Explorer

Robert J. Flaherty, in his early years, had no thought but to follow in the footsteps of his father, a mining engineer. The boy grew up around mining camps of northern Michigan and Canada, with miners and Indians as companions. Later the father became a prospector searching the Canadian wilderness for mineral resources—for United States Steel and other corporations. Sometimes he took young Bob with him on these explorations, traveling many weeks by canoe in summer and on snowshoes in winter, meeting Eskimos, mapping the country, learning arts of frontier survival.

In 1910, at the age of twenty-six, young Robert Flaherty embarked on his own career as explorer and prospector. He was hired by Sir William Mackenzie, builder of Canadian railroads. Canada had decided on a railroad to carry wheat from its western lands to Hudson Bay, for shipment to Europe. Wheat-carrying trains and ships could also carry iron and other ores. What deposits were there in the Hudson Bay area? Young Flaherty was sent to prospect. Within a few short years, in four expeditions for Sir William Mackenzie, he won fame as an explorer, showed astounding resourcefulness and stamina, mapped unknown country, and brought back reports on mineral and pulpwood resources, as well as deposits of gypsum and lignite.

In 1913 as he prepared for his third expedition, Sir William Mackenzie said to him: “You’re going into interesting country—strange people—animals and all that—why don’t you include in your outfit a camera for making film?”

Flaherty liked the idea. He bought a Bell & Howell camera, a portable developing and printing machine, and some lighting equipment. Since he knew nothing about film, he also took a three-week cinematography course in Rochester, N.Y. During his next two Mackenzie expeditions, in 1914 and 1915, he shot many hours of film on Eskimo life. The film activity, begun casually, soon became an obsession that almost obliterated the search for minerals.

Between the third and fourth expeditions he was married. Shortly afterwards in Toronto the young bride, Frances Hubbard Flaherty, recorded in her diary—February 1, 1915:
Moving pictures still the undercurrent of life. Printing almost finished and editing begun. R. refuses to let me see them until the first edition is in shape. . . . R. is full of the idea of the use of moving pictures in education, in the teaching of geography and history. Someone might well make it a life work. Why not we?  

A few weeks later Flaherty began test showings. Reactions gave cause for jubilation. The director of the Ontario Museum of Archaeology, C. T. Currelly, wrote him:

I cannot too strongly congratulate you on the moving pictures you exhibited in Convocation Hall. They are much the best I have ever seen. . . . I have never known anything received with greater enthusiasm.

Another spectator wrote to a New York acquaintance:

This will introduce Mr. Robert J. Flaherty of Toronto, who has a most interesting series of ethnological moving pictures of Esquimo life, which show the primitive existence of a people in the way they lived before being brought in contact with explorers. He is looking to bring them out in the best way. I know you are thoroughly in touch with the moving picture game from the inside and can at least give him some pointers. Do what you can. . . .

Flaherty was not ready to launch his film. Heading north for his fourth Mackenzie expedition, he obtained more footage, came back to Toronto, and continued editing. In 1916, while he was preparing to ship the film to New York, his cigarette fell from the table onto scraps of film on the floor. Within moments his entire negative—30,000 feet of film—was exploding into flames before his eyes. In trying to beat out the flames he was badly burned, and landed in a hospital. He was lucky to escape with his life.

What remained was his work print. It was not considered feasible, at that time, to make a new negative from it.

Flaherty persuaded himself the disaster had been for the best. In spite of enthusiasm he had aroused, he was not satisfied with the film. It was, he felt, too much a travelogue—"a scene of this and that, no relation, no thread." Talking it over long hours with Frances, he decided he must return to the north and make a different kind of film. It would center on one Eskimo and his family, and reveal characteristic events of their lives.

He began showing the surviving print to raise funds. It soon seemed an impossible task. The World War of 1914–18 occupied
Documentary

the attention of the world and brought other priorities. Prospecting
trips to Hudson Bay were, for the duration, out of the question. And
film people seemed indifferent. Flaherty himself, when he showed his
film, found it more and more inept. He became all the more deter-
mined to make it as he knew he must. From 1916 to 1920—while
three daughters were born to the Flahertys—he kept at the fund-
raising efforts. He earned modest funds with articles and talks about
northern exploration. His in-laws talked about getting him a Ford
agency; in his mid-thirties, he seemed to them at dead end. Then, as
the war ended, the fur company Revillon Frères began to take inter-
est in his proposals, and in 1920 Robert Flaherty finally headed north
again. He was to get $500 a month for an unstipulated period, $13,000
for equipment and technical costs, and a $3000 credit at Port Harris-
on for “remuneration of natives.” It took him two months to reach
this subarctic post on the northeast coast of Hudson Bay. He stayed
sixteen months.

