from the Oriental references subtly coded in the rooftop design, to the railway connection to the capital of Prussia,

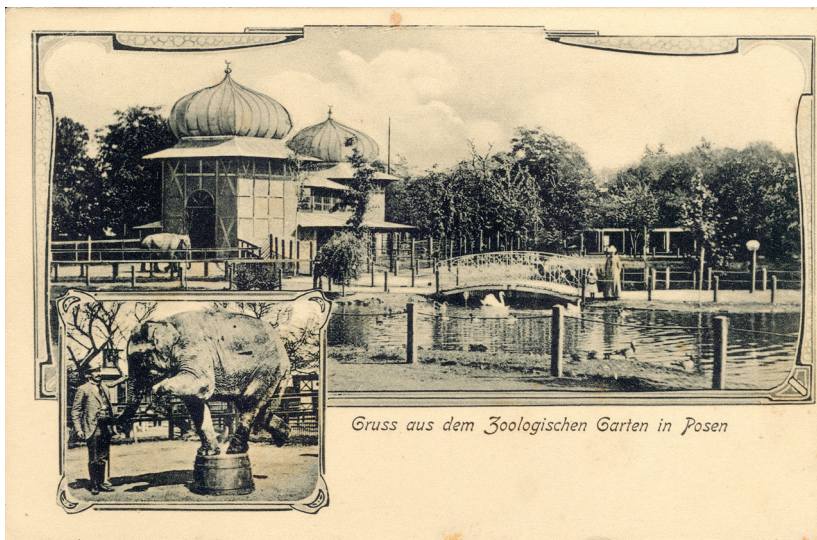


Figure 1. Postcard from the Poznań Zoological Garden featuring an elephant performing a trick, and with the elephant house in the background. Source: Iconographic Collections of the Poznań University Library.

thus, symbolically linking the zoo grounds with the imperial centre. Implied by this itinerary are the colonial and imperial associations layered within the infrastructure of the elephant house, thus, creating an effect of a 'second-hand orientalism', especially when one considers the refurbishing of an already existing building and space to serve a new function.

At the turn of the century, the railway system formed the main infrastructure of mobility, while the train station functioned as an open gate to the modernizing city. The history of public zoological gardens is intimately intertwined with that of modern mobility through such varied phenomena as the emergence of urban crowds seeking recreation, the colonial traffic in exotic species, and travelling circuses occasionally supplying specimens to zoos. This kind of mobility is implied within the infrastructure, location, and transformations of the elephant house in the Poznań Zoo. The foundational story of the zoo, retold in multiple press releases and institutional historiographies, starts in 1871 with a prank. The initial collection of random animals kept in the restaurant garden of the railway station was an eccentric birthday gift to the chairman of the local bowling club. The peculiar bestiary was said to consist of a pig, goat, sheep, cat, rabbit, squirrel, goose, duck, chicken, and peacock all picked up on the streets of the city, along with a trained bear and monkey purchased from travelling Roma. The animals were later handed over to the *Sedanverein*, an association of reservists named after a Prussian victory in France. This rather whimsical origin story of the zoo thus coincides with the foundation of the German Empire.

After the second partition of Poland between Prussia and the Russian Empire in 1793, Poznań belonged to the Kingdom of Prussia. From 1848, the city became the capital of the Provinz Posen often called the Prussian East, but remained the centre for Polish cultural life. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the city experienced a period of infrastructural, industrial, and military developments, a so-called *Gründerzeit*. In 1874, the new urban middle classes looked to transform the menagerie into a public zoo through the formation of a joint-stock company. Public subscription to an institution with scientific and educational aspirations served as a proof of philanthropic deed, and promised elevation in class status. However, the plan failed as the issued 500 shares worth fifteen Marks each did not sell as expected by the initiators (Urbański and Taborski 1975, p. 20). One year later a newly formed Association Zoological Garden (*Verein Zoologischer Garten*) with fifteen board members took over custody of the growing animal collection. The buildings belonging to the railway station, along with its restaurant and adjoining garden, were purchased by the Association in 1886.

