

# Following in the Footsteps of Isabella Bird? Alma Karlin and Her Representations of Japan

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*Real learning always entails a struggle to understand the unknown.*

David Harvey

## Abstract

Alma Karlin (1889–1950), a round-the-world traveller, intellectual, and writer from Celje, Slovenia, arrived in Japan and lived in Tokyo in the early 1920s, an era which historians consider to be an interim period between the initial expansion of the Japanese Empire to mainland Asia and its end in 1945. The writer's fascination with the land can be inferred, among other things, from a 35-page description of Japan and the Japanese in her most famous book, *Einsame Weltreise. Die Tragödie einer Frau (The Odyssey of a Lonely Woman)*, and passages in *Reiseskizzen (Travel Sketches)*, an earlier work. The article aims to place these travel accounts in the historical and ideological contexts of their time while highlighting some similarities and differences between the representations of the land and its people by Karlin and those by Isabella Bird (1831–1904). Although Karlin makes no explicit reference to the famous British traveller in her writing on Japan, the article demonstrates that she must have known about Bird's book *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan*. It is, above all, her decision to introduce her (German) readers to topoi that were typical of Victorian women's travel writing which suggests that Karlin partly based her image of Japan, if not even the itinerary of her journey there, on Bird's bestselling work. Nevertheless, Karlin does not seem to have conformed to the then dominant orientalist discourses on Japan, her representations generally showing none of the Western arrogance that was so typical of her fellow travellers of both sexes.

**Keywords:** Alma Karlin, Japan, travel writing, Isabella Bird, representations, Orientalism

## Po stopinjah Isabelle Bird? Alma Karlin in njene podobe Japonske

### Izvleček

Celjska svetovna popotnica, intelektualka in pisateljica Alma Karlin (1889–1950) je japonsko otočje obiskala in v Tokiu prebivala v zgodnjih dvajsetih letih 20. stoletja, ki v zgodovino pisju veljajo za vmesno obdobje med začetkom širjenja japonskega imperija

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na azijsko celino in njegovim neslavnim koncem leta 1945. Pisateljčino fascinacijo nad deželo je mogoče razbrati tudi iz približno 35 strani dolgega opisa Japonske in Japoncev v njenem najbolj znanem delu *Einsame Weltreise. Die Tragödie einer Frau (Samotno potovanje v daljne dežele: tragedija ženske)* ter iz odlomkov iz predhodno objavljenih podlistkov z naslovom *Reiseskizzen (Popotne skice)*. Avtor te opise postavi v zgodovinski in ideološki kontekst časa njihovega nastanka, hkrati pa opozori na nekaj vzporednic in nasprotij med reprezentacijami dežele ter njenih prebivalcev izpod peresa Alme Karlin in tistimi slovite britanske popotnice Isabelle Bird (1831–1904). Čeprav v japonskem delu svojega potopisa tega eksplicitno ne omenja, prispevek dokazuje, da je Alma Karlin nedvomno poznala knjižno uspešnico Isabelle Bird *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan*. Posledično lahko upravičeno sklepamo, da si je svoje podobe Japonske, mogoče celo itinerarij, ustvarila tudi na podlagi tega dela, kar je po avtorjevem mnenju najbolj razvidno iz izbire (klasičnih) tem ženskih potopisov iz viktorijanskega obdobja, ki jih je želela približati svojemu (nemškemu) bralstvu. Kljub temu se zdi, da se Alma Karlin ni podredila tedanjim orientalističnim diskurzom o Japonski, saj v njenih reprezentacijah praviloma ni mogoče zaznati tipične zahodnjaške oholosti, tako značilne za njene popotniške pendante obeh spolov.

**Ključne besede:** Alma Karlin, Japonska, potopisi, Isabella Bird, reprezentacije, orientalizem

Since the last decade of the 20th century, Alma Karlin (1889–1950) has been one of the most widely discussed natives of Celje, a city in central Slovenia. For decades she was relegated to the margins of the history of the place where she had been born and spent most of her life—it was not until 1989 that a commemorative plaque was placed on the site of the house she had been born in.<sup>1</sup> However, after Slovenia's independence, Karlin became the subject of numerous academic studies and popular articles, not only focusing on her non-conformist personal credo but also her substantial, stylistically diverse literary legacy, including the travel diaries based on her eight-year journey around the globe. Pušavec (2009, 128) highlights the 1990s as a milestone in the studies on Karlin: in 1992, Marko Radmilovič made a documentary entitled *Celjanka med ljudožerci* ("A Woman from Celje among Cannibals"), followed by *Alma* in 1995, a monodrama written by Uršula Cetinski and starring Polona Vetric in both the Slovenian and English versions. The question is: why did this revival of interest come then? It is worth noting that the (academic) discovery and recognition of the life and work of Alma Karlin in the mid-1990s should be understood in the light of the atmosphere in Slovenian society in the late 1980s and early 1990s at large, which sought to associate the country with the Central European cultural and historical identity (see Vidmar-Horvat and Delanty 2008, 209–12). With her presumed cosmopolitanism and resistance to dominant societal

1 A detailed account of the local community's treatment of Alma Karlin's legacy can be found in Plevnik 2018.

norms, Karlin was a welcome deviation from the supposed Balkan narrow-mindedness and chauvinism.<sup>2</sup> Adding this to the fact that the same period saw mass publication and exploration of women’s travelogues worldwide—a phenomenon initiated in the 1970s as part of the feminist movement’s agenda to acknowledge women’s contribution to the intellectual history of humankind (Bassnett 2002, 226), and amplified by the publishing industry’s efforts to find new market niches (Weber 2003, 27)—the sudden fascination for Alma Karlin no longer seems so surprising (cf. Perenič 2018, 55).

### Karlin’s Travel Accounts from a Socio-Anthropological Perspective

According to Baskar (2015, 60), “any socio-anthropological analysis of travel practices necessitates contextualizing the traveller not only culturally, but also sociologically”, meaning that they should be “considered also from the point of view of their social class” and “the regional division of labour they were subject to”. Although some scholars suggest she failed to earn a high school diploma,<sup>3</sup> Karlin did not come from an underprivileged background. On the contrary, she was born into a respectable bourgeois family whose intellectual openness could be seen to go beyond her mother’s profession as a teacher.<sup>4</sup> The evidence of this includes the language tests at the Royal Society of Arts, London, which Karlin passed with distinction, and the odd language teaching job, which helped her pay for her round-the-world journey. Still, in terms of her professional life, Karlin would nowadays be considered a freelancer. Throughout her journey, she had an irregular, modest, even inadequate income, often living close to the minimum subsistence level and suffering from material deprivation.<sup>5</sup>

2 The goal seems not to have been achieved yet in full. In his introduction, Marijan Pušavec (2018, 4), a renowned Slovenian researcher of Karlin’s literary legacy, notes: “By issuing a special edition of *Dialogi* dedicated to Alma M. Karlin, the editorial board aimed at putting forth her persona not as another lesson of history, but as an example of someone who may herald a more *globalised role of the provincial town and community in a broader transnational framework* [my italics]. With her life, Alma M. Karlin demonstrated that this was not impossible.”

3 Citing Pušavec, Perenič (2018, 50, n. 9) writes that Karlin formally completed only seven years of primary schooling.

4 Amalija Maček (2018, 13) notes that in German the social class Karlin was a member of would be referred to as *Bildungsbürgertum*, an educated class of the bourgeoisie that was immensely proud of its cultural capital.

5 Like many of her predecessors of both sexes, she risked everything to achieve her goal, including her own life: “To be part of a ‘historic’ moment meant taking risks: staking all one’s physical and intellectual abilities, for there was a huge prize to be had, or a devastating loss” (Šmitek 1995, 8–9).

As Karlin spent her formative years in a time and place where one's national identity was a highly significant issue while experiencing the collapse of both Austria-Hungary in the aftermath of World War I and then that of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1941, it is hardly surprising that her national identity was a fluid, elusive one, not unlike those of many of the colonized peoples she visited on her travels. Another aspect which no socio-anthropological analysis of her imaginings of the places she visited in general, or Japan and the Japanese in particular, should neglect is that she grew up in the Dual Monarchy. This political entity was a contiguous empire rather than a monoethnic state, hence her German orientalist *Kulturbrille*, as will be discussed below.