He knew now how he must proceed. The full collaboration of Es-
kimos had already become the key to his method. This seemed a
philosophical necessity but also, in working alone, a practical neces-
sity. Some of the Eskimos soon knew his camera better than he did:
they could take it apart and put it together—and did so, when the
camera fell into the sea and had to be cleaned piece by piece. They
scoured the coast for driftwood to help him build a drying reel for his
film.

As his main character Flaherty chose a celebrated hunter of the
Itivimuit tribe of Eskimos—Nanook. Nanook became chief fountain-
head of film sequences. His zeal for the “aggie”—the film—came to
know no bounds. One of his first suggestions was a walrus hunt, done
as in former days, before the explorers came.

“Suppose we go,” Flaherty said to him, “do you know that you
and your men may have to give up making a kill, if it interferes with
my film? Will you remember that it is the picture of you hunting the
iuvik that I want, and not their meat?”


In a diary scrawled in pencil with frequent abbreviations, Flaherty
recorded his activities. On September 26, 1920, six weeks after ar-
ival, he wrote:

It has been the day of days. Morning came clear and warm. Some twenty
walrus lay sleeping on the rocks. Approached to within 100 ft & filmed

Eskimo drawing of walrus hunt—from Flaherty Papers.

with telephoto lens. Nan stalking quarry with harpoon—within 20 ft they
rose in alarm and tumbled toward the sea. Nan's harpoon landed but the
quarry succeeded in reaching the water. Then commenced a battle royal—
& Esk straining for their lives on the harpoon line at water's edge—this
quarry like a huge fish floundering—churning in the sea—The remainerd
of the herd hovered around—their "Ok ok!" resounding—one great bull
even came in to quarry & locked horns in attempt to rescue—I filmed
and filmed and filmed—The men—calling me to end the struggle by rifle—so
fearful were they about being pulled into the sea.

Flaherty later wrote that he pretended not to understand their appeal
and just kept cranking. The sequence became one of the most famous in
Nanook of the North. The scene gives no hint of the presence of a
rifle. Flaherty's focus was on traditional ways.

The work went on at relentless pace. Diary jottings noted ideas for
sequences:

Pos scenes
unloading
the port
winter
tracking
the gramophone
Xmas
sledging
medicine—castor oil

The gramophone and castor oil were the only civilized intrusions permitted in the final film—perhaps because of the Eskimo warmth and humor they elicited.

Notes on Eskimo words and their meanings punctuate the diaries. An early entry was: "Again—poonuk." Flaherty must have said "poonuk!" many times to his co-workers. He showed them every sequence immediately. If it seemed unsatisfactory, or if he wanted an additional shot from another angle or distance, the action was repeated.

Problems mounted. Sometimes it was so cold that film shivered into bits like "so much thin wafer glass." Some sequences involved long journeys with overnight stops in igloos built en route. A trip of many weeks to film a "polar bear aggie"—a dangerous project urged by Nanook—almost ended in disaster. They found no bear and, for weeks, no food for men or dogs. Halted many days by blizzards, they huddled in an igloo as its dome grew black with smoke and dripped black drops. They barely survived the trip. On the way back they used film to kindle a fire.

The building of an igloo became one of the most celebrated sequences in the film. But interior photography presented a problem: the igloo was too small. So Nanook and others undertook to build an outsized "aggie igloo." During the first attempts the domes collapsed—as the builders roared with laughter. Finally they succeeded, but the interior was found too dark for photography. So half the igloo was sheared away. For the camera Nanook and his family went to sleep and awoke "with all the cold of out-of-doors pouring in." Daylight lit the scene. Flaherty was intent on authenticity of result. That this might call for ingenious means did not disturb him. Film itself, and all its technology, were products of ingenuity.

Printing his footage called for considerable ingenuity. Flaherty found that the light from his portable generator fluctuated too much. In his hut he therefore cut an aperture the size of one 35mm frame—and blocked out all windows. With the printing machine screwed to the wall, he used the sun for light, regulating the intensity with bits of muslin.