The mobilization to establish a zoological garden, distinguished from the earlier private menagerie, was part of larger trends in contemporary urban development and expansion (Wirtz 1997, Kisling 2000). Public zoos helped to assert the prestige of the burgeoning city, because 'an ambitious city

had to have ambitious infrastructure and public amenities' (Rothfels 2009, p. 482). However, a provincial zoo like that in Poznań was to a large extent characterized by its embedded hybridity and imposed limitations: created from an *ad hoc* menagerie, later than similar institutions, and with German, Polish, and Jewish membership not devoid of inherent inequalities. Nevertheless, until 1918, the zoo's communications were bilingual (in German and Polish), as were all of its information plaques. This was on the one hand to ensure higher attendance, but on the other it also contributed to building the fantasy of harmonious co-existence for the divided and highly segregated city. Consider this passage from a report on a visit to the Poznań Zoo in 1888, published in *Der Zoologische Garten* journal that was considered the Central Organ of the Zoological Gardens in Germany:

Thanks to the prudent management of the garden, the demand from the city authorities, especially from Lord Mayor Mueller, who has a receptive ear for all scientific and charitable endeavours in the elegant provincial capital, thanks also to the active participation of the entire population, without distinction of nationality and the faith, the garden has been considerably beautified, enlarged and more purposefully furnished in the last five years. (Friedel 1889, p. 152)³

Seemingly, the zoo grounds offered a politically neutral space where different national groups could meet and unite in entertainment under the universal principle of natural harmony.

However, even from its outset, the zoo was destined for arrested development due to spatial constraints delimited by its location within the city, but also within the empire; it stood in close proximity to larger urban centres with more prominent zoological gardens, e.g. Berlin, Königsberg, or Breslau (Wrocław). Almost every zoo manager throughout its history lamented the scarcity of space available (5.24 ha, from 1886 until present), and many envisioned and planned relocating the zoo outside of the city to ensure its growth. In the words of Arthur Kronthal, a Jewish city counsellor and chronicler who strongly supported the development of the zoo,

the new rise of the Zoological Garden will probably become possible only when it will be relocated outside of the city, and – just as Hagenbeck's Tierpark in Stellingen is for the people of Hamburg – the new Garden will become an excursion destination for the Poznanians. (Kronthal 1911, p. 553)

Although such comparisons to pioneering and prominent zoological institutions in Paris, Vienna, London, Berlin or Stellingen were not uncommon, it is important to critically reflect on the practice of self-defining through lack or inadequacy from the perspective of the edge of the empire. It might be compelling to write the history of a 'provincial' zoo as an imitation of larger, better-stocked, more scientifically-oriented or technologically advanced Western institutions. In her foreword to Ian Miller's book on the Tokyo Imperial Zoo, Harriet Ritvo notes that in imitating another institution, no zoo ends up

with an exact copy, as ‘the design and purpose of zoos inevitably reflect the attitudes and values of the society that produces them, and their history inevitably reflects the larger history of which they are part’ (2013, p. xvii). She later utilizes the variables of parallelism and convergence as conceptual frames and directions for approaching intercultural differences and similarities manifested through zoos. Taking the ‘provinciality’ of Poznań Zoo seriously prompts us to further think through these variables in terms of proximity and distance in order to tease out the coordinates of power relations inevitably embedded in these kinds of exchanges. The term ‘provincial’ connotes lower status within a territorial hierarchy, but also ‘lacking the polish of urban society’, that is to say, being insufficiently metropolitan. To aspire to a metropolitan status, Poznań Zoo needed something big and spectacular in its collection. What it needed was an elephant.

Why does an elephant make zoo?

In Kronthal’s account, by 1895 the Zoological Garden in Poznań was steadily expanding its collection, but ‘what the visitors were especially missing was an elephant’ (1926, p. 72). He claimed that thus far the citizens of Poznań were only able to enjoy a circus show where two artists wearing an elephant costume marched in a parade, imitating the form and movements of the pachyderm. This peculiar performance ended with the dismembering of the papier-mâché beast, as the costume tore apart due to the curious crowds jostling: ‘Thus, the yearnings of the visitors to the garden were focused on getting a real walking and living elephant’ (1926). The Association started collecting donations for the purchase of this most desired and costly specimen. Visitors demanded an exhibition that would fulfil their hopes for a proper zoo.

This fascination with the largest living mammals has to do with a number of ways Europeans have related to elephants throughout history. From antiquity until the early modern period, the use of elephants in combat and warfare, animated through the stories of Hannibal and Alexander the Great, contributed to their portrayal as aggressive, dangerous, and terrifying beasts, yet capable of submission to human masters (O’bryhim 1991). The first elephants brought to European courts as diplomatic gifts for popes and kings served as tokens of power and influence (Bedini 1997, Robbins 2002). These rare and wondrous creatures were among the most treasured. Thus, they were often ascribed moral virtues like sagacity, docility, sensibility and rational thinking, as well as emotions like vindictiveness and the ability to grieve. Modern scientific attention to these spectacular species was poised to debunk some of the myths about elephants, but at the same time, natural history upheld their special status within the hierarchy of living beings. Most famously, Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon in his extremely influential *Histoire naturelle* (1764), wrote that the elephant ‘is the most respectable

animal in the world. In size he surpasses all other terrestrial creatures; and, by his intelligence, he makes as near an approach to man, as matter can approach spirit' (1812, pp. 133–134).

