

GERMAN AKAY (1915-2005)

ANNA BALIKCI-DENJONGPA
Namgyal Institute of Tibetology

Known as 'German' Akay, the last surviving Sikkimese member of Ernst Schäfer's 1938-1939 German Tibet Expedition died on May 10, 2005 in Tathangchen, Gangtok, at the age of 90.

For a Sikkimese, German Akay had an unusual life. His father had worked for the Palace and looked after the Chogyal's horses. Father and son were both tall and strong, and as a young man, Akay soon found work on three scientific expeditions.

Akay was the German expedition's hunter and Schäfer's assistant. The expedition left Germany in April 1938 intending to study the people, biology and geology of Tibet. Having spent fourteen months in Sikkim and Tibet, the expedition team returned to Berlin in August 1939.

In Sikkim, expedition members travelled to Lachen, Thangu, Lachung and Zemu Lake and illegally crossed into Tibet as far as Chorten Nyima. Having been denied permission to enter Tibet through official channels, they personally negotiated an invitation with the help of the Taring Raja, the elder half-brother of the King of Sikkim, Sir Tashi Namgyal. Armed with an official invitation, this time the group legally crossed the border into Tibet at Nathula shortly before Christmas of 1938. They arrived in Lhasa on January 19th and stayed there for two months. They returned to Sikkim at the end of June 1939.

The expedition was abruptly terminated with the beginning of the Second World War. The Germans fled British India, and Akay, as the animal keeper, was left stranded in Calcutta looking after a number of animals including Tibetan mastiffs. German Akay continued to care for his charges until the British luckily decided to take them over and sent Akay back home to Gangtok.

Other Sikkimese members of the expedition were Lazor, a Lepcha from Tumin, who was hired as the expedition cook and Kaiser Bahadur Thapa (1918-2000) who was the expedition's interpreter. K.B. Thapa and Schäfer kept in touch until Schäfer's death in 1992.

German Akay participated in two further expeditions with Francis Kingdon Ward (1985-1958), the British botanical explorer. He

accompanied Kingdon Ward and his wife on the Lohit George expedition of 1950 to the Assam-Tibet border.

German Akay also served in the Indian Army for two years, but was hit by a grenade in Burma. Receiving a pension from the army he then became a farmer.

In 2003, I had the fortune to meet Dr. Bruno Beger in Germany. Dr. Beger is the last surviving member of the German exploration, on which he worked as the physical anthropologist. Born in 1911 and with a background in anatomy, Beger also acted as the expedition doctor. In 1998 he published his personal expedition diary. When I met him, Dr. Beger kindly let me digitise a large number of his 1938 photographs of Sikkim. As soon as I returned to Gangtok, I showed these photos to German Akay on my laptop. For the first time, Akay saw the photographs of the expedition and of himself as a young man, and was able to share the experience with his family. Dr. Beger and Akay subsequently exchanged letters and gifts. Dr. Beger's photographs are now part of an exhibition at the Namgyal Institute in Gangtok, the opening of which was attended by German Akay's widow and only son.