Although the political map of Europe was considerably rearranged after the Great War, the global geopolitical landscape was still profoundly shaped by colonial empires when Alma Karlin travelled the world in the 1920s. One of the imperial powers Karlin visited on her journey was the Great Japanese Empire (*Dai-Nippon Teikoku*),<sup>6</sup> where she stayed for approximately 15 months in total. By the time of her visit, the Japanese archipelago had already become a well-known territory across Europe, including in the region of today's Slovenia, or in Karlin's own words, "every child in Europe babbles about geishas, kimonos, Japanese lanterns, wind chimes" (Karlin 1997, 103).<sup>7</sup> This was a result of *Japonisme*, the aesthetic cult of Japan in Europe and the US that peaked in the second half of the 19th century and was strongly reflected in art, especially painting, influencing some of the greatest masters of the time, such as Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890), Gustav Klimt (1862–1918), and Edgar Degas (1834–1917).

This Japanophilia was also reflected in the fast-growing body of travel literature about the country. One of the most famous travel writers was Isabella Bird (1831–1904), a Victorian traveller who went on to become the first woman to be elected Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society in 1897. It is no overstatement to say that the position made her an icon and role model for many women travel writers who came after her. Since Bird's travelogues, especially *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan*, first published in 1880, were instant bestsellers and saw several reprints in her lifetime (see Elliott 2008, 1–2), as was the case with Karlin's several decades later, it is beyond doubt that Karlin knew about them even if she never explicitly said as much. This is all the more likely given that Karlin spent several years in London before World War I. Adding this on top of the

6 In the early 1920s, the Japanese colonial empire ruled over Taiwan, the Korean peninsula, Micronesia, and South Sakhalin.

7 In Slovenian newspapers, the first longer pieces of writing on Japan date back to the year of Karlin's birth, claims Gabrič (2018, 155).

fact that she mostly relied on trustworthy sources such as encyclopaedias, classic literature, and dictionaries when studying faraway lands and learning new languages (Maček 2018, 9–10), it is safe to assume that she read Bird's travel diary about her experiences in Japan when planning her own trip to East Asia.<sup>8</sup>

In her travelogues, Karlin often mentions how meticulously she studied the places and people she intended to visit on her journey, adding that “there is value to stopping in a country only when you have prepared for the stop, or else your perception is superficial and unrealistic” (2006, 201).<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, when describing a visit to Tokyo's red-light district of Yoshiwara, she writes (Karlin 1997, 84): “I knew where I was, for I went there intentionally and had read about it extensively.” This was not unique to Karlin. As many scholars today observe, travellers purposely adopt their predecessors' travel practices, seeking affirmation for what they have read and real-life images of what they have imagined beforehand. Sara Mills underlines that

most writers portray members of the other nation through a conceptual and textual grid constituted by travel books. This close intertextual relation with other travel accounts can be seen in the fact that travel writing has always appropriated other writing, sometimes explicitly but often by plagiarising. (Mills 2001, 73)

It should be added that such plagiarism is not necessarily intentional, but rather spontaneous, unwitting, as can be seen from Karlin's ethnographic accounts of the places she visited, where “the external information has been absorbed into the text and submitted to the authorial voice” (Šlibar 1998, 123–24). At any rate, both lead to much the same result, with writers recreating the impressions and records of those who came before.

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8 Trnovec (2020, 104) is explicit about Karlin preparing for her travels by reading travel diaries, among other things, but does not cite any specific authors or titles. As early as 1882, William Henry Davenport Adams published *Celebrated Women Travelers of the Nineteenth Century*, a book that saw more than nine reprints by 1906. As eager to learn as she was, Karlin may have even been aware of the photographs made by the Austrian photographers Wilhelm Burger (1844–1920) and Michael Moser (1853–1912), who arrived in Japan as part of an Austrian-Hungarian delegation back in 1869 (Tōkyō daigaku 2018).

9 According to Vladimir Šlibar (2009, 135), in her immense desire for knowledge, Karlin prepared painstakingly for her journey, “studying history, geography, and natural science, working to hone her painting skills, and compiling a dictionary of ten languages” before leaving Celje in the autumn of 1919.



Figure 1. Alma Karlin with her “Erika” typewriter. Unknown author. (Source: National and University Library of Slovenia, Ljubljana)

That said, Karlin’s *Einsame Weltreise. Die Tragödie einer Frau* (1929) and *Im Banne der Südsee. Die Tragödie einer Frau* (1930),<sup>10</sup> the travel texts published soon after she returned from her eight-year globetrotting experience, can serve as a Central European woman’s insightful ethnographical account of geographically and culturally distant societies and peoples in the 1920s, despite her probably being unfamiliar with the anthropological theories of the time (Šlibar 1998, 124). However, to fully understand her scholarly and publicly acclaimed travelogues, it is necessary to compare them with those of her—predominantly Anglo-American—female predecessors and contemporaries.<sup>11</sup> To this end, the ar-

10 In the manner of many Victorian female travel diaries—for example, Isabella Bird’s travel experience from the US titled *A Lady’s Life in the Rocky Mountains* (1879) and Gertrude Adams Fisher’s *A Woman Alone in the Heart of Japan* (1906) (see Williams 2017, 18; cf. Elliott 2008, 2)—Karlin made explicit references in her book titles to the fact that they were written by a woman.

11 There had been non-British women travellers who embarked on solo round-the-world journeys as early as the 19th century. This includes Lina Bögli (1858–1941), who paid for her 10-year trip with the money she earned herself, much as Karlin did. Bögli wrote about her adventure in *Forward: Letters Written on a Trip around the World*, a book published in 1904. I owe this piece of information to Jerneja Jezernik.



ticle intends to highlight some parallels and distinctions between Karlin's representations of the Japanese archipelago and its inhabitants and those of Isabella Bird. Moreover, what undoubtedly was a remarkable journey should necessarily be considered in the light of the historical and ideological milieu in which Karlin lived and travelled. From such a broad perspective, new aspects of the places visited and their inhabitants, as represented by a woman traveller, can be explored.

The primary focus of this analysis of Alma Karlin's relationship to her *locus amoenus* is on the parts of Slovenian translations of *Reiseskizzen* (*Travel Sketches*) and one of the travelogues mentioned above, *Einsame Weltreise* (*The Odyssey of a Lonely Woman*), which refer to Japan as we know it today, a country made up of four main islands, Hokkaidō, Honshū, Kyūshū, Shikoku, and the archipelago of Okinawa.

### “A Woman Travelling Alone” in a Rapidly Changing Country

Similar to Bird, Karlin got her first impression of Japan in Yokohama, the then leading Japanese port. Between June 1922 and July 1923, she stayed in Tokyo, which was, as it is today, the political, intellectual, and economic centre of the country. With a population of some two million, Tokyo was, at the time, smaller than London, where Karlin used to live before World War I. At first, she stayed near the Imperial Palace, in the Yūrakuchō district, before moving to her student's home in Hongō, where she remained for the rest of her stay in the capital (Jezernik 2006, 81).<sup>12</sup>

Needless to say, neither Bird nor Karlin was the first European woman to visit Japan after the American “Black Ships” (*kurofune*) arrived in 1853,<sup>13</sup> forcing the Tokugawa shogunate (1603–1867) to re-establish diversified international political and economic relations with all major Western superpowers. Soon thereafter, the country was flooded with European and North American advisers (*oyatoi gaikokujin*) hired by the Meiji government to assist in reforming the education system, military, law, administration, economy, etc. Their main task was to

12 Like in many other places on her globetrotting journey, Karlin worked as a language tutor while in Japan.

13 There were many forerunners of Bird (see Klein 2011), although she refrained from mentioning this in her travelogue. Japan had piqued Europe's interest ever since the Middle Ages, and it was perhaps Marco Polo (1254–1324) who first passed the word about this land to Europe. He most likely heard about Japan when traveling to South China, rather than going there himself, notes Takeuchi (1998, 86).

