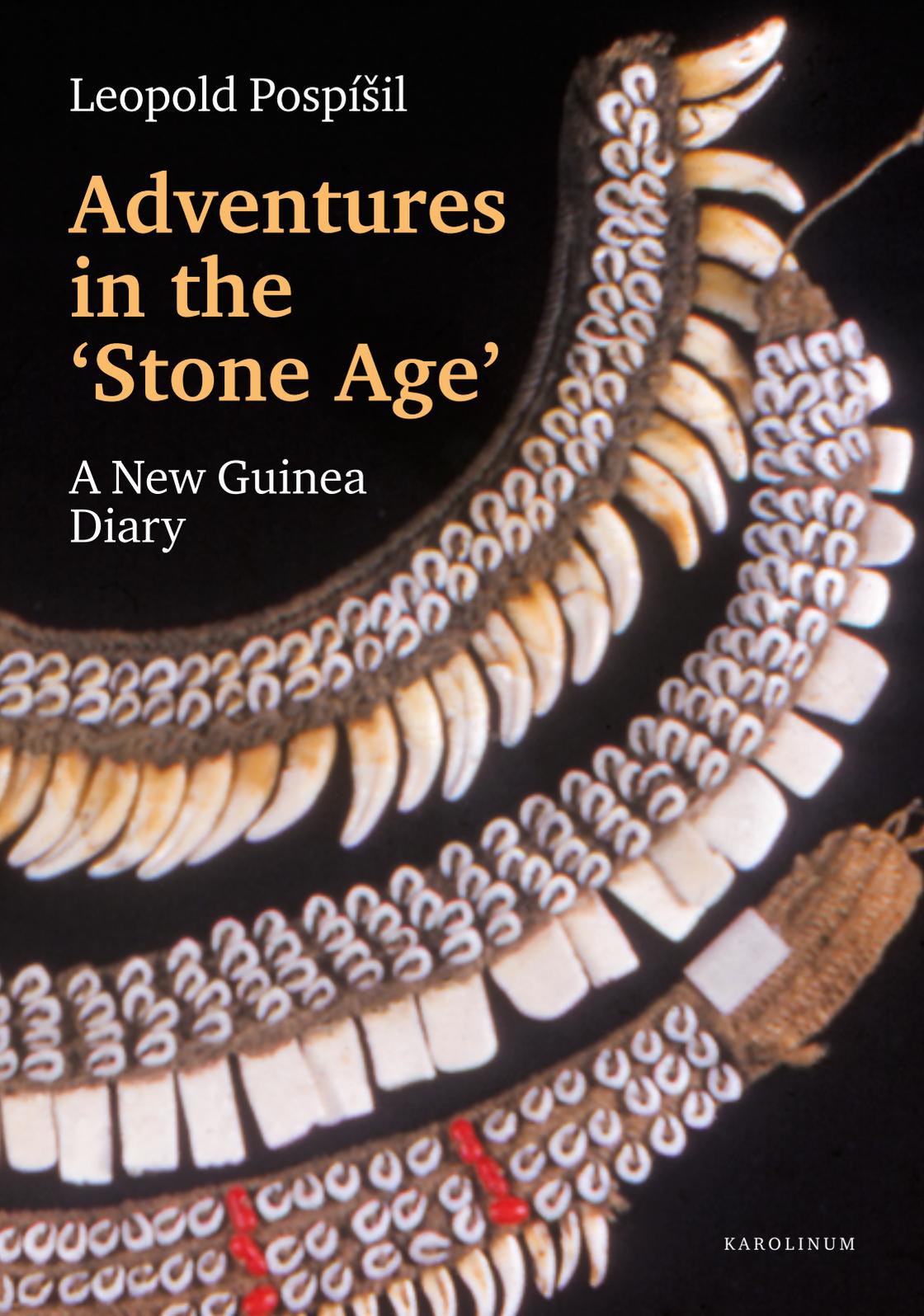


Leopold Pospíšil

Adventures in the 'Stone Age'

A New Guinea
Diary



KAROLINUM PRESS

Karolinum Press is a publishing department of Charles University

Ovocný trh 560/5, 116 36 Prague 1, Czech Republic

www.karolinum.cz

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© Edited by Jaroslav Jiřík and Martin Soukup, 2021

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Photography © author's private collections, 2021

Language supervision and translation of afterword by Robert Russell

Set and printed in the Czech Republic by Karolinum Press

First edition

A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library
of the Czech Republic.

