

Review Essay

Newly Discovered Sources on Carl von Waeber (1841–1910): Sylvia Bräsel, *“Bilder eines Diplomatenlebens zwischen Europa und Ostasien”**

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“Bilder eines Diplomatenlebens zwischen Europa und Ostasien”: Carl von Waeber (1841–1910) [Pictures of one diplomat’s life between Europe and East Asia: Carl von Waeber (1841–1910)] is a photo-book by the German researcher Dr. Sylvia Bräsel. Following the monograph by Bella Pak (B. Pak 2013) discussed below, it is the second book dedicated to the first-ever Russian diplomatic representative to Korea, Karl Ivanovich Waeber (German: Carl [Karl]¹ Friedrich

*This is a review of Bräsel (2021). It is based on Simbirtseva and Volkov (2021), which presents a general overview of the Waeber archive along with proof of its authenticity, considers its scholarly significance, and examines some misconceptions that have developed about Waeber in modern historiography due to the lack of reliable information. Because of the frequent reference to pages in Bräsel (2021), they are given simply as numbers in parentheses. Ownership of the Waeber archive rests with Dr. Sylvia Bräsel. It was officially transferred to her by the previous owner, Ebba Niefeld-von Waeber, in 2019 (6, 208).

1. Variations in the name spelling are due to the fact that he is named Karl on his birth certificate (38) but Carl on his tombstone (201).

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Theodor von Waeber; Korean: Wi Pae 韋貝, 1841–1910). It is written for a general readership, but will undoubtedly attract scholars' attention too, as it presents for the first time a hitherto unknown historical source—the Waebers' family archive. Bräsel was able to gain access to the archive when she found, through persistent effort, the diplomat's granddaughter, the last surviving member of his family, in Germany in 2015. It is this important scholarly contribution by Bräsel that we would particularly like to emphasize here.

As stated in the preface, the book recounts the odyssey of the Baltic German diplomat Carl von Waeber's family in the Russian Imperial service in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, between East Asia, especially Korea, and Eastern and Western Europe, through images and text. It would therefore be more correct to say that the book is dedicated to Carl von Waeber rather than Karl Ivanovich Waeber. The former name is how he is invariably referred to in this book—with the family prefix “von” indicating that he belonged to the nobility, to which he was elevated for his achievements in the Russian service along with his promotion to the rank of active state councilor in 1888.

According to the rules of German anthroponymy, this prefix is preserved in all mentions of his name and the names of his family members. But here we refer to him as Waeber, as he is not referred to as “von Waeber” in any official Russian sources. Under Russian law he had no right to “von,” as he received his title of nobility in Russia, not abroad, and was not included in the official lists of noble clans of the Baltic provinces. Only those German families who had lived there and had received their title of nobility by the time those territories were annexed by Russia in the eighteenth century, or who migrated there from Germany or Austria after that period but already had a title of nobility by that time, were entitled to the prefix “von” in their family name.

The book presents about a hundred previously unpublished photographs and two dozen documents from the Waeber-Maack-Sontag family archives, accompanied by Bräsel's comments. They reflect the life course of Waeber, his wife Jenny Alide Eugenie (1850–1921, née Maack), and their descendants, as well as Marie-Antoinette Sontag (1838–1922), a distant relative who accompanied the Waebers to East Asia as a nanny to their children and confidant. They are depicted in their relationships with each other, as well as with friends, colleagues, and personalities of the time. Slightly more than half of the photographs relate to their time in Korea (1885–1897). Separate selections tell of their childhood in the Baltics (Waeber and his wife) and Alsace (Sontag), as well as their final years in Radebeul, Germany and Cannes, France.

The seven single images of Waeber are of particular interest. Taken in different years on special occasions, they are sensational because Waeber's photographs

were unknown until now. They are, first of all, two ceremonial portraits in official uniform with regalia (117, 132, 158). On the right side of his chest, one can see the Star of the Order of Saint Anna, First Class. That was the highest order he ever received. It was awarded to him on March 27, 1898, shortly after his return from Korea. These portraits may have been taken on that occasion.