accelerate the modernization of Japan along the lines of the Western empires to avoid being colonized and meeting the same fate as neighbouring China had a few decades earlier. Meanwhile, refusing to merely sit and wait for the Western experts to arrive, the Japanese political and intellectual elite-to-be headed West to acquire knowledge themselves. One such prominent example was the Iwakura mission (*Iwakura shisetsudan*). Consisting of members of the then established and up-and-coming intellectual and political elite—including Itō Hirobumi (1841–1909), who emerged as the most influential Japanese politician of the group—this diplomatic mission visited all the superpowers of the time, including Austria-Hungary, on its journey between 1871 and 1873.<sup>14</sup>

It was only ten years after the Meiji Revolution that professed to be restoring the Emperor's political authority, a time of the last acts of rebellion against the new system when Isabella Bird arrived in Japan. As a subject of the mighty British Empire, this Victorian traveller enjoyed a higher social status than Karlin, but a few parallels could nevertheless be drawn between them. As women, they were bound to have different experiences than their male colleagues, their choices of routes necessarily informed by the fear of being raped (Weber 2003, 45). Karlin's horrific experience of narrowly escaping rape in Peru inspired her lifelong "fear of the male human animal" (2006, 87).<sup>15</sup>

In her own words, Karlin was a traveller who travelled alone and, in some instances, set foot where no white person had trodden before. However, as will be discussed below, this was not the case in Japan. In her Japan diaries (1881, vol. 1, vii), Bird made similar assertions of travelling alone, but when travelling to Hokkaidō, she was accompanied by a young Japanese translator named Ito. This was a reasonable decision since, like Karlin, Bird could not speak the local language. Therefore, both travellers were compelled to acquire information through intermediaries, either Japanese or foreigners who could speak Japanese. Another common trait is that both Karlin (see Mihurko Poniž 2018, 67–68) and Bird (Bassnett 2002, 232; Elliott 2008, 2), like many other travel writers, kept their audience in mind while writing about Japan. As Orožen (1990, 159) highlights, Karlin thought the purpose of what was in

14 After returning, Kume Kunitake (1839–1931), a private secretary to the head of the mission, Prince Iwakura Tomomi (1825–1883), and subsequently a professor of History at Tokyo Imperial University, published an in-depth account of the journey, whose complete English translation is more than 2,000 pages long. Travelling by train from Rome to Vienna, the mission crossed the Slovenian ethnic territory. Kume was particularly impressed by Austria and Vienna, saying the city was second only to Paris in terms of beauty (Kume 2009, 415–25).

15 For various reasons, Karlin (2006, 10–11) could not travel to Japan directly from Italy, so she decided to go to South America first.



every respect a tiring journey “was not only to discover new things but also to communicate them”.<sup>16</sup>

There were also many differences between the two women, the most obvious being the primary reasons for their visits. Karlin first became fascinated by Japan during her stay in London, when her chance meeting with a Japanese native called Nobuji G. piqued her interest in Asia at large (Karlin 2010, 151).<sup>17</sup> From this student, Karlin learned a great deal about his country, and once in Japan she was fascinated by its people, saying that “no other people can compare with the Japanese” (Karlin 1997, 112).<sup>18</sup> With Bird, some scholars argue that one of the main reasons for her visit to Japan was to explore the possibilities of spreading the Christian faith, in her case Protestantism, in the Japanese archipelago (Kanasaka 2017, 106). However, once in Japan her attitude towards missionary schools was ambivalent. Bird (1881, vol. 2, 224–26) feared that girls’ education was unduly focused on learning Western (table) manners at the expense of Japanese female etiquette, which in her traditionalistic eyes could lead to their social uprooting from the local community.<sup>19</sup>

The facts set out above already point to another difference between the authors. While Karlin occasionally doubted herself and her understanding of Japan, and openly regretted her inability to speak Japanese, Bird, on the other hand, was a more confident traveller, an omniscient narrator who, save for the introduction to her travelogues, never voiced doubts about her biased representation of Japan and its inhabitants, especially the native Ainu people (see also Bach 1995, 593). Her social capital was far greater than that of Alma Karlin: while in Japan, Bird moved in an intellectual milieu that was beyond reach for the traveller from Celje, its unreachability stemming not only from the fact that most of the figures the British woman met decades before had by then passed away. Among others, Bird (1881, vol. 1, 46, ix) was introduced to, or even socialized extensively with, James Curtis Hepburn (1815–1911), the author of what is still the most widely used system for transliteration of the Japanese language into the Latin alphabet; Heinrich

16 Karlin addressed the reader already in the notes made in the travel diary she kept during her journey. This leads Maček (2018, 15) to believe that the notes were made with the intention of being published. The dynamic between Karin’s self-identity as an explorer and that as a writer is further discussed in Veselič (forthcoming).

17 Before her first meeting with Nobuji G., Karlin thought she should do her homework and research the customs and traditions of his native land (2010, 151).

18 Karlin’s affection for the Japanese could be matched only by her affection for the British (see Orožen 1990, 157).

19 Yet, as Ozawa (2008, 95–97) points out, her comments and descriptions of missionary work are almost entirely omitted in the popular editions of her *Unbeaten Tracks*.

von Siebold (1852–1908), a translator and diplomat of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, who shared his father's passion for Japan; and Basil Hall Chamberlain (1850–1935), an erudite professor at Tokyo Imperial University. Needless to say, Bird's circle of acquaintances and friends during her stay in Japan also included Sir Harry S. Parkes (1828–1885) and his wife Fanny, the first non-Japanese woman to ascend Mount Fuji. Bird (1881, vol. 1, 245, n. 1) frequently refers to her distinguished friends who supposedly helped her understand Japanese culture in detail. Meanwhile, Karlin mentions her meetings with Okada Tadaichi, where she was introduced to many dignitaries and artists, and recounts the few days she spent in Nikkō in the company of the poet and university professor of English, Ernest Edwin Speight (1871–1949), as noted by Hrvatin (2019, 112).

Finally, the writers' travel accounts differ both in form and length. Bird's (1881, vol. 1, vii) "narrative of travels in Japan" has an epistolary structure, while Karlin based her writing on *Reiseskizzen*, a text she had written during her travels in instalments for the Celje-based German paper *Cillier Zeitung*. When released as a book, the experiences from Japan were given merely 35 pages, with some sections repeated from the newspaper editions, whereas Bird's account is more than 800 pages long. Unlike *Unbeaten Tracks*, Karlin's travel writing on Japan leaves the reader with the impression of having been given a medley of events and people that the writer was (un)impressed by during her visit to the country, rather than a coherent travelogue.

## Walking the Beaten Track

As mentioned earlier, Karlin walked the beaten track when in Japan, visiting, or claiming to visit, only popular tourist destinations such as Kamakura, Nikkō, Kyoto, Mount Fuji, and so on.<sup>20</sup> Unlike Bird, who never lived in Japan, always staying on the move, Karlin resided and worked in Tokyo, making occasional

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20 Shigemori Bučar (2019, 45) reconstructs Karlin's Japan itinerary from her collection of postcards of Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines, claiming that she probably travelled the country's western part between 1 and 10 July, for Karlin sent her first postcard from Korea to Celje on 11 July. Her passion for collecting not only postcards, but also other items on her round-the-world trip, should be understood as her desire to produce hard evidence that she had truly been to the places she wrote about. According to Mills (2001, 112), "[t]ravel writers, especially after the eighteenth century, write very much within an atmosphere of an assumption of exaggeration and possibly falsification; they thus have to adopt strategies to counter this, such as including maps, photographs and even testimonials /.../ by adopting a documentary, objective style and including certain types of information." Her strong desire for her travel writing to be considered credible is further proven by her assertions of the truthfulness of her writing that can be found in the autobiography she wrote after her return (Karlin 2010, 298).

trips to places near and further away from the city to break her daily routine. The only exception seems to be her trip to Kansai and Kyūshū, from where she continued her journey to the Korean Peninsula, which had been under Japanese colonial rule since 1910.<sup>21</sup> It should be noted that Karlin's travels across the Japanese archipelago were much less complicated than those of Isabella Bird, as the Japanese Empire had since built an elaborate rail network across the metropole and was busy expanding it to its colonies. As early as in May 1872, Japan's first rail link connected Tokyo and Yokohama, followed by the Kobe–Osaka–Kyoto link a few years later, and yet the entire rail system in 1878 covered only 76,5 miles (123 kilometres) (Bird 1881, vol. 2, 328). However, the improving transport infrastructure gradually changed locals' travel habits, enabling them "leisure travel". March (2007) adds that by the early 20th century, bureaucrats had realized the importance of the consistent, vigorous promotion of tourist destinations in foreign markets, paving the way for the establishment of the Japan Tourist Bureau in 1912.<sup>22</sup> So when Karlin travelled to tourist destinations in Honshū, there were hardly any unbeaten tracks left since travelling was no longer as strictly regulated as in the early years of the Meiji period, when foreigners needed a special permit to go inland.