As analysed by Louise Robbins, Buffon's detailed description of elephant behaviour and species characteristics builds the animal's superior status as the 'pinnacle of the animal hierarchy', through highlighting its love of freedom (2002, p. 193). According to Buffon, while it is possible to tame an individual, the elephant's noble character and temperament make it impossible to enslave the species. This is partly evidenced by their refusal to mate in captivity; 'they are not of the number of those born slaves, which we propagate, mutilate, or multiply, purely to answer our own purposes' (Buffon 1812, p. 152). Eighteenth-century knowledge about elephants depicts them as social, intelligent, highly sensible, celibate, obedient, yet proud animals, thus, rendering them close-to-humans and *almost* model citizens.

Apart from historical and scientific accounts, Western hunters also praised elephants as the ultimate game. Theodore Roosevelt wrote, that 'no other animal, not the lion himself, is so constant a theme of talk, and a subject of such unflagging interest round the campfires of African hunters and in the native villages of the African wilderness as the elephant' (Roosevelt 1910, p. 283). The desire to shoot the largest terrestrial mammal was also shared among Polish big game hunters. An aristocrat, Count Józef Mikołaj Potocki, published his memoirs from hunting expeditions to British colonies in India and Ceylon (1894) and Somalia (1895/96), where he marvels over elephant hunting:

A strange feeling overwhelms a hunter unfamiliar with this exceptional game, at a scene of a giant shot down. Happiness and that feeling of immense, perhaps bloodthirsty but genuine, satisfaction, familiar to every hunter seeing his quarry, and *what* a quarry that is! – obscures in my opinion all other considerations, and I don't believe in the sincerity of those descriptions by hunters who when shooting their first elephant dwell on the pointlessness of this sport or the cruelty of killing harmless animals. (Potocki 1896a, p. 95) ⁴

To shoot one's first elephant was a rite of passage for any white hunter, making it into a scene of 'confrontation between white manhood and the noblest beast' (Haraway 1984, p. 45). Fragments of Potocki's elaborately illustrated travelogues were reprinted in hunting journals (*Z literatury łowieckiej* 1898) and popular press (Potocki 1896b, 1896c, 1898), making it a widely accessible source of information about faraway lands and their inhabitants for Polish readers.⁵

For common people a way to encounter exotic wilderness in a more direct sense than through literature was to visit the zoo. The desire to see and even touch a living elephant was partially induced by travel writing such as that by Potocki, where almost every other page mentions this particular animal being

either spotted, tracked, or killed. Overall, the combination of pre-modern beliefs about the exceptionality of these majestic beasts, early modern scientific elevation of the species into a superior noble being among nonhuman animals, and trophy hunting stories presenting elephants as the most sought for game can at least partially explain why elephants became the keystone species for zoological collections across the Western world. To put it simply, the elephant made the zoo. The display of this charismatic animal associated with royal and princely menageries, colonial safaris, and conquest of exotic wilderness would instantly elevate the metropolitan status of the city. In 1894, the Poznań Zoo finally celebrated the arrival of the first elephant to their collection:

After a long time of desire, anxiousness, and hoping,

He finally arrives!

Here in the Zoological Garden

Stands the royal animal

In his whole glory

With his proud implicitness

And in his big house. (Kronthal 1926, p. 72)

This rhymed excerpt comes from another appeal to the public issued by the zoo's editorial committee, asking for more donations. The zoo had to set up an 'elephant fund' to cover the costly living expenses of the long-awaited giant, estimated at more than three thousand Marks yearly, so around ten percent of the total annual budget. But according to commentators, 'this reason alone should make the Poznań Zoo attract visitors' (G. 1901, p. 3), marking the elephant's displayed body as valuable animal capital (Shukin 2009).

From tents to enclosures: zoo-circus relations

This highly anticipated and costly specimen was a female Asian elephant named Nelly, purchased from a German circus.⁶ An article from the journal of the Animal Welfare Association in Poznań recounts that Nelly was born in India and was transported from Calcutta to the South of France in 1888, where she had spent several years on fairgrounds (G. 1901, p. 3). She was a wild-caught elephant, handed over from animal traders to circus promoters until she found her 'home' in the Poznań Zoo. The article reports on her daily diet, as well as typical behaviour: 'On top of her walks, the time between her meals is filled with a measured swaying back and forth, that aims at keeping the gigantic body in movement and aiding digestion' (G. 1901, p. 4) However, from today's perspective, this notorious body rocking

known as 'weaving' was not therapeutic, but rather has been recognized as a stereotypical movement disorder resulting from chaining and social isolation (Kurt *et al.* 2008, p. 340). At the turn of the century, zoos typically kept single specimens, depriving captive elephants of their highly-structured families, thus breaking the strong bonds they create with related animals in their social groups. Additionally, circus training, started from an early age, was aimed at brutally breaking their character to make them suitable for display and performance. Nelly quickly became the hallmark of the collection, and provided the kind of entertainment the visitors craved: on command, she would lie down, kneel, lift her feet, catch small coins with her trunk, and loudly demand snacks from visitors who enjoyed feeding her and caressing her enormous body.

