

"In the Wonderland of Alaska" – the Adventurous Life of Augusta Enders-Schichanovsky

Augusta Enders-Schichanowsky led an extraordinary life in many respects. She went on several journeys to Alaska, and worked as a gold prospector and Polar explorer. She corresponded with important figures, had contacts with major research institutes, and recorded all her experiences in a book – yet writing her biography involves a great deal of speculation, because most of her estate was lost during World War II bombing raids over Berlin. To reconstruct her life, all that remains is her travel journal "In the Wonderland of Alaska" and a resident's registration card from Munich.

She was born in Forchheim in 1865, the daughter of Jewish rifle maker Ferdinand Enders and his wife Elisabeth. Although the family lived in Bayreuth, the daughter attended the school for Catholic "Englische Fräulein" in Kempten, at least temporarily. This is rather unusual for a girl from a Jewish family. In 1884 she married Alfred Schichanovsky, who came from a family of Prussian civil servants. His mother was from the von Uechtritz family, and her father was a councillor in Küstrin. The young couple seem to have moved quite early on to Varel near Oldenburg, where their son Alfred was born in 1885. Neither her husband nor her son seems to have played a significant role in the life of Augusta Enders-Schichanowsky, however. According to his registration card, Alfred Schichanowsky senior died in 1909 in Varel. His wife makes no mention of this at all in her travel accounts. Two years after the birth of her son, Augusta Enders-Schichanowsky went to art school in Paris, intending to become a painter. Her encounter there with the polar explorers Fritjof Nansen, Fredrick Cook and Robert Peary was decisive for her future career, however. She was so impressed by them that she decided to go on a polar expedition herself. This turned out to be rather difficult, however, because no-one was prepared to take a woman on such an arduous trip. She duly decided to go on her own.

In Berlin, where she now lived as a freelance artist, she made an intense study of geography and learnt photography. She also made contact with her brother Wilhelm, who lived in America. By the year 1900, she was ready. With no-one to accompany her she boarded the mail steamer "Barbarossa" in Bremen, and travelled to New York. To reach the Arctic, her ultimate destination, she travelled through Canada by train as far as the Pacific coast and then took another ship from there to reach Alaska. Her first stop was the Aleutian Island of Unalaska in the far west. The harbour there, "Dutch Harbour", was an intermediate stop for adventurers attracted by the promise of gold in Nome, Northern Alaska. Nome was probably the destination of Auguste Enders-Schichanowsky. She seems to have wanted to amass enough wealth there to finance an Arctic expedition of her own. She thus quickly moved on from Unalaska to Nome. She lived in the most primitive conditions in a tent, but

seems to have been successful as a prospector quite early on: during the same year she undertook an initial expedition to the region of the Seward Peninsula, where she studied the language of the Eskimos and unearthed the bones of ancient animals. Her main aim, however, remained an exploration trip to the North Pole. Again, she planned to finance the journey by prospecting for gold. She was unable to make use of the claim she acquired near Nome, however, because of an attack of malaria. She was so sick that she was initially taken to the military base at St. Michael. When her disease was compounded by a kidney complaint and typhus, she was forced to travel back to Germany in the late autumn of 1900.

She continued with her plans in Berlin, however. Since she was now completely committed to polar research, she gave up her artist's studio. She made contact with professors from the city's Ethnological Museum, who asked her to provide them if possible with the skeleton of an Eskimo. In the summer of 1903 she then travelled to Alaska a second time.

The gold claim she had acquired in 1900 was lost, however, and the land she had bought on speculation, hoping that a railway line would be built on it, proved to be worthless. The railway was never built, and the locomotives, which had already been brought to Nome by ship, were rusting away. A few days' walk away from Nome, Auguste Enders-Schichanovsky built a log cabin as a base of operations. She continued prospecting for gold, made several short trips to Eskimo settlements, stuffed animals and also fulfilled the wish of the Berlin Ethnological museum for an Eskimo skeleton.

In 1904 she had health problems again. Again she had to leave Alaska, but this time she did not return to Germany – instead, she stayed with her brother in New York. She lived from the sale of her pictures – and they seem to have sold quite well, because she earned enough to finance a trip to Central America. In 1906 she travelled to San Francisco via Havana, Panama and Mexico, intending to start a new life there as an artist. Shortly before her arrival, however, San Francisco was hit by the serious earthquake. In the totally destroyed city, she now saw no opportunity to realize her plans. She took a ship to Los Angeles, where she remained for two years. Here, too, she earned a living by painting. Once she had earned a little more money, she set off once more for the north – but only made it as far as Seattle, where she lived outside the town for quite some time in a tent in the wilderness. Her savings were soon used up, however, and there was no clear source of new income. Her plight became so bad that she fell sick with typhus again. Friends finally made it possible for her to travel to New York, where she was looked after by her brother.

In 1911 she returned to Germany, most probably to revive her ailing health and also to drum up enough money for a further journey. This was not to be: Augusta Enders-Schichanovsky never left Germany again. At first it was the outbreak of World War I that made return to America impossible; later on it was probably her age and poor health. She

certainly cannot have lacked money or courage – she only ever needed enough to pay for the trip over, and everything else was available once she arrived. We know next to nothing about the rest of her life. Her Munich registration card makes it clear that she lived from 1924 to 1929 in Garmisch. This is probably where she wrote her book "In the Wonderland of Alaska", which was published in 1926. In the "Nationality" section of her registration card we read "Free State of Oldenburg". She had spent the early days of her marriage in the small town of Varel, and that was where she returned in the spring of 1929 – as the last entry on her card makes clear. The date of her death is unknown. Auguste Enders-Schichanovsky seems never to have intended to emigrate to America. The country, and especially its northern section, always remained a travel destination for her and a subject of research. Whenever she spent a little longer in any one place it was always because of financial or health reasons, her ultimate aim always being a further journey into the "Wonderland of Alaska". Germany remained the homeland to which she kept on returning.

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