To convey to the reader the beauty of Japan's tourist attractions, Karlin also touches on some other topics when describing the places she visited. Recalling her visit to Kamakura, a seaside town just over an hour's train journey from Tokyo, famous for a seated Buddha statue, Karlin scolds Europeans for their obsession with physical appearance while associating people in the East with a spiritual inclination and a capacity for contemplation:

Active Westerners are excited by their physical strength like children, while pensive, soul-searching Easterners pursue the strength of the spirit, the body being merely the outer manifestation of the spirit and its temporary aide, a vessel. (Karlin 2006, 223)

21 For more details about her East Asian travels, see Vampelj Suhadolnik (2016, 53). Karlin's impressions of Korea are discussed by Senica (2011, 74–75) and Shigemori Bučar (2020), those of Taiwan by Senica (2011, 73–74) and Veselič (2020).

22 McDonald (2017, 14), on the other hand, underlines that the main impetus for the creation of this "government's official tourist organization" was to encourage travel from the metropole to the "new territories".

With today's knowledge, Karlin's notes on spirituality in the East should be read *cum grano salis*.<sup>23</sup> As Cwiertka (2006, 121–22) emphasizes, Japanese political elites, at least, were very much interested in the imperial subject's physical body, as suggested by the establishment of the Imperial Government Institute for Nutrition in 1920. Its creation likely had to do with the idea that only physically strong soldiers can perform well on the battlefield. In the early 1920s, Japan's imperial expansion had been well underway for quite some time. It was right after the Meiji Revolution and the return of political authority to the Emperor that the new political elites started the aggressive territorial expansion, resulting in the colonization of Hokkaidō as early as 1869.

Although Karlin left behind a set of postcards with images of the Ainu people, the indigenous inhabitants of Hokkaidō, and her travel diaries include notes on them, she seems not to have visited the island herself, as noted convincingly by some researchers (Jezernik 2006, 84; Veselič 2020, 147, n. 18). It has been established that the postcards were bought at the Japan-British Exhibition, held in London in 1910, rather than in Japan.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, unlike the passages describing the Tayal in Taiwan, whom she had met and wrote about meticulously (Karlin 2006, 326–33), Karlin's accounts of Ainu cuisine, spirituality, etc., are detailed yet generic and anachronistic (1997, 85–90). Her depiction of the daily life of the Ainu lacks any reference to the then already easily discernible impact of Western missionaries in the northernmost Japanese prefecture (Oguma 1998, 59–61), whom she often mentions in some other parts of her travelogues and with whom she even identifies (Sperber 2007, 176). Doubts about Karlin's

23 In the Japanese section of *The Odyssey of a Lonely Woman*, Karlin (2006, 266) says she occasionally prayed the Rosary. The fact that it is precisely this section of her diary where she mentions this is interesting: like today, Christianity was close to non-existent in Japan at the time compared to Buddhism or Shinto.

Unlike Karlin's keen interest in theosophy and East Asian religious beliefs and practices, which have been widely researched by Šmitek (2009) and Veselič (2021), respectively, her relationship with Catholicism is yet to be analysed. This is despite the fact that in the 1930s, Karlin attended daily mass at the Church of the Assumption in the centre of Celje (Trnovec 2020, 135), or according to Jerneja Jezernik (personal correspondence, December 31, 2020) engaged in contemplation at the Capuchins' church across the River Savinja, together with Thea Schreiber Gamelin (1906–1988), their way of life in other respects most likely deviating from what was considered acceptable at the time (Šučur 2014). In her old age, Schreiber Gamelin even decided to study theology in Ljubljana (Maček 2018, 22).

24 I thank Maja Veselič for this insight. Held by the Celje Regional Museum, Karlin's collection includes more than 500 postcards, of which nearly half show Japanese motifs (Trnovec 2020, 120). During her stay in London, Karlin must have visited the said exhibition in 1910. With the event, Japan aimed to promote its image of a successful colonial superpower on the eastern edge of Asia in the eyes of predominantly British visitors. According to Hennessey (2018), the exhibition included an Ainu village (in the form of a "human zoo").

visit to Hokkaidō are reinforced by the fact that her accounts of this supposed trip can only be found in feuilletons she wrote for a local *Celje* paper but were entirely omitted from her travel book. All this indicates that Karlin based her imaginings of the Ainu on documents from the second half of the 19th century, which were widely available across Europe at the time, as Ölschleger proves (2014), and perhaps even on Bird's accounts, rather than on first-hand experience.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, Karlin (1997, 86) did not hesitate to criticize, albeit in brief, Japanese colonial expansion, saying that the Japanese were crowding the Ainu out and forbidding them to use their language.

Compared with Karlin's accounts, Bird's descriptions of the Ainu are much less well-disposed. The British traveller might have been the first non-Japanese woman to come into contact with the indigenous people of Hokkaidō and was undoubtedly the first to write about them.<sup>26</sup> The most striking thing about this is the fact that she disrespected their wish not to disclose the information revealed to her to the Japanese government (1881, vol. 2, 58). Given that it was due to the latter's goodwill that she could travel north in the first place, she must have been aware that the political elite would be interested in her experience of the country. While betraying the Ainu's trust, Bird also paved the way for even harsher domination in the colonial attempts to Japanize the Ainu by diligently citing their names and the places she visited. It is precisely the overt support for Hokkaidō's colonization that could be one of the reasons for the incredible popularity of Bird in Japan, claims Williams (2017, 27), for Bird turned a blind eye to the misdeeds of the Japanese Empire. However, as Kanasaka (2017, 188) highlights, Bird's popularity in Japan did not start until the 1970s or 1980s, when it was a result of a campaign to promote new ways of travelling around the country.

Karlin's experience and the ensuing accounts of Japan would undoubtedly have been different had she spent one year in the "modern Osaka" instead of Tokyo, among "large shops and the hurrying Japanese, who seem to have become impolite" (Karlin 2006, 271). In the early 20th century, Japan saw a massive rise in department stores, which started to dominate "the commercial, architectural and cultural landscape of Japanese cities" (Cwiertka 2006, 50). Her travel accounts

25 On the issue of the credibility of women's travel diaries, Mulligan (2014, 183–84) notes: "Part of the pleasure of reading travel writing is the reader's awareness that the text is working on two levels simultaneously. In literary terms, travel writers employ a diverse range of rhetorical stylistic devices, paradoxically often used in fiction writing, to convince us of the authenticity of their accounts: but alongside the literary enjoyment, we can sometimes get a glimpse of the truly remarkable reality of human possibility."