According to historian Daniel E. Bender, for the early U.S. zoo movement an elephant exhibition 'helped the zoo to distinguish itself as a true, scientific zoological garden and not simply a menagerie, a haphazard assortment of animals meant more to amuse than educate' (2016, p. 15). However, he further explains that this was a scenario envisioned by the urban elites, whereas most visitors longed for an elephant spectacle that they were familiar with from travelling circus performances. Circuses also played an important role in supplying young and peripheral zoos with their superfluous elephants. As was the case with Nelly, who stayed in the Poznań Zoo until her death in 1907, elephants were often retired to zoos after their prime performance days were over. In general, the relationship between zoos and circuses was ambiguous. On the one hand, the zoo wanted to distinguish itself from frivolous forms of amusement considered suitable only for the lower classes by building its reputation as an educational and scientific institution.⁷ On the other hand, zoos remained places of popular entertainment. The Poznań Zoo not only frequently hosted symphonic and military concerts, as was reported in the weekly press, but it also directly depended on circuses and travelling shows for many of their exotic specimens. Large circuses that regularly visited Poznań – including the German Krone's Circus and American Ringling Bros. Barnum and Bailey Circus – had at their disposal budgets far exceeding those of the Zoo (Urbański and Taborski 1975, p. 67). But whenever circuses donated animals to the zoo it was not disinterested, and the elephant case exemplifies that most clearly.

'Little Cohn',⁸ a male elephant that entered the Zoo's collection in 1913, was another donation from a circus. In fact, it would be more appropriate to say that the Sarrasani Circus,⁹ visiting Poznań for two weeks in June 1913, rather disposed of a troublesome specimen. The story of how the giant ended up in the zoo is especially exciting and was widely reported in everyday press. The Poznań Zoo's veterinarian, Dr. Józef Starkowski, who attended to performing Circus animals for the time of their residence, recognized that Little Cohn was especially stubborn and vengeful (Starkowski 1924).

In his account, the elephant would not tolerate lashing or other forms of punishment and one evening the animal revolted against his keepers. After this dangerous act of disobedience, Little Cohn was chained and punished by beating with bull hooks – long heavy sticks with steel points on the end. While the last performance was taking place in the circus tent, the bull broke loose and escaped towards the nearby railway station. The circus owner ran after the elephant and shot at it twelve times with a revolver, until the animal finally returned to the stalls. Starkowski witnessed how the wounded elephant was trying to stop the haemorrhage in its left artery:

I was in the circus stalls when all of this happened, and I saw the returning elephant with the trunk folded up to touch the bleeding wound with its finger-like extension. I later saw clearly that the elephant was lowering the trunk to pick up moist soil, which he applied to the wound. (Starkowski 1924, p. 67)

Sarrasani wanted to kill the rouge, but Starkowski offered that the zoological garden takes the elephant in for rehabilitation and safekeeping. Little Cohn was transported to the Zoo under the cover of the night where he joined another Asian elephant named Dora, who arrived in Poznań three years before from the Cologne Zoo. Sarrasani left Little Cohn behind, but he came back after two months to assist in a dental surgery of removing the elephant's injured tusk. He decided to sell the troublesome giant to the zoo for three thousand Marks, again below the market price that the zoo could not otherwise afford. As Rothfels notes,

... debates over animal training and performance are always historical and cultural—what is seen as “natural” or “unnatural” for an animal, what is understood as “cruelty,” what it means when we say that a look or sound of a particular animal is “almost human,” how we understand the significance of the animals around us, are all rooted in the historical and personal contexts of our lives. (2005, p. 172).

The detailed account by Starkowski is at times written in a purely scientific tone, verifying the zoological knowledge on the species, while at other points the description slips into anthropomorphism. The Zoo's veterinarian clearly finds a connection with an animal praised for its intelligence, great memory, and capable of self-help, as he observed with wounded Little Cohn. His narrative, written after the First World War, presents the zoo as a safe haven for a rebellious individual, who refuses the authority of those who enslave him. Following the logic of this representation, the elephant is implicitly symbolizing Poland itself: proudly rebellious, refusing to be broken by German imperialism, but also wounded. In the interwar period until the opening of the Warsaw Zoo in 1928, Poznań Zoo was the only remaining zoological garden in Poland, and was an object of national pride. The process of domesticating elephants became part of nationalizing the zoo.