A rare group photo (41) captures Waeber presumably in the last year of his studies (1865) at Saint Petersburg University. Along with three fellow students, he stands behind the prominent Sinologist V.P. Vasiliev (1818–1900), with two other professors seated at a table.

Another rarity is a photo of Waeber and his interpreter (presumably Kim Hongnyuk) in his office at the Russian diplomatic mission in Seoul (129). Bräsel dates it to the time of King Gojong's stay there (February 11, 1896–February 20, 1897). In total, she attributes five photos to this historical period. These are, first of all, the portraits of Waeber standing with a scroll at the entrance to a Korean traditional building (128) and sitting with a book in the Russian mission's living room, which is decorated with art objects (129). In addition, she attributes to the same period two photos (130–131) presumably taken on the occasion of the stay in Seoul of Rear Admiral E.I. Alexeev, the then chief of the Pacific Squadron. They show Waeber with the officers of Gojong's Russian guard unit, but Alekseev is not among them; thus, the photos' connection to his visit is not conclusively proven.

The paucity of photographs from this period seems to demonstrate the meticulousness with which Waeber separated the official from the personal. He had no personal space during that period: His house and his time were placed at the disposal of his royal guest, and he was not in the habit of flaunting his office.

Two documents link Waeber directly to Gojong. One is the Korean king's gift to Waeber of his own portrait with the inscription: "A photo of the great ruler of the great state of Joseon. 505th year since the state foundation" (136). The photo, dated 1897 by the European calendar, is published here for the first time (126). Where exactly it was taken and by whom is unknown. But it is obviously of professional quality. It shows Gojong in a white traditional costume, sitting in a wicker armchair against an East Asian-type screen decorated with pictures of plants and birds and looking attentively at the camera. Waeber treasured this portrait for the rest of his life. It can be seen in a frame in two 1908 photographs of the interiors of his Villa "Korea" in Radebeul, where he spent his last years from 1907 to 1910 (189, 191).

The informal relationship between Waeber and Gojong is evidenced by the invitation to a talk with the emperor "over a glass of wine" on a stamped

letterhead, signed by an official, Min Sangho, and dated 11 October without the year. Bräsel dates this to the time of Waeber's last visit to Korea in 1902 for the celebrations of the fortieth anniversary of Gojong's accession to the throne. The invitation is presented in the original (135) and translated (125) by her consultant, professor Yu Woo-ik.

Another valuable document is a previously unknown photograph of Min Yeonghwan (1861–1905), one of the most influential politicians and diplomats in Gojong's entourage, with whom Waeber “maintained very good relations” (126). In 1896, Min led the Korean delegation to the coronation of Russian Emperor Nicholas II. The photo of him sitting on a train platform in front of a steam locomotive on a cold day (134) was taken during that trip.

A selection of twenty-three photographs in various formats (86–97) depict Seoul, its surroundings and the Korean people as they were 130 years ago. Waeber apparently took some of them himself. Although other photographs in the archive are not organized in any way, these are collected in a special album with an inlaid lacquer cover (84–85), which Bräsel calls “The Korean album.” They are accompanied by explanations by Dr. Eckart Dege, a renowned German expert on Korean geography. In his opinion, these photographs reflect Waeber's geographical and ethnographic interests (80). Concomitantly, they show him as a pioneer of Korean studies in Russia, where this academic discipline still did not yet exist as such.

Among the documents are Waeber's birth and death certificates (38, 196), birth certificates of his wife (45) and Sontag (50), genealogical trees (35–36, 43–44), the circular of the Russian Foreign Ministry of July 31, 1895, appointing Waeber as envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary to Mexico (138), and Waeber's obituaries in the Radebeul press (197).