Quantities of negative shot during midwinter were developed in a rush in March and April of 1921. All available hands were recruited. The vast amounts of water needed were hauled up through a hole chiseled in six feet of ice and were then pulled by a ten-dog team and a fourteen-foot sledge to Flaherty's quarters, to be poured into wash tanks and later hauled away again. On some days tons of water were hauled. Keeping it free of fur hairs was a problem.

Late that summer Flaherty headed back to civilization. Pointing to the countless pebbles on the beach, he told Nanook that people in such numbers, far southward, would see the Inuit—"we the people," as they called themselves—in actions they had filmed together.

That winter Nanook of the North reached final form at the editing table. Flaherty had help from an assistant editor, Charles Gelb, but he himself dominated every moment. The editing process was undoubtedly helped by Flaherty's experience and dissatisfaction with the earlier film. This time he had been able to anticipate editing problems, providing crucial close-ups, reverse angles, and a few panoramic movements and tilts to yield moments of revelation. Flaherty had apparently mastered—unlike previous documentarists—the "grammar" of film as it had evolved in the fiction film. This evolution had not merely changed techniques; it had transformed the sensibilities of audiences. The ability to witness an episode from many angles and distances, seen in quick succession—a totally surrealistic privilege, unmatched in human experience—had become so much a part of film-viewing that it was unconsciously accepted as "natural." Flaherty had by now absorbed this machinery of the fiction film, but he was applying it to material not invented by a writer or director, nor performed by actors. Thus drama, with its potential for emotional impact, was wedded to something more real—people being themselves.

A few moments in the film reflected earlier documentary styles. Characters occasionally glanced at the camera as though at a film maker. Nanook, grinning over the gramophone, testing a gramophone disc with his teeth, looks at the camera as though for agreement and approval; his child, tasting castor oil, shares his pleasure with a smile to the camera. These seem holdovers from travelogue—characters posing for the camera, demonstrating their quaintness. Such shots soon vanished from Flaherty's documentary language.
In his subtitles Flaherty was especially felicitous. They showed a rare gift for word-choice—“the rasp and hiss of driving snow”—and for conciseness. They never overexplained. “Now only one thing more is needed,” a subtitle tells us as Nanook, having apparently completed an igloo, starts to cut a block of ice. Audiences do not know, for the moment, the purpose of the “one thing more.” They soon discover: a square of snow is cut from the igloo, and the ice becomes a window. It is even equipped with a snow reflector, to catch the low sun. The sequence has often brought applause. Part of the satisfaction lies in the fact that the audience has been permitted to be, like Flaherty himself, explorer and discoverer.

Similarly, when Nanook has harpooned an unseen creature through a hole in the ice, and we see him in a grotesquely acrobatic rope-tug, sometimes winning but sometimes skidding head over heels toward the hole as the antagonist gains momentum, Flaherty does not immediately identify the unseen creature as a seal. Again he allows us the joy of discovery.

Especially valuable to the film are glimpses of children and their

relations with others. During the igloo-building we see a child determinedly shooting arrows at a small snow-animal. A subtitle says: “To be a great hunter like his father.” Finishing the igloo, Nanook turns to give him a brief bow-and-arrow lesson, then warms the child’s hands in a moment of affection and intimacy, remote from travelogue.

Early in 1922 Nanook of the North, a product of two decades of exploring and almost a decade of film activity, was ready for distributors. First to see it was a group from Paramount.

Paramount was then emerging as a leading force in an American film industry that had seized world leadership. The 1914–18 World War had choked off production in France—the prewar leader—and had almost halted it in England and Italy. The American industry, expanding fantastically while establishing itself in Hollywood, had filled the vacuum. By the end of the war huge American production-distribution-exhibition combinations were supplying the screens of the world. Each felt it understood what audiences wanted: its worldwide distribution records held the answers.

At the Paramount screening of Nanook of the North, as Flaherty
later described it, the projection room was blue with smoke before the film was over. Then most of the men simply left the room.

The manager came up and very kindly put his arm around my shoulders and told me he was terribly sorry, but it was a film that just couldn't be shown to the public. He said that he had tried to do such things before and they had always ended in failure. He was very sorry indeed that I had gone through all that hardship in the North, only to come to such an end, but he felt he had to tell me and that was that.