26 Needless to say, Japanese explorers had travelled to Ezochi, now Hokkaidō, before this, in the Meiji period, also pursuing their interest in the Ainu. This included Matsuura Takeshirō (1818–1888), an explorer and cartographer credited with coining the name Hokkaidō.

suggest that Karlin was concerned about the merging of Japanese and Western cultural elements:

Japan has found itself at a turning point, and what dismays a foreigner is the temporarily external adoption of Western ways where these should better be avoided: people wearing ugly, ill-suited Western clothes not tailored to Asiatic bodies; unsightly American stone cubes displacing lovely local buildings; imitation in areas where local art is superior and more accomplished. (Karlin in Jezernik 2006, 100)

If Karlin was annoyed by new buildings made of stone, Bird, on the other hand, disapproved of Western-style wooden structures, which failed to fit her stereotypical notions of the Japanese urban landscape:

*Tōkiyō* and the new *régime* are architecturally represented by the ministerial villas of stone-faced brick, with red brick garden walls, the Engineering College, really solid and handsome, and a number of barracks, departments, police stations, colleges, and schools, in a debased Europeanised or Americanised style, built of wood, painted white, with a superabundance of oblong glass windows, and usually without verandahs, looking like inferior warehouses, or taverns in the outskirts of San Francisco, as vulgar and dismally ugly as they can be, and more like confectionery than building. (Bird 1881, vol. 1, 34)

The above excerpts suggest that their authors disapproved of the mixing of cultural, more specifically architectural, elements of the East with those of the West. This is precisely what travellers often lament still today, denying the peoples of the “exotic” places they visit the right to use the latest technological advancements, citing their negative impact on the “traditional” ways of life. Overwhelmed by disgust at what she saw, Bird forgot that during her visit Japan was still an economically weak and technologically undeveloped country unable to build modern infrastructure overnight, despite its efforts. Her aversion to mixing or, indeed, “impurity” was not limited to architecture alone. According to Bird (1881, vol. 1, 8), the Japanese of the treaty ports were contaminated and vulgarized by their interactions with foreigners, while those inland, where very few foreigners were allowed at the time, were still “kindly, gentle, and courteous”. Karlin (2006, 379–80) also objected to race-mixing, seeing it as the root cause of moral and cultural degradation. In her opinion, this resulted in social problems in many South American countries, especially Peru. Later on her journey, she failed to question the “White Australia policy”, Australia’s immigration



legislation that was highly discriminatory to all non-whites, including the Japanese, in the 1920s; instead, Karlin even defended it.<sup>27</sup>

## Karlin's Daily Life in Tokyo

In analysing her descriptions of Japanese society in general and gender relations in particular, one should not overlook that while in Japan Karlin moved in the middle- and upper-class social circles among relatively well-educated men and women. From these friends and acquaintances, she acquired her knowledge of Japan's social structure and cultural specifics.<sup>28</sup> Although Karlin was multilingual, Japanese was not one of the nine languages she mastered. Remembering her reunion with her former student Nobuji, she laments: "He spoke the language of the country, and I did not" (Karlin in Jezernik 2009, 24). According to Barbara Trnovec (2020, 101), Karlin had studied Japanese in London, but could only say two words when she arrived: "Please" and "Excuse me / I am sorry" (Karlin 2006, 228). Despite her year-long stay in Tokyo, her knowledge of Japanese most likely remained limited to courtesies such as *gomen kudasai* (Hello. Is anyone home?) or *itadakimasu* (Let's eat!), and did not include writing in Japanese characters (Karlin 1997, 76, 77; 2006, 256).<sup>29</sup>

Nevertheless, Karlin proudly claimed she could communicate well enough with random fellow passengers on a tram if she had to enquire about the right stop (Karlin 1997, 78). Some other daily chores made her uneasy, since her scarce knowledge of the language did not suffice for a fluent dialogue. Visits to the international post office were particularly traumatic for her, even though workers there could speak English more fluently than she spoke Japanese (Karlin 1997, 77). However, her lack of knowledge of the Japanese language did not stop Karlin

27 Although some studies wish to paint her as a proto-feminist, Williams' (2017, 27) remarks on Bird could easily apply to Karlin: "Attempts to incorporate Bird into a feminist literary tradition are, however, complicated by her forceful support of contemporary racial and imperial hierarchies, and by her judgmental Christian moral framework." In the two travellers' defence, it should be added that such ethnocentric perception of the world dominated both the academia and the public discourses of the time in Europe and the United States (Goodenough 2002, 423). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights had not been adopted until after World War II, in December 1948.

28 Fister-Stoga (2001, 101) points out that despite her relatively long stay, the locals Karlin interacted with most likely perceived her as a tourist, treating her with deference and respect.

29 Her deficient knowledge of Japanese can be seen from her remark that all Japanese ships belong to the "maru" company (Karlin 2006, 312). The suffix *maru*, meaning "circle", is often attached to Japanese merchant ship names. Several theories purport to explain this, one saying that it was a way for sailors to express their hope for a safe return.

from socializing with the locals. To communicate with them, she used English, French or German, the languages she had mastered well and taught professionally while in Japan (Karlin 1997, 79; 2006, 243). Although one-third of the time in the middle school curriculum in the early Taishō period was devoted to the study of English (Clarke 2009, 72), Karlin's writings (1997, 78–79; 2006, 237) suggest that the level of knowledge of foreign languages that allowed for fluent communication was mainly limited to intellectuals.



Figure 2. Alma Karlin in *yukata*, photographed in Celje. Unknown author. (Source: National and University Library of Slovenia, Ljubljana)

Besides socializing with influential individuals, how did Karlin spend her spare time in Tokyo? Her descriptions in *The Odyssey of a Lonely Woman* indicate that she was entirely in keeping with the spirit of the age, taking walks in Ginza, particularly in the evenings to see the night markets (Karlin 2006, 234–35). This made her very much like many other members of the emerging middle class, who mostly lived on the outskirts of the city while making use of extensive railway links to the Tokyo city centre to do one-day (shopping) trips to the elite Ginza district, as Gordon notes.

A family excursion to the Ginza shopping district on a Sunday would feature window shopping and perhaps the purchase of the latest style in ready-to-wear dress at Mitsui's pioneering Mitsukoshi department store. Shoppers would take a break in a coffee shop or beer hall, two other urban innovations of the early twentieth century. Their coffee would most often be brewed from beans grown by Japanese emigrant farmers in Brazil. [White, Merry I. 2012. *Coffee Life in Japan*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 5] They might end the day by dining in an elegant Western-style restaurant. A new term was coined for this modern leisure, *Gin-bura*, loosely translatable as "Ginza cruising". (Gordon 2020, 159)

Some researchers (Befu 2001, 132; Cwiertka 2006, 144) highlight that the blind enthusiasm for everything and everyone from the West had already declined in Japan by the time Karlin disembarked in Yokohama in the early 1920s. Nevertheless, Karlin felt that ordinary people in Japan of the 1920s had yet to get used to the presence of Westerners. When describing her experience of the Japanese perception of her, Karlin (1997, 76) notes: "They look at a white woman with great interest, but in the same way we look at a monkey in captivity, an elephant in a zoo, or some rare creature—as something curious, ugly, and amusing." While some Japanese in the 1920s may have still been reluctant to welcome foreigners into their city, town or village, they had long overcome the inferiority complex against the West. Nevertheless, despite her busy social life with the locals, which resulted in some insightful remarks about them, as noted by Fister-Stoga (2001, 107), Karlin felt she had failed to reach the depths of the "Japanese soul" (Karlin 2006, 243–44). The reason for this self-criticism is unclear to us. It is not implausible that when communicating with Karlin locals would directly point to or indirectly hint at Westerners' perceived inability to fully grasp Japanese culture. The anthropologist Harumi Befu offers the following explanation for the Japanese sense of superiority over foreigners:

This notion of uniqueness is often accompanied by a belief that these unique features cannot be understood or fully comprehended by

non-Japanese. Comprehension of these unique features supposedly requires not rational or logical understanding but an intuitive insight into Japanese culture that only natives can achieve. Thus foreigners are defined as incapable of understanding the essence of Japanese culture. (Befu 2001, 67)

However, Karlin's lack of self-confidence may also be interpreted in the light of the fact that women travellers were not supposed to produce "scientific" and authoritative writing; on the contrary, their accounts were expected to be amateurish (Mills 2001, 83).

### Focusing on Japanese Cuisine

As a result of this expectation, women travel writers mostly, but not always (see Williams 2017, 27), focused on "less sophisticated" topics. One of them was local cuisine, and both Bird and Karlin succumbed to this discursive pressure. Karlin writes about the food she ate rather extensively.<sup>30</sup> After disembarking in Yokohama, she had "curry with rice" in the company of her fellow passengers from Russia in a restaurant "decorated in European style" (Karlin 2006, 225). Called *yōshokuya*, such restaurants—some 5,000 had opened across Tokyo by 1923—served Western food tailored to the eating habits of the local population (Ishige 2014, 157). As it was nearly seven decades since Japan had established close economic and political relations with the West when Karlin was there, the urban population had become well acquainted with European cuisine.