The significance of the discovery of this archive can hardly be overestimated. The history of the establishment and development of official Russia-Korea relations at the end of the nineteenth century, as well as a number of important events in the history of Korea in the pre-colonial period, are inextricably linked to Waeber's name. However, although historians have been writing about his professional activities for decades, very little personal information about him was known until now, mainly because searches had been limited to the Russian archives, which contain little information of this kind. This scarcity is mentioned by Dr. Bella B. Pak (B. Pak 2013, 11), who published the first biographical book about him. Entitled *Russian Diplomat K.I. Waeber and Korea*, it came out in 2013 in Moscow in Russian (B. Pak 2013) and was translated into Korean in 2020 (B. Pak 2020). Pak summarized Waeber's diplomatic work experience in Korea using official sources and research publications in Russian. But she was

unable to find his personal papers, and even the date of his death (January 8, 1910) in her book was given with reference to a photo of the Waeber family tombstone found on a German-language internet site. At the same time, she gave the date of his birth as July 5, 1841, following Russian archival sources, although the tombstone inscription gives it as June 17, 1841. Confusion over the main dates of his life characterizes the state of our knowledge about details of Waeber's biography to date. In this respect, Bräsel's discovery of his archive takes on particular importance.

A few words about the author, Sylvia Bräsel. She is a German philologist with a degree in German literature, who taught at universities in various European and East Asian countries until her retirement in 2018. For about thirty years, she has been involved in comparative literary and cultural studies, with a particular focus on Korea. Bräsel is also a recognized expert in Germany on the history of early (1832–1932) Germany-Korea cultural relations and a recipient of the 2009 Li Mireuk Prize, awarded by the German-Korean Society for her special contribution to its development. Her interest in the subject began in the mid-1990s, when she was a visiting associate professor at Yonsei University in Seoul. She was captivated in particular by the fate of her compatriots—the forgotten pioneers of contact between European and Far Eastern civilizations. Eager to retrieve them “from the dustbin of history” (5), she set about searching and studying their legacy and biographies. She has now authored a number of publications on these people, among whom she also counts Waeber.²

Here it is necessary to raise the issue of authenticity, because there have appeared people who claim to be Waeber's descendants without any factual basis. The authenticity of the archive found by Bräsel is, however, beyond doubt. It is proved by its unique content, presented in sufficient detail, although without a general inventory. The granddaughter's identity is confirmed by her family name, a genealogical tree (35), and a photo gallery of her ancestors. It starts with two photos, with hand-written notes on the back (37), of Johann Heinrich Waeber Jr. (1800–1858) and his wife Dorothea Charlotte (1806–1880)—Waeber's parents and her great-grandparents.

The detailed story of the archive's discovery (5) is further proof of its authenticity. Bräsel's meeting with Ebba Niefeld-von Waeber (1937–2021), a granddaughter of the famous diplomat, was a rare piece of luck. It happened 105 years after his death, thanks to the second and late marriage of his younger son Eugen (1879–1952), which delayed the change of generations. It is also

2. Information about the author was gleaned from her personal website: www.dr-sylvia-braesel.de (Accessed November 26, 2021).

fortunate that this archive has survived, at least in part, despite the two world wars in which Germany fought against Russia: The family in possession of such an archive risked being branded as Russian spies. Waeber's epistolary legacy was apparently destroyed during the period of fascism for fear of reprisals. However, scattered records of Eugen's memories remain. As a child, he lived with his parents in Korea.

Nietfeld-von Waeber is photographed next to the family heirloom, a lacquer inlaid screen once brought by her grandfather from Korea (207). For almost half a century she preserved her ancestors' relics, and thus made their publication possible. This book is dedicated to her. She passed away just days before this book came out in print. Before that, she authorized Bräsel to publicly correct the false information that had emerged in recent years about her grandfather.

As mentioned above, Waeber's portraits had been unknown until Bräsel found them in 2015. In this regard, it is worth paying attention to the "photo of Waeber" published by Pak in her 2013 book³ and also in its Korean translation, published in 2020 (B. Pak 2020, 416). The person in this photo, which Pak dates to 1878, bears no resemblance to Waeber's portraits of the 1870s in Bräsel's book (49, 63). According to Pak (B. Pak 2013, 12, 26–27), it comes from a certain V. F. Weber, "the diplomat's great-grandson," descended from Waeber's son from his first marriage named Walter, who after the death of Waeber's first wife Anna (née von Sass) was sent to a "childless brother Jacob."