From elephant victims to semi-colonial trophies

During the First World War, imperial politics played out on the zoo grounds: while information signs in Polish language disappeared, the zoo frequently hosted military concerts and parades deterring Polish visitors. When in June 1919 the Poznań Zoo was taken over by Polish management, the animal collection was seriously depleted, with only 243 specimens of 75 species left (Urbański and Taborski 1975, p. 55). Among them, the two Asian elephants Dora and Little Cohn were the most valuable specimens. In the interwar period, the Poznań Zoo was about to become a truly national institution through distancing itself from German influence,¹⁰ while grappling with post-war financial difficulties. A series of graphics in local and national press promoted the zoo as the 'only Polish zoo', making it a civic duty to support the gardens (Mulczyński 2016). Many citizens donated domestic fauna, but the management needed exotic species to attract more visitors and survive these difficulties. Proximity of German animal traders, the undeniable leaders on the global market, did not easily translate into access to rare animals. Most specimens were still obtained through exchange with other zoos and circuses.

Divergent attitudes towards the most famous animal trading company, Carl Hagenbeck, illustrate how the Polish publics negotiated between colonial longings and national sovereignty. On one hand, the Hamburg-based animal-trading mogul was praised for assembling the largest and most impressive menagerie in the world. His innovative 'barless zoo' set the gold standard for animal captivity (Wszczęświatowa menażerya 1904). On the other hand, his methods of animal training were condemned as cruel and despotic. Consider this passage from a weekly magazine, where Hagenbeck is heavily criticized and presented as a German oppressor:

The role of mass 'assimilator' of animals, the conqueror of their golden freedom, crowding them within the narrow frames of enslaved life, must have appealed to a human of German race with a hostile attitude towards everything that inspires freedom. (...) The leading menageries of Europe are gardens in Hamburg and Berlin. Even on Polish land, zoological gardens exist only where there used to be German rule. This is because this new type of entertainment was especially welcomed by the German audience that takes delight in inflicting agony, limiting freedom, tormenting the weak or helpless. In all of this, we cannot of course forget about the great pedagogical benefits of having a zoological garden in the city. However, when we take a closer look at the 'everyday' life of wild animals in big German travelling circuses we will see *the cruelty against animals even as docile and intelligent as elephants*, we will come to a conviction that sadistic joy of distressing animals plays a small role in this 'friendly' relationship. (Ludzie i bestje 1929, p. 11, emphasis added)

In this account, animal training becomes a powerful metaphor for dependency. The author goes as far as to present zoological gardens in Poland as

a German legacy – clearly pointing towards Poznań and Wrocław – and part of the spectacle of subjugation and tyranny.¹¹

Interestingly, the elephant is singled out here to represent an innocent victim, a ‘noble savage’ enslaved by ruthless colonizers who crave lavish entertainment. In this sense, the animal is supposed to symbolize the Polish nation in its struggle for freedom and independence from the German rule. Clearly, earlier ideas about elephants as freedom-loving gentle giants popularized in late-eighteenth century natural history writings prepared the ground for this symbolic domestication of the elephant within Polish self-victimizing narratives. Whereas Robbins notes that in naturalist writings about animals, ‘debates about colonialism and slavery played out in stories about the subjugation of wild and exotic animals’ (2002, pp. 186–187), imperial relations were also mediated through the use of animals as analogies and allegories in popular writings on zoos and circuses in the periphery of the (former) empire. The two elephants in the Poznań Zoo collection could have been easily bracketed as leftovers from German imperialism. Instead, they were embraced as fellow victims, partaking in the spectacle of suffering. They were also simply too valuable to be turned down as part of the despised German legacy. Elephants were the cornerstones of the collection, maintaining its global character and justifying efforts to maintain the zoo under the harsh conditions of post-war renewal.

At the same time, newly gained national independence fostered new ideas of Polish cosmopolitanism in which the elephant body was deployed in the service of the state: no longer as a fellow survivor of German cruelty, but as a token of possible overseas territorial expansion. Colonial longings were rekindled in interwar Poland. The founding of the Maritime and Colonial League (*Liga Morska i Kolonialna*) in 1930 marked the start of nearly a decade of Polish demands for colonies (Hunczak 1967, Balogun 2018, Grzechnik 2019b). This organization, born out of a movement for popularizing inland and maritime navigation with military aspirations of building a Polish navy, was instrumental in mobilizing colonial sentiments among Poles. Whereas a few decades earlier, the railway system was seen as the means for economic development, in the 1930s the sea was imagined as the main route to securing access to colonial raw materials (J.D. 1935). However, the economic rationale for obtaining overseas colonies was only part of the story, as the need for territorial expansion was largely motivated by Polish nationalism and the pretence of becoming international power, simultaneously feeding anti-Semitic propaganda to resettle Jewish minority to Madagascar. The League made claims over former German colonies in Africa, but had also purchased land in Brazil and ran multiple plantations in Liberia. Meanwhile, at home they organized nationwide campaigns to incite public interest in the colonial question. In 1938, during the ‘Colonial Days’ in Poznań, over 40,000 people marched demanding colonies (Hunczak 1967, p. 654).