Nonetheless, it seems that during her stay in Tokyo Karlin was not able to enjoy all the benefits of culinary globalization. Due to her meagre income and high rent, as well as the payments she had to meet to repay the money borrowed in Hawaii to continue her travels, Karlin's first weeks in Tokyo meant a hand-to-mouth existence with very modest meals. In her own words (Karlin 2006, 230), she "suffered from serious malnutrition", her breakfast consisting of a small slice of bread, lunch of soy wrappers, and dinner of (rotting) peaches. Although this was in the first few weeks, poor meals were a constant throughout her stay in Japan (2006, 261–62). As she was, understandably, embarrassed about her poverty, she preferred to keep quiet about it (Karlin 2006, 231): "Nobody knew anything about this; even in the boarding house, I made it seem as if I ate my fill."

Later, with the help of a German friend, Karlin was introduced to a journalist

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30 Similarly, Bird devotes an entire chapter to Japanese cuisine (1881, vol. 1, 237–46).

from *The Asahi Shimbun*, one of Japan's leading dailies even today, and became a contributor, and this allowed her to rise from the "swamp of destitution" (Karlin 2006, 231). A few pages later, she writes something that shatters the stereotypical notion most Westerners have of Japanese cuisine, according to which rice has always been the staple food. "I would gladly treat myself to a daily portion of rice, soup or vegetables if only I could get my hands on these things," Karlin laments (2006 245, 227), saying that life in Japan is incredibly expensive for Europeans. In the 1920s, white rice was too costly and therefore too exclusive to be the main dish in all Japanese households. Cwiertka (2006, 67) describes the diet of the time as follows: "Pure rice was reserved in peasant households for special occasions, such as New Year. Despite the rising standard of living during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the peasant diet still fell considerably below urban standards." It seems that throughout her stay in Japan, Karlin's diet was closer to that of the rural and impoverished working-class population in fast-growing cities, which included Korean and Okinawan immigrants to the *naichi* ("inner lands"), than to middle-class city dwellers. That said, Karlin was not a victim of high rice prices, which affected the daily lives of many Japanese; her choice of lifestyle was deliberate. At 150 yen per month, her salary for a part-time job at the German Embassy was far above average: a female typist, for instance, would earn around 1 yen per day in the late 1920s (see Gordon 2020, 154). But having already experienced privation on her journey and having been forced to borrow money to continue it, Karlin was very disciplined in saving the money earned from her job at the Embassy for new travels. That means she sustained her day-to-day life through tutoring and writing articles for Japanese newspapers (Karlin 2006, 262).

### On the Social Position of Women in Japan

In the 1920s, cities teemed with progressive Japanese women who loved Western fashions along dandy Japanese men, a phenomenon that did not go unnoticed by Karlin (1997, 74; 2006, 245), who mentions locals wearing Western-style shoes and European-style clothes. A new middle class emerged, whose typical representatives were the first *modan gaaru* (modern girls), the polar opposite of the *salaryman*. Although they still worked low-paid jobs, typically as shop-attendants, popular culture characterized them as broad-minded individuals who paid no heed to social norms and tirelessly followed the latest fashion trends. During World War I, the empire's increased economic growth had a positive impact on households' incomes, particularly in urban areas. This slightly higher standard of living made conspicuous consumption possible for some individuals.



The country's rapid industrialization and modernization also had some drawbacks. Working conditions in many industries were poor, salaries were low, and women enjoyed even fewer labour rights than men. As Karlin (2006, 269) noted during her visit to Kokura, a town in the north of Kyushu, young girls often lived in boarding houses owned by the companies they worked for. However, the violation of female workers' basic rights in Japan did not upset Karlin enough to pay more attention to the issue in her travel writing.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, she (Karlin 1997, 76) writes extensively about local women's role in the family. She noticed that they were considered far inferior to men, noting: "A woman has no worth here. She is required to follow her husband, to serve his parents like a slave." Similar rhetoric about women's position in society can be seen in Bird's writings.<sup>32</sup> Both Bird and Karlin cite the mother-in-law as the embodiment of evil. The former writes (Bird 1881, vol. 1, 253): "The eldest son, who inherits the house and land, almost invariably brings his wife to his father's house, where she often becomes little better than a slave to her mother-in-law." In the same vein, Karlin asserts:

She, a stranger little older than a child, comes to live with her husband, a stranger to her, with her mother-in-law, also a stranger, and has to do whatever the latter pleases. /.../ Her life is miserable until the son becomes the master and she becomes the mother-in-law; then she can start torturing others. (Karlin 1997, 81)

Unlike today, when Japan has one of the lowest birth-rates in the world, one of the key social duties of a married woman in imperial Japan was to bear children. According to both Karlin (*ibid.*) and Bird (1881, vol. 1, 253), a husband could send his wife back to her parents if he felt she had not lived up to her task of becoming a mother.

In the first half of the 20th century, the ideology of the husband's multifaceted superiority over his wife was epitomized in the motto *otoko wa soto, onna wa uchi* ("Man outside, woman inside"). While many women still had to work until they were married, a woman's role in society changed drastically with marriage, as she was being suddenly tasked with the responsibility for what the Germans referred

31 Jerneja Jezernik (2006, 105–9) highlights that Karlin expounded on this topic in her short story *Little Spring* (*Kleiner Frühling*), which depicts the hardships endured by young Japanese girls in textile factories. Working conditions in weaving and spinning mills were unbearable, and poorly paid young workers were forced to toil from dawn to dusk, for 14 hours or more. The miserable working conditions were ideal for the spread of tuberculosis, a disease O Hara, the protagonist of Karlin's story, suffers from. As Gordon (2020, 102–3) emphasizes, young Japanese girls had few alternatives in the early 20th century, unpaid work on their parents' farms or the then still legal prostitution often being the only two options.

32 The social status of women was one of the main topoi of Victorian female travel writing on Japan (Williams 2017, 18).



to as *Kinder, Küche, Kirche*. It should be noted that gender inequality, which the government started promoting sometime in the mid-Meiji period, had not always characterized Japanese society. In the Edo period, men of most social classes were expected to help women with raising children, grocery shopping, and household chores. This changed in the late 19th century,<sup>33</sup> and Kathleen Uno (1993, 294) notes that up until the demise of Imperial Japan it was mostly officials at the Education Ministry who strived, through mass media and a special educational system for girls, to enforce a highly misogynistic ideology that instructed women to be “good wives, wise mothers” (*ryōsai kenbo*). Therefore, it is hardly surprising that Karlin (1997, 81) characterized a married Japanese woman as “a workhorse and a breeding animal”, adding that, evidently, “such a woman cannot have a very sharp mind, or the time to hone it”. Judging by Karlin’s observations, officials were quite successful in their endeavours to promote a highly unequal, patriarchal system. Gender inequality was very likely particularly pronounced in the higher social classes, where “women in the grandest houses do not eat at the table, they merely serve their husbands and guests” (Karlin 2006, 256).

However, since some women, especially teachers, socialists, and feminists, refused to accept the imposed role of the housewife and unyieldingly opposed this systemic ideological repression, such ideas could never fully take root (Uno 1993, 294). Karlin (2006, 228) mentions Mrs M., a Japanese woman born in France, who divorced her Japanese husband after six years of marriage and described her marriage as a waste of time. This example clearly shows a discrepancy between the ruling elite’s ideals and their practical implementation, which exists in every society.