Four other major distribution companies reacted similarly. One executive explained that the public was not interested in Eskimos; it preferred people in dress suits. But finally the Pathé organization—like Revillon, of French origin—accepted the film for distribution and was able to open it at the important Capitol theater in New York on June 11, 1922—with immediate success. Most critics found it a revelation. “Beside this film,” said the New York Times, “the usual photoplay, the so-called ‘dramatic’ work of the screen, becomes as thin and blank as the celluloid on which it is printed.” The critic found it “far more interesting, far more compelling purely as entertainment, than any except the rare exceptions among photoplays.” Reviewing the films of the entire year, Robert E. Sherwood said of Nanook of the North:

It stands alone, literally in a class by itself. Indeed, no list of all the best pictures of the year or of all the years in the brief history of the movies, could be considered complete without it.

Hailed by almost all critics, the film was also a box-office success in the United States and a very substantial one abroad. Its fame spread rapidly throughout the world. European critics vied with each other in superlatives. A French critic compared the film to Greek classic drama.

Flaherty had spent on Nanook of the North approximately twice the amount anticipated in the original arrangements. The total production cost came to $53,000. Such excess expenditures became a Flaherty habit. Revillon loaned the additional funds, to be repaid from distribution income; it recouped this investment and made a substantial profit, as did Flaherty. Documentary suddenly acquired a financial legitimacy it had not had for years. Paramount, first company to reject Nanook of the North, also became first to reconsider its stance. Jesse Lasky of Paramount proposed sending Flaherty anywhere he wanted to go to bring back “another Nanook.” Contract talks began, soon centering on the South Seas.

The ultimate in commercial accolade came from the Broadway music world with the appearance of the song Nanook:

Polar bears are prowling,
Wintry winds are howling,
Where the snow is falling,
There my heart is calling:
Nanook! Nanook!

The chorus went:

Ever-loving Nanook,
Though you don’t read a book,
But, oh, how you can love,
And thrill me like the twinkling northern lights
above. . . .

Much later the Flahertys, in Berlin, found the smiling face of Nanook on the wrapper of an ice-cream sandwich—a “Nanuk.” When Nanook died on a hunting trip two years after the appearance of Nanook of the North, the event was noted by newspapers throughout the world. When documentary film makers from many lands were asked thirty years later, on the occasion of the 1964 Mannheim film festival, to select the greatest documentaries of all time, Nanook of the North led the list.

While establishing a new genre, which has become firmly fixed in documentary tradition, Nanook and its creator have been criticized on various grounds. In this film as in later films, Flaherty exposed his characters to extreme dangers. To be sure, they welcomed and even sought these dangers, and this suggests the kind of dedication they came to share with Flaherty. Nanook, who urged the most perilous sequences, may well have sensed in the aggie a kind of immortality for the Inuit and himself. In spite of his prowess in the film, he was apparently already ill. A Flaherty diary entry notes that one night he coughed splotches of blood on the wall of their igloo.

Flaherty was a man of immense charm; his blue eyes riveted attention. Of imposing physique, he was a prodigious worker, ebullient companion, yarn-spinner, hard drinker, chain-smoker, and spared neither himself nor others. He loved music, and took his violin and phonograph records with him to the subarctic to entertain the Eskimos. He was an admirer and collector of Eskimo carvings and drawings; his photographic compositions in Nanook often suggest Eskimo drawings: small figures in a vast expanse of white.

But his total absorption in the Eskimo, and the nature of Nanook of the North and subsequent Flaherty films, seem also linked to his own conflicts. His first contacts with primitive people came early, and were dismaying. Indian hangers-on at the mining camps, who sometimes came to his mother's kitchen for food and warmth, were a pitiful lot, bearing the marks of civilized diseases, including alcoholism. Many had hacking coughs. He later described his mother as in tears over them. "It is too awful," she would say, "what the white man has done to them." When Flaherty first met Eskimos, he saw the same deterioration at work. But as he went further north, where contacts with explorers, prospectors, and entrepreneurs had been less extensive, he had glimpses of what seemed an earlier nobility. On this he riveted his attention.