Amidst widespread colonial propaganda, the zoo served as a perfect testing ground for future encounters with foreign fauna and peoples. These attitudes were also manifested in the portrayal of the zoo elephants. A short article on the inhabitants of the gardens, featuring a photo of two elephants in the Poznań Zoo, proudly starts with words: 'Looking at the image below one could think that an English colonial soldier is "grooming" the heaviest beasts of burden in service of the royal army' (Lokatorzy poznańskiego Zwierzyńca 1939). The photo shows a uniformed zookeeper tending to Dora and another young elephant. This female Asian elephant named 'Neli' (sometimes 'Nekli') was purchased in 1937 from Hagenbeck's Tierpark in Hamburg (Młody słoń w Zoologu 1937). The humorous shift in tone, communicated through the fanciful image of employing beloved inhabitants of the local zoo for royal, colonial military adventuring, evokes the colonial longings awakened in the Second Polish Republic.¹² Everyday Poles wished to imagine themselves as active agents in colonial endeavours they had otherwise 'missed out' on.

Apart from the usual zoological exhibition, the so-called 'ethnographic shows' or *Völkerschauen* provided another opportunity for such colonial encounters (Thode-Arora 2014). The idea of exhibiting groups of indigenous peoples to European audiences is credited to Hagenbeck, who apart from trading and training exotic animals was also a renowned impresario of 'exotic' peoples (Rothfels 2008, p. 81). Hagenbeck's travelling troupes, typically stationed on the zoo grounds, and set up 'tribal village' where indigenous performers staged everyday activities such as cooking, basket weaving, or wood carving, and entertained visitors with traditional dances or hunting skills shows. Until 1914 seventeen such groups visited Poznań (Karolczak 2000, p. 232).¹³ The presence of human zoos in Eastern Europe allowed local audiences to place themselves within the hierarchy of peoples and construct their own whiteness in relation to racial 'Others'. Curious visitors measured their own levels of civilization against the 'primitives' on display. This process becomes especially evident in Polish press reports from 1901, when two groups were stationed in the Zoo at the same time: the natives from German colony in Togo, and the Sinhalese people from Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka). Black bodies of the Togolese performers are described as ugly, coarse, and clumsy: 'There is a natural stiffness to their movement, unlikely to be a remnant from the German regiment as are those patriotic German songs that the choir of the Togolese-Negro women sings until it hurts your ears' (W ogrodzie zoologicznym 1901, p. 4). In contrast, the Sinhalese are presented as more beautiful and graceful, inscribing this comparison into the Orientalizing fascination with the far East.¹⁴ It is important to note that this careful racial positioning also includes Germans represented as caricatured colonizers. In this context, Polish self-identification requires all three imaginary figures: the black radically Other, the

far-East 'noble savage', and the ridiculed German oppressor. This multi-layered process constitutes what Milica Bakić-Hayden calls *nesting orientalisms*, 'where the designation of "other" has been appropriated and manipulated by those who have themselves been designated as such in orientalist discourse' (Bakić-Hayden 1995, p. 922). Polish project of late colonial expansion proclaimed that due to their own history of subjugation Poles would make more compassionate colonizers; an idea that had poor chances for execution given the prominence of openly racist discourses on non-Europeans perpetuated in the publications of the Maritime and Colonial League (Malicki 2017).