## German Orientalist Perspective in Karlin’s Writing on Japan

The social, political, and economic situation in Japan in the second half of the 1870s was hardly comparable with that in the early 1920s. That said, one’s

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33 During its modernization, a process that went hand in hand with the construction of Japanese national identity, the country saw a phenomenon in which, according to Kuwayama (2009: 47), “/.../ the emics of dominant groups have been superimposed on those of other groups, thus having been elevated to the status of the etics for the entire culture, while having been presented as its emics in cross-cultural comparison.” In the same vein, Sumiko Iwao (1995, 5) notes that “the samurai class culture of premodern times penetrated throughout the entire society as rigid class distinctions were officially abolished. As a consequence, women as a whole lost power and equality they had enjoyed. In other words, it was only quite recently, a little more than a century ago, that women lost their previous power and producer / worker status and became, especially in the cities, ‘unemployed’ consumer.” The changed perception of the social role of women, and their subsequent relegation to housewives, stretched as far as the edges of the empire, as Ito (2008, 154–57) shows in the case of Okinawa.

perception of the land visited is not shaped by the time of the visit alone, but also by the traveller's ideological and social background. Or as Mills (2001, 69–70) puts it: "Travel writing cannot be read as a simple account of a journey, a country and a narrator, but must be seen in the light of discourses circulating at the time." The temporal contextualization of the perceptions of Japan that Bird and Karlin put forth to their readers would therefore be incomplete if their accounts of the places visited and the people encountered there were not also placed in the broader context of British and German Orientalism, respectively, aspects of which are reflected (sub)consciously in both writers' travel diaries. Their types of Orientalism differ in that Bird primarily identified with the British Empire and occasionally the Japanese colonial empire, as can be seen from her approving references to the civilizing mission in Hokkaidō.<sup>34</sup> Meanwhile, Karlin's was a nationally tinted Orientalism: through language, she principally identified with the German people and the German state, though never glorifying the latter when comparing it to Japan. Hence Karlin does not fit fully in the category of German orientalist writers, defined by Kontje (2004, 2–3) as having "oscillated between identifying their country with the rest of Europe against the Orient and allying themselves with selected parts of the East against the West". This affection for Japan is most apparent in Karlin's account of the Great Buddha of Kamakura and her agreement with the Japanese perception of work: "It should be done nicely, well, and without haste" (Karlin 2006, 233, 257).

Although she declared herself Austrian in the autobiography published after her return (2010, 294),<sup>35</sup> Karlin's allegiance belongs to the Germans, emphasizes Šlibar (1998, 122). Therefore, if read in detail, her accounts of the Japanese experience often reveal her German ethnic identification, which was a voluntary, conscious decision.<sup>36</sup> Karlin justified her sympathies for the Reich in a Herderian spirit with the shared language (Karlin 2006, 246),<sup>37</sup> thereby confirming Cvirn's claim (1992, 453–54) that

34 Due to limited space, this paper only focuses on Karlin's orientalist gaze. For Bird's orientalist representation of the Ainu, see Park (2015).

35 Božena Orožen (1990, 155) draws attention to this indirectly in her treatise: "What she is referring to when leaving Trieste, where her eight-year journey began in the late fall of 1919, and watching 'the last bit of homeland' disappear, is not the Slovenian community that lived around there, but the fact that Trieste used to belong to Austria-Hungary." At the same habitual, subconscious level, Karlin's Austrian imperial perspective is reflected in her relationship to Slovenians, or Slavic as she calls them, notes Bodrova (2018, 37).

36 In her own words, Karlin (1996, 101) kept submitting her travel writing to the aforementioned *Cillier Zeitung* free-of-charge in order to help build the German identity (*Deutschtum*) in the region. Her motives, however, were completely apolitical (2010, 294–95): "Needless to say, I have an attachment to the German people—it would be vile to claim otherwise—but this love, which never manifests politically, does not make me a bad subject to the state I chose to continue my life in."

37 Orožen (1990, 156) insightfully describes German as Karlin's "linguistic homeland".

language was the paramount element of one's national identity for the pro-German population of Celje at the turn of the 20th century. Although Germany was still recovering from its defeat in the First World War, Karlin (2006, 269) seems to have been rather proud to say that “the Japanese were the first among nations to admit that Germany is too strong to ever fail, and in every aspect—including knowledge, thinking, and character, all reinforcing the country as a military power”. Her emotional attachment to Germany is immediately apparent from how upset she feels by a film she watches on the ship on her way to Japan. The film very likely showed German war crimes during the war, and Karlin (2006, 224) excludes the possibility that people of the German Reich might truly be capable of the atrocities shown on the screen (rape, killing, including of children, arson, etc.), wondering why the German government is not doing more to stop the dissemination of this “propaganda” material since Asians “could not know that these films pursue an incendiary policy”.<sup>38</sup> Karlin continues to defend the Germans even after her bad experience with them following her employment in a machine factory in Tokyo, eagerly providing the reasons she thinks were behind this (Karlin 2006, 229–30).<sup>39</sup>

Rather than being limited to abstract ideas of national belonging, Karlin's affection for Germany was also reflected in her descriptions of specific individuals. One of the Germans she valued very highly was the then German Ambassador to Japan, Wilhelm Solf (1862–1936). Karlin believed Solf had contributed a great deal to Germany's popularity in Japan, stating that he had generated keen interest in his country among the Japanese (Karlin 2006, 269). Yet this Japanese affinity for the Germans was not new. Since the mid-Meiji period, Japanese empire-building had mainly been patterned after the German model, and it was not until the collapse of this model in 1945 that the esteem for it finally declined. This choice of Japanese political elites was hardly surprising, given the military glory won by Prussia through its victories against the Habsburg Monarchy in 1866 and against France five years later. Additionally, Germany had been a growing economic power since the unification of the country in 1871. On the brink of the First World War, this made Germany the leading economic power in Europe (Lieven 2001, 179), crowning the empire ruled by the House of Hohenzollern with the nimbus of an invincible, almighty state.

According to Karlin (2006, 269), Japan's political leaders had to balance their overt sympathies for Germany against their relations with the British Empire,

38 Nevertheless, reports of German war crimes were not a product of (Anglo-American) propaganda, and the greatest atrocities were committed in Belgium and Kalisz, a city in Poland.

39 Karlin later clearly expressed her anti-Nazi feelings and considered the Slovenian national liberation struggle against the German occupation of Slovenia to be entirely legitimate, while rejecting the Communist ideology at the same time (Kregar 2009).

a key ally of Japan since the early 1920s. Even though Karlin was a committed Anglophile, she never compared the two empires directly. In the section of *The Odyssey of a Lonely Woman* describing her Japanese experience, the British are mentioned only once, in the context of working conditions. Comparing them to people of the German Reich, she praises Britons as well as Americans for being kind to employees, noting that British employers also pay their staff better, offer fair overtime payments, and provide their staff with various benefits within the company while being reserved, calm, and very polite (Karlin 2006, 230, 246).

In her accounts of Japan and the Japanese, Karlin randomly switches between vantage points, moving from a German perspective to a transnational position of a European or white woman. Upon her arrival in Japan, the most important thing for her is to board with Europeans: Karlin describes her stay in a Russian boarding house at the start of her year in Tokyo as a dream come true and a chance to brush up her Russian (Karlin 2006, 226). Despite her self-professed affiliation with Europe, in her *magnum opus* she (2006, 244) does not consider Europeans to be superior to the Japanese *per se*, and while she reproaches the Japanese for rigidity and stiffness in thinking, she also claims that they have a greater capacity for in-depth analysis (Fister-Stoga 2001, 104). Moreover, Fister-Stoga (2001, 107–8) notes that Karlin occasionally thinks higher of the Japanese than she does of Europeans.<sup>40</sup> Still, she does so in the manner of the typical orientalist dichotomy “us vs. them”, denying individuals on both sides of the divide the capacity to be different, unique, to think and behave out of their cultures. Karlin’s previously mentioned remarks (2006, 257) about the spirituality and dexterousness of people in the East (i.e., the Japanese) are typical examples of simplistic generalization, idealization, and essentialization. Meanwhile, a touch of European arrogance can be discerned in her observation that the Japanese lack individuality, a trait allegedly reflected in their physiognomy (Karlin 1997, 83).

Karlin’s obsession with racial identity is most apparent in the section elaborating on her decision to adopt an inadequate diet or, indeed, starvation. Even though Karlin knows she could get rice, soup<sup>41</sup>, and some vegetables in a “second-class hotel”, she refuses to do what would “cause disgust which Europeans do their best to avoid, and would likely ruin my reputation in the eyes of the yellow man—but most certainly in the eyes of the white man” (Karlin 2006, 245). This was Karlin’s sense of virtue overriding her hunger.