He had reasons for doing so. One was a growing sense that he himself represented the cultural destruction that troubled him. He had originally plunged with all his heart into the role of explorer and prospector; before Nanook, his own father was his hero. Yet as he entered the Eskimo world, he knew he did so as the advance guard of industrial civilization, the world of United States Steel and Sir William Mackenzie and railroad and mining empires. The mixed feeling this gave him left its mark on all his films.

Flaherty did not come to grips with this inner conflict; he relentlessly avoided it, in Nanook as in most other films, by banishing the intruder from the world he portrayed. Flaherty wrote:

(I am not going to make films about what the white man has made of primitive peoples. . . .

What I want to show is the former majesty and character of these people, while it is still possible—before the white man has destroyed not only their character, but the people as well.

The urge that I had to make Nanook came from the way I felt about these people, my admiration for them; I wanted to tell others about them."

The urge to capture on film the nature of rapidly vanishing cultures has been pursued also by anthropologists, who have given it the name "salvage ethnography." Flaherty was doing such work for deeply personal rather than scholarly reasons, but the outcome was similar. It has been called "romantic" in that Flaherty was not recording a current way of life but one filtered through memories of Nanook and his people. Unquestionably the film reflected their image of their traditional life. Yet a people's self-image may be a crucial ingredient in its culture, and worth recording. Anthropologists, while aware of the distorting lens, study it with care. In effect, so did Flaherty.

John Grierson, a Flaherty apostle, was also a frequent critic of the "romanticism" of Flaherty. "Consider," Grierson wrote later, "the problem of the Eskimo. . . . His clothes and blankets most often come from Manchester, supplied by a department store in Winnipeg. . . . They listen to fur prices over the radio, and are subjected to fast operations of commercial opportunists flying in from New York. . . ."
But Flaherty knew all this; he was aware of the “fast operations.” In a sense he had been part of them. His concern now was not to produce an exposé, but to celebrate what he valued. To this, generations have responded.

During the following half-century the fiction films of the early 1920’s became museum curios—dress suits and all—but _Nanook of the North_ retained astonishing validity, an aliveness scarcely affected by time.

By 1923 Robert Flaherty, with a Paramount contract and a roomy budget—“Write your own ticket,” Jesse Lasky had said—was organizing an expedition to Samoa in the Pacific, this time with Frances Flaherty, their three daughters, an Irish nursemaid, and his brother David Flaherty. Robert Flaherty was world-famous, creator of a new kind of film, and from the South Seas he was to bring back “another _Nanook._”

The genre, the tradition he had launched, was now in deep trouble. Behind _Nanook of the North_ had been twenty years of exploring and living with Eskimos. The same process was now to be compressed into a year or two—which to Hollywood seemed a long time.

The Flaherty group headed for the village of Safune on the island of Savai‘i. There they had been told they might find—before it was too late—the old Polynesian culture as it had been before the traders and missionaries came. This gave the new project a thrust similar to that of _Nanook of the North_.

The start was encouraging. When the people of Safune realized that Flaherty did not want to film them in the clothes the missionaries and traders had brought them, they were surprised and then deeply moved. “It seemed a new idea to them,” wrote Flaherty later, “that neither Christ nor we, the papalangi, really wished to see them in white man’s clothes. Through the influence of the missionary it had come about that the Samoan who had only a siapo was looked down upon.” Urged by Flaherty, the chief asked all to wear siapos. It seemed to precipitate a reliving of old days, a remembering of things almost forgotten.

But all this could not make “another _Nanook._” The struggle for survival that had been a central element in _Nanook_ hardly existed in Samoa. Flaherty had read about sea monsters but there were none. Nature was benign. Food fell from the trees. To find a climax for his film, Flaherty finally revived the painful ordeal of tattooing, a Poly-
nesian manhood-initiation rite that had almost become extinct through missionary influence.

Moana, released in 1926, was hailed by some as a worthy successor to Nanook of the North. A film of great pictorial beauty, it was called an “idyll” by some critics—the sort of praise-word that has often kept audiences away. Paramount tried to promote the film as “the love life of a South Sea siren,” but audiences lured by this were bound to be disappointed. Moana failed at the box office. The failure virtually ended Flaherty’s association with big-studio Hollywood. An American Indian film project was started under William Fox auspices, but was soon afterward halted.