Sinhalese performers returned to Poznań in the summer of 1928 with the 'Ceylonese Village' show, directed by John Hagenbeck, the younger half-brother of the famous German trader, who continued family business after Carl's death. This time, the all-Polish management of the zoo invited the troupe of seventy performers. The show changed its formula to an ethnographic-zoological spectacle, with displays of tribal dances, handicrafts, and tricks performed by enchanters. It included a yogi, presented as a 'medical curiosity', and culminated with a colourful caravan featuring zebus and majestic elephants. The presence of animals was on a one hand motivated by the attempt to reconstruct 'typical' street scenes from distant India and Ceylon, and on the other, it enhanced the exotic and ahistorical character of the show. The translated and reprinted brochure contains a section on the animal world, explaining the special place of elephants in Buddhist societies (Kurth 1928, pp. 11–12). Most of the press releases were based on the promotional materials provided by Hagenbeck, repeating a familiar story of mysterious oriental charm to be experienced in the zoo. Sinhalese performers riding and training elephants in ornamented colourful gear formed a crucial part of this oriental fantasy. Local accounts highlighted that 'enormous elephants can be seen working and performing various tricks' (Wieś Cejlońska 1928). In the zoo archives, I also found photos of the director Kazimierz Szczerkowski and veterinarian Starkowski posing in front of one of the guest elephants and its guide. Even though visitors were familiar with these charismatic animals and had seen them perform tricks before, the setting of an elephant performance along with indigenous people not only provided a direct cultural reference to their natural habitat, but it also further fuelled the exoticizing meanings coded in the zoological enterprise. In this sense, human performers were folded into the animal spectacle that had already been rehearsed in the zoo before, while reinforcing racial hierarchies. In the context of the reawakening of colonial aspirations in Poland, these ethnological-zoological shows enhanced the role of the zoo as a primary site for colonial encounters and re-centred elephants as tokens of power and symbols of conquest.

Conclusions

Neither Dora nor Nelly survived until the end of the Second World War. When Rakowski took the position of the zoo director in 1945, he started to actively campaign with municipal authorities to purchase an elephant because, as he noted, 'the lack of an elephant is more acute' than that of any other animal in the collection (Rakowski 1946b). Despite his tireless efforts, the Poznań Zoo had to wait ten years for another elephant. In September 1955 a female calf was shipped from the Netherlands by sea and arrived to Poznań on a cargo train. The name 'Kinga' was chosen for this long-awaited star attraction through a contest in a local newspaper. She quickly became the visitors' favourite. Kinga spent all her life in the same small enclosure as her predecessors. She was not moved to the spacious New Zoo that opened its gates in 1974 because the elephant pavilion there was launched only in 2008, five years after her death. Nevertheless, most employees of the Old Zoo and inhabitants of Poznań still recall the presence of an enormous elephant in the heart of the city.

In my analysis, the zoo became a primary site for colonial encounters, sustaining the 'duress' of the empire at the very peripheries of its shifting borders and along varying 'temporal, spatial, and affective coordinates' (Stoler 2016, p. 6). Given this imperial legacy, recorded outside of official colonial archives, I argue that captive and travelling elephant bodies served as a material link between the mystical Orient and the colonial Empire, helping to measure the differences of savagery and civilization. For example, the senseless killing of captive animals in the Poznań Zoo by the retreating German soldiers mentioned by Rakowski in his letter served as evidence of the savagery and cruelty of the occupiers. The terrible fate of zoo animals, represented as innocent victims of the Nazi regime, not only alludes to human suffering (*cf.*, Kinder 2013, Salih 2014, Wöbse and Roscher 2019), but also provides a basis for a request for compassionate donation of new zoo specimens that would be employed in restoring social order in post-war Poland. The special role that an elephant plays in this process of coming back to 'normality' is largely predetermined by the history of keeping pachyderms in the Poznań Zoo. This animal history uncovers a specific relation to colonialism from an Eastern European perspective: on the one hand, it shows the dependence on the colonial extraction of exotic wildlife that ensured the circulation of valuable specimens beyond the colony-empire circuit, while on the other, the mastery over 'the noblest beast' stabilized the empire as a model for modern sovereignty. Hence, the elephant serves as a strategic symbol for the peripheral staging of the imperial mode of power. A staging that is not to be understood as simple mimicry, but rather as a result of intricate web of dependencies, entwining human and nonhuman lives and masking the beastly side of sovereignty.

By tracing the shifting itineraries of traffic in elephants from the imperial centre to its periphery, this article sketches a partial history of a provincial zoo. In postcolonial critique, ‘provincializing’ means decentring the hegemony of European thought, or ‘to write into the history of modernity the ambivalences, contradictions, and use of force, and the tragedies and the ironies that attend it’ (Chakrabarty 1992, p. 352). In this sense, the records of ‘delayed’ Eastern European modernity (Sosnowska 2004) constitute such ambivalences and contradictions, breaking with the binary epistemological framework of ‘East’ versus ‘West’. Through the site of the zoo as part of the transnational institutional network, my research is informed by broader exchanges between those symbolic geographies, while avoiding falling into the narratives of national exceptionalism. The uses of postcolonial theory in scholarship on Polish history tend to focus on the ambivalence and in-betweenness of being colonized and colonizing eastern neighbours (Janion 2006, Kania 2009, Leder 2014, Mayblin *et al.* 2014, Mick 2014). Meanwhile, my analysis of the role of elephant performance in zoos, circuses, and travelling shows in mediating and mobilizing imperial longings offers a unique insight into a physical presence of colonial imperialism (via traffic in exotic species) in an area without overseas colonies. In this sense, what Gayatri Spivak calls the ‘worlding of the world on unscripted earth’ extends even outside of the direct colonial contact, as it continues to overwrite imperialism at the semi-periphery (Spivak 1985, p. 253). This process happens through a site where modernist models of citizenship, nationhood, and Europeanness are forged at the interface between science, education, and transnational politics.