However, the Waebers' lineage was documented and recorded, in particular, in the German genealogical publication *Baltische Ahnen-und Stammtafeln*. 28. *Jahrgang* (Köln, 1986, s. 55–61). And, as the family tree in Bräsel's book also testifies (35), Waeber did not have a brother named Jacob, and his father's only brother was named Karl Hermann Friedrich (Fritz). A photo together with Fritz (39) is the only one that shows Waeber as a child. The same tree shows that Waeber was married only once—to Eugenie Maak. According to the von Sass family record (*Genealogisches Handbuch der baltischen Ritterschaften*. Teil 1, 2. Livland. Görlitz, 1929. S. 872) the cavalry general Cornilii (Konrad Heinrich Johann) Kornilievich von Sass (1793–1857), whom Pak named as the father of Waeber's first wife Anna, had no daughter with such a name.

In an album of old photographs published in Estonia and the death register of Revel (today's Tallinn), Bräsel found evidence that enabled her to identify the Walter from Pak's 2013 book (6). He was not related to Carl Waeber: He was a merchant named Walter Bernhard Weber from Revel. Even his surname was

3. For his portrait on the cover of the book, see: <https://www.chitai-gorod.ru/catalog/book/1226086/> (Accessed November 26, 2021).

spelled differently (Weber, not von Waeber), and he was a “son of Jacob.” Unlike Bräsel, Pak failed to provide any documents confirming the identity of her informant. It remains unknown whose photograph she received from him and published as “Waeber’s photo” in 2013 and 2020.

Let us make clear our working hypothesis here. The search for Waeber’s photographs began when South Korean historians started working in Russian archives after the USSR/Russia and the Republic of Korea established diplomatic relations in 1990. One of them, Pak Jonghyo, authored the very first biographical article about Waeber. It was published in Russian in the journal *Problemy Dal’nego Vostoka* [Problems of the Far East] (J. Pak 1993). There was an anticipation of discovery in the air.

The search was generated, first of all, by academic interest, but it also had a political undertone. During the Soviet period, when the USSR had diplomatic relations only with the DPRK, the symbol of those relations was Lenin, the leader of the Bolshevik Party, which was believed to have played a special role in liberating the peoples of Africa and Asia, including Korea, from the colonial yoke. In the post-Soviet period, Russia’s relations with the ROK required a new symbol of longevity and continuity. Waeber, whose “outstanding role in the formation, development and strengthening of Russia-Korea relations” was first recognized by Russian historians in 1998 (B. Pak 1998, 72), became a new such symbol. This symbol required visualization. The desire to create it in the absence of any real information, but under the weight of public demand, explains, in our opinion, the appearance of the untrue “Waeber’s photo” on the cover of the Russian academic book.

Bräsel’s comments on the photos are based on a treasure trove of related information from additional sources, which she discovered in South Korea, Germany, Russia, the Baltic States, and France (5). The excerpts from old press reports, letters, memoirs, and research books and articles in German, English, Russian, and French provide numerous insights into the Waebers’ personalities. “A cultured man and experienced diplomat” and “an eloquent and charming society lady” (67)—these are just two of the many statements about Waeber and his wife made by their contemporaries that are referenced by this book. These statements come from the famous Korean reformer Seo Jae-pil (Philip Jaisohn, 1864–1951) and testify to the Waebers’ ability to win over even their political opponents, one of whom was Seo. This is an invaluable quality in a diplomat.

Although the central theme of the book is Waeber’s biography, it also contains information on the history of photography and Baltic Germans, the role of ethnic Germans in academia and state administration in Czarist Russia

before 1918; the history of Korea and Seoul, Korean culture and ethnography, among others. Such a broad coverage of diverse topics did not allow for a more detailed study and led Bräsel to some errors. For example, she reports that Gojong and his son fled to the Russian mission from Deoksu Palace (121), but in fact it was Gyeongbok Palace, and Deoksu Palace did not yet exist then.

However, some factual errors in the commentary do not diminish the significance of this book, which introduces a completely new historical source. For the first time in history, it presents real photographic images of Carl Waeber—a prominent diplomat, the founder of official Russia-Korea relations, and the first Russian professional Koreanologist, and provides previously unknown reliable information on his biography and personality. “In my experience, personal photographs and documents often produce a more enduring effect than dry historical facts,” writes Bräsel (7). It is hard to disagree with her.

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