40 Bach (1995, 595) suggests that Bird also treats some aspects of Japanese culture as superior to her own.

41 What she had in mind was probably *misoshiru* rather than beef noodle soup.

Karlin's class identity is another aspect that occasionally surfaces in her descriptions. This is readily discernible in her—mostly habitual—conceited and scornful attitude to those below her on the social ladder, a disposition she could have modelled on her mother's overtly contemptuous, disdainful treatment of their Slovenian maid Mimi (Karlin 2010, 51). Referring to a student who failed to use a handkerchief despite having a cold, she notes that he was of a lower social class and had "boogers the size of stalactites in Postojna Cave" hanging out of his nose. This bothered her so much that she lied about being too busy to continue tutoring him (Karlin 2006, 244). Occasionally, her students would approach her if they ran into her on the street to exchange a few words and feel very clever in doing so, she concludes the passage mockingly (*ibid.*).

On the other hand, Karlin was quite timid and insecure in her interactions with distinguished persons higher up the social ladder. She believed they wanted to socialize with her only to witness her presumably peculiar behaviour (*ibid.*, 256), rather than because they were interested in her as a person. Despite her low self-esteem Karlin undoubtedly had a vast knowledge of various subjects and fascinating life experience. Before arriving in Japan, she had been travelling the world for some thirty months, not to mention her experience of living in several European countries in her twenties. Eventually, the job as a clerk in the German Embassy had a positive impact on her self-confidence, her description of this even revealing a sense of superiority, saying that positions there were something "only the best among the mortals could achieve, and this determined my worth" (Karlin 2006, 247).

Scholars have long attempted to understand why Karlin's Slovenian parents raised her speaking a "foreign" language or why her use of the Slovenian language was so awkward. The Karlins, Jakob (1829–1898) and Vilibalda (1844–1928), seem to have adopted the belief held by the German population of Celje in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that learning Slovenian—or *Windisch*, as they called it—was futile, since the knowledge of this language could never be put to use.<sup>42</sup> According to Cvirn (1992, 453), they claimed that due to the strong influence of the German vocabulary, Slovenian did not deserve to be considered a proper written language, but was, at most, a dialect, a language spoken by peasants, while the "New Slovenian", the language of the Slovenian bourgeoisie, was an artificial creation nobody could understand. This goes in line with Karlin's (2006, 224) lamentation that her knowledge of Slovenian is "deficient especially in terms of modern

42 Karlin seems to have internalized this belief: according to Orožen (1990, 158), she did not consider Slovenian to be one of the foreign languages that could have, had she been proficient in it, become her window to the world. Still, Slovenian was one of the ten languages she included in the dictionary she made before leaving.

expressions”, when discussing her efforts to translate a love letter from Croatian to German on her way from Hawaii to Japan, which proves beyond doubt that she had been (somewhat) proficient in spoken Slovenian before she embarked on her round-the-world journey (cf. Sperber 2007, 177).

## Conclusion

Among all the countries visited on her trip, Japan left the strongest mark on Karlin. Knowing that the Japanese archipelago was her primary destination, this comes as no surprise. As mentioned before, Karlin created images of the faraway places she intended to visit before even setting off. Her thorough, careful study of her overseas destinations only made her imaginings more deeply ingrained and stereotypical. Of all the destinations on her journey, Japan seems to have fitted best with her idyllic image of “distant dream worlds I have created myself” (Karlin 2006, 266). Or, in the words of Edward W. Said:

Many travelers find themselves saying of an experience in a new country that it wasn't what they expected, meaning that it wasn't what a book said it would be. And of course many writers of travel books or guidebooks compose them in order to say that a country *is* like this, or better, that it *is* colorful, expensive, and so forth. The idea in either case is that people, places, and experiences can always be described by a book, so much so that the book (or text) acquires a greater authority, and use, even than the actuality it describes. (Said 1979, 93)

As real-life experience often failed to live up to her expectations, Karlin had experienced many disappointments along her journey. Her attempts to reconcile her expectations with reality put a tremendous strain on her, claims Maček (2018, 6). But while her identification and fascination with earlier male travellers were articulated and personalized—e.g. with Christopher Columbus (1451–1506), Vasco da Gama (1460–1524), Robert Louise Stevenson (1850–1894), Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936), and occasionally also with the fictional literary character Robinson Crusoe—whereby Karlin was unable to recognize any negative aspects of Columbus' “discovery” of the Americas, her identification with women travellers was, much like her anthropological references, impersonal and concealed, obscured.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> The (un)intentional omission of other women travellers when recounting one's own undertakings was not typical only of Karlin. Williams (2017, 17) points to a similar practice in Bird's writing.



This is no surprise, as the so-called global sisterhood of travellers and travel writers is a myth, women writers' lack of mutual sympathy going back to the Victorian era. Rather than sympathy, travel stories written by women most often reveal rivalry, distrust, jealousy and conflicts, adds Weber (2003, 36–38). In her introduction to *The Odyssey of a Lonely Woman*, Karlin (2006, 5) says she earned the money for her trip by working, rather than begging like many other “world travellers”. Knowing that Karlin was, according to her friend Erika Madronič, also quite self-centred—and this trait is apparent in the introduction to her celebrated travelogue (Šlibar 1998, 118)—and ambitious, yet always highly self-critical (Trnovec 2020, 132), the lack of direct references to women in her writing is hardly surprising. All things considered, Karlin was well aware of walking the beaten path, at least in Japan. This can be gathered from her laments about the lack of the expected and supposedly deserved attention from fellow (German) citizens in the face of obstacles she had to overcome on her journey: “Consider everything the English did for the woman who had the courage to go *off the beaten track!*” (Karlin 1996, 156; italics added) This was likely an allusion to Bird and her *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan*, as well as to her admission to the Royal Geographical Society.<sup>44</sup>

The practice of referring to texts by earlier women travel writers has so far been neglected in scholarly narratives on Karlin's travelogues. But, as I demonstrated, Karlin partly based her expectations, her image of Japan, and perhaps also her itinerary—as much as her financial circumstances allowed—on Bird's *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan*.<sup>45</sup> The influence of this book on Karlin becomes most apparent in her descriptions of the social roles of married women in Japan, and to a lesser extent, of the Ainu. While Isabella Bird's detailed reports of the Hokkaidō natives' way of life were most likely not one of the primary sources of Karlin's “experience” of Ezochi, her influence on Karlin's perception of married women in Japan was highly likely. In other words, Bird's representations were almost directly mirrored in Karlin's depiction of “the wicked mother-in-law” vs. “the poor daughter-in-law”. The topos of the position of the “other” woman was representative of Victorian women travel writers, which aligns with Šlibar's observation (1998, 117) that Karlin is characterized by “her conformity to mainstream expectations and her tendency to conform with the characteristics

44 The Slovenian translation of this passage from *Die Banne der Südsee* (“Was taten Engländer für eine Frau, die den Mut hatte, vom allgemeinen Pfad abzuweichen!”) found in an article by Orožen (1990, 160), is closer to the German original than the translation in *Urok Južnega morja* (Karlin 1996, 156).

45 It is worth noting here that it was her two major journeys to East Asia in 1878 and 1897, and subsequently published travel accounts, which provided professional accreditation to Bird, maintains Elliott (2008, 2).

of women's travel discourse since the nineteenth century". Yet, although Karlin walked the beaten path while in Japan, and the Japan section of *The Odyssey of a Lonely Woman* deals with the some of the recurrent topoi of Victorian travel writing, her accounts of the land and its inhabitants mostly remain outside the common Western orientalist discourses of the time.<sup>46</sup> As mentioned above, her accounts on Japan lack an authoritative pronouncements and, contrary to Bird's (see Williams 2017, 28), avoid the glorification of European (moral) superiority, characteristics that were so typical of many of her contemporaries. This agrees with Fister-Stoga's claim that Karlin's writings on Japan are far from the *the-monarch-of-all-I-survey* genre (2001, 101, 104).

Alma Karlin's travel accounts need to be studied from a comparative perspective and together with their ideological and historical contexts to gain a complete understanding of her representations of the lands and peoples she visited on her heroic round-the-world journey.

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46 This does not mean that Karlin's travel accounts of Japan were produced outside Western colonial discourses, which *per se* were (and remain) a heterogenous phenomenon. Nevertheless, in women travel writing "colonialism is more notable by its absence in many of the accounts; the addressing of large-scale issues, such as the role of the journey in relation to colonial expansion or description of potential colonial sites, is notably absent" (Mills 2001, 98).

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