Notes

1. East Prussia was a province of the Kingdom of Prussia that was part of the German Empire from 1871 until the reconstitution of the Second Polish Republic in 1918. In 1815 the city of Poznań became the capital of the Grand Duchy of Posen that from 1848 transformed into the Province of Posen.
2. This is considering that the Breslau Zoological Garden (now Wrocław) founded in 1865 while the city was part of Prussia remained a German institution until 1948 (Solski and Stehlow 2015).
3. All longer translations from German are made by Gina Grzimek.
4. All translations from Polish are made by the author.
5. Potocki’s accounts always included descriptions of human “types” from the places he visited, placing the indigenous populations alongside natural wonders to be observed and recorded by the white European traveller. Of course, the hunters were also accompanied by a number of native “helpers” and trackers, often described as “simple, but sincere,” whose labour and knowledge were indispensable to white hunters.
6. Nelly was the second captive elephant in Poland after a female Asian elephant named Kaśka that between 1884 and 1891 resided in a short-lived menagerie in Bagatela in Warsaw (W. 1884). Again, this is excluding the Breslau Zoological

Garden whose first elephant named "Theodor" arrived already in 1873 from the London Zoo.

7. Until 1907, the Poznań Zoo was managed by officials without specialized education, who attempted to strike a balance between the scientific-educational and entertainment roles of the institution. The first managers frequently consulted Dr. Heinrich Bodinus, the director of the Berlin Zoo between 1869 and 1884, on matters concerning animal husbandry. Robert Jeackel, who served as the Poznań Zoo director between 1881 and 1907, received most of his knowledge from the ten-volume popular zoological encyclopedia *Brehm's Tierleben* (1863–1869) (Urbański and Taborski 1975, p. 37). The oldest remaining list of animals in the Poznań Zoo I found in the institutional archives is organized according to the classification system used in this publication. In other words, this suggests that specialists in Berlin and Germany had the know-how and expertise, which the provincial zoo lacked. This is also an important aspect of the power relations imbedded in the geopolitical setting of my case study.
8. It is important to note that the name 'Little Cohn,' that was most probably given to the elephant in the circus, derives from an anti-Semitic joke popular in the early twentieth century in the German Empire. The figure of *der kleine Cohn*, a man so small that his own wife lost him in the crowd, was popularized by a song written around the 1900s and followed by a series of anti-Semitic postcards and caricatures (Backhaus 1999, Schäfer 2005, pp. 82–85). Polish sources only recount that the name was a humorous take on the distinctly large size of the specimen, but the widespread anti-Semitic sentiments at the turn of the century lead to suppose that this performative act of naming the elephant after a racist trope was well understood by Poles.
9. The circus was founded by Poznań-born Hans Stosch, a clown who took on the stage name of Giovanni Sarrasani.
10. This distancing had an ideological underpinning and was mostly visible in public communication, however, it did not affect intellectual exchange between zoos of the Reich and the Polish Republic.
11. These kinds of negative sentiments were already present during World War I, as evidenced by a call for boycotting Hagenbeck's Circus that was hosted in Warsaw in 1917. Authors of a pamphlet distributed in the city claim that "(e)very honest Pole should boycott Hagenbeck's circus as one of many German events aimed at our annihilation" (O cyrku Hagenbecka 1917).
12. Even though both elephants were purchased from German zoos, in this speculation they were rather imagined as part of the British colonial empire, demonstrating how Poles aligned themselves politically in relation to different colonial actors. Most of Polish aristocracy travelling overseas, including Potocki mentioned earlier, would visit British colonies and protectorates.
13. Between 1870 and 1914 the following shows visited Poznań: Nubians (1879), Papuans (1882), Samoyedic peoples (1883), Sioux (1884), Kalmyks (1884), Zulu (1885), Dahomey Amazons (1892), "Swahili" (1893), Laplanders (1897), Kyrgyz people and Tatars (1898), Mahdi's Warriors from Sudan (1899), Samoans (1901), "Negroes from Togo" and "Sinhalese from Ceylon" (1901), Dervish (1902), tribes of Northern Africa: Bedouins, Berbers and Moors (1904), tribes from the Nile Valley (1914).
14. What might have made the Sinhalese more sympathetic in the eyes of Poles is that they belong to Indo-Aryan language group.

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