Flaherty was still a world figure. Proposals and invitations poured in. Would he like to make a film in Iceland? Australia expressed interest in a Flaherty visit. Such proposals generally came without budgets. The German director Fred Murnau, sick of Hollywood, wanted Flaherty to work with him on a film on Bali; after long negotiations, the project was abandoned. Flaherty worked briefly with Murnau on Tabu—a fiction film more Murnau than Flaherty.

Flaherty wanted to make a film in the Soviet Union about one or another primitive tribe in Siberia, but he received no encouragement from Soviet officials. Stress on the virtues of primitive cultures was not likely to have high priority among the Soviets. After Moana, eight years passed before another Flaherty-style documentary appeared.

But primitive-people films by others meanwhile followed the Nanook success. The 1925 feature-length documentary Grass, by Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack—the latter had been a combat photographer in the 1914–18 World War—was distributed by Paramount with much success. It portrayed a staggering migration of 50,000 people over the Zardeh Kuh mountains in Turkey and Persia in search of grass for their herds. The crossing of the torrential Karun river with loss of life among men, women, children, goats, sheep, donkeys, horses, provided one of the most spectacular sequences ever put on film. The photography, sometimes from near positions and sometimes from mountain tops, was often breathtaking. But the migrants remain a mass of strangers to the audience; no individual portrait emerges from them. And the final emphasis was not on what they had endured but—in a brash display of egotism—on the heroic accomplishment of the film makers. The same team followed in 1927 with Chang, commissioned by Paramount and filmed in Siam, and
ostensibly following a Nanook pattern: a family struggling for survival, in this case against jungle animals. But the impressive animal sequences were set in a story framework that must have been part of Hollywood pre-planning, along with pretentious subtitled dialogue. Kru, a Lao tribesman, tells his child:

"The very last grain of rice is husked, O very small daughter!"

At a moment of crisis, a Lao call to battle:

"Out, swords! Out spears! Out, O Brave Men! Help us, O Lord Buddha!"

From their documentary beginnings the Cooper-Schoedsack team was clearly veering in other directions, more in line with studio ideas. They had their ultimate success a few years later with King Kong.

A more authentic project was the French film The Black Cruise (La Croisière Noire, 1926) by Léon Poirier—like Murnau, a temporary fugitive from fiction. Sponsored by Citroën, it recorded an unprecedented automobile journey from the northern to the southern reaches of Africa, and on to the French island colony of Madagascar. The feature-length project provided occasion for countless vignettes of tribal and village life. Again, no individual portraits emerge, and the expedition's interest remains superficial, with stress on the bizarre. Yet the record of such a journey inevitably offered documentary values, and preparations for a similar Citroën-sponsored Asian journey, from Lebanon to Indochina, were begun in 1929. Titled The Yellow Cruise (La Croisière Jaune) the film did not reach completion until many years later.

The explorer-as-documentalist tradition received some of its most tawdry contributions in the work of Mr. and Mrs. Martin Johnson, who had completed their first travelogue in 1912 and were still successfully at it two decades later. Self-glorification was the keynote. Unabashed condescension and amusement marked their attitude toward natives. They started Congorilla—about "big apes and little people"—in 1929 as the transition to sound was under way, so they included brief sound sequences and a narration to make it "the first sound film from darkest Africa." Both Johnsons were constantly on camera in sequences demonstrating their courage or wit, or both. In a forest clearing we see them recruiting forty "black boys" as carriers. When one gives his name, it sounds like "coffee pot" to Mrs. Osa

Johnson, so his name is written down as Coffee Pot. Johnson's narration speaks of "funny little savages," "happiest little savages on earth." His idea of humor was to give a pygmy a cigar and wait for him to get sick; to give another a balloon to blow up and watch his reaction when it bursts; to give a monkey beer and watch the result. During a shot of a crocodile opening its mouth, Johnson's narration comments: "Gee, what a place to throw old razor-blades." To catch two baby gorillas, seven huge trees are chopped down, isolating the gorillas in a tree in the middle; then it is chopped down.

A decade after Nanook of the North the explorer-as-documentalist was clearly in decline. The creator of the genre and of its greatest triumph seemed himself to be edging into obscurity. But meanwhile other documentary genres were moving to the fore—one of these, under the impact of huge social change.

Reporter

Denis Arkadievich Kaufman (1896–1954), known in film history as Dziga Vertov, was one of three sons of a librarian in Bialystok, in the