ISBN 978-80-246-4807-1 (pdf)

ISBN 978-80-246-4751-7



Univerzita Karlova
Nakladatelství Karolinum

www.karolinum.cz
ebooks@karolinum.cz



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Note on the Title

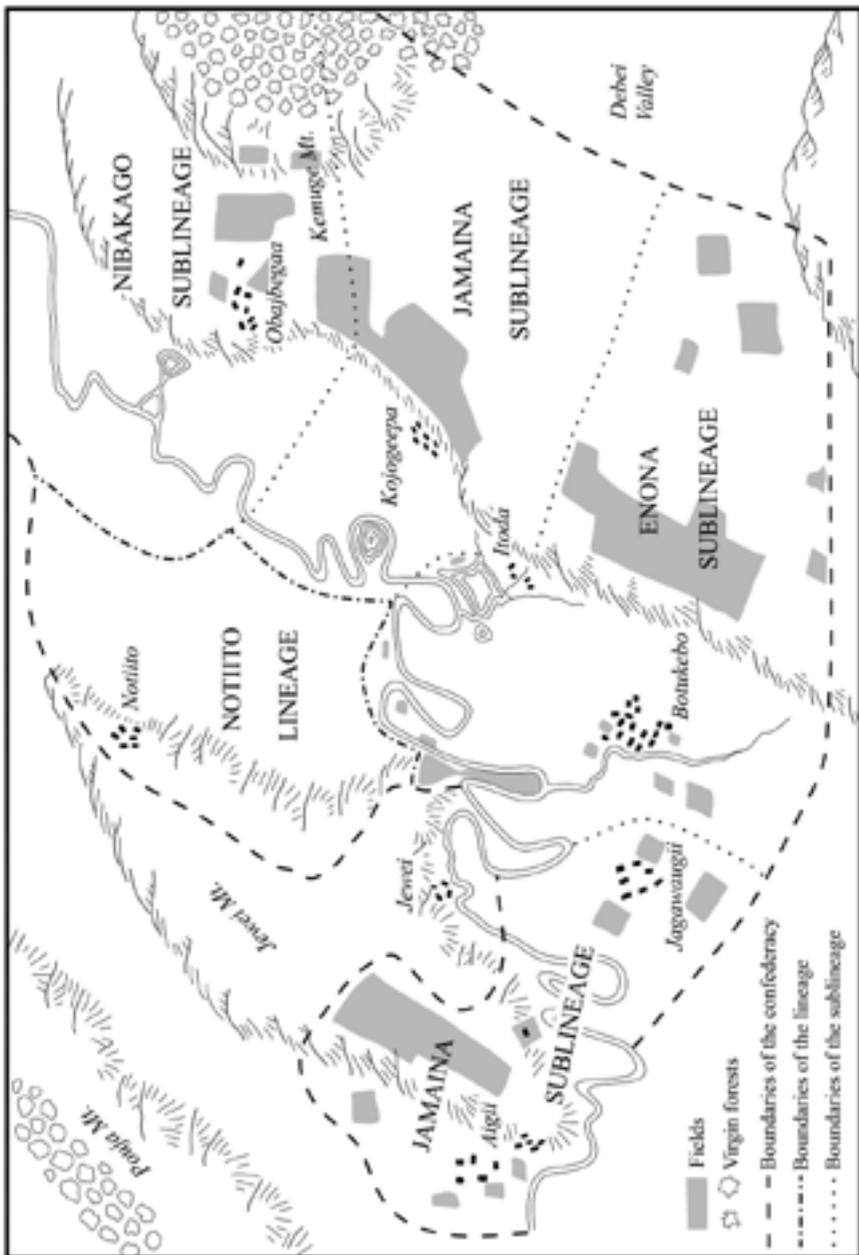
We understand that readers may be taken aback by the title of this book.

Anthropologists have been concerned for good reason and for quite some time about the power dynamics between anthropologists and their subjects, who traditionally were viewed as ‘the other.’ Already in 1983, in his seminal work *Time and the Other*, Johannes Fabian challenged the allochronistic approach of anthropology that presented anthropologists and their subjects as being from different ages or times. However, the potentially politically incorrect title of this book, which at the time of the author’s arrival situates the Kapauku in the Stone Age, has been kept for three reasons.

The first is that Leopold Pospíšil’s research took place almost seventy years ago. Anthropology’s ethnocentric emphasis on an evolutionary development from the Stone Age through the Bronze Age to the Iron Age was prevalent in scholarship and higher education at the time. Anthropology has come a long way since then, but the diary entries which form the basis for this book come from a time before such a shift in anthropology occurred.

The next reason is that when the author lived among the Kapauku, stone was indeed an essential piece of raw material — utilized for axe-blades, arrow-heads, and in cooking, just to mention a few of its uses. The importance of stone to the culture Pospíšil describes should not be discounted or underestimated.

Finally, we trust that readers of the book will quickly understand the author’s respect for the Kapauku and see that his comments about the Stone Age are usually tongue-in-cheek as he insists that the culture of the Kapauku was very often more sophisticated and advanced than those of the Western anthropologists’ observing them.



Map with local sublineages. (Scale: 1 : 50,000)

How I Became an Anthropologist

Since boyhood, I have been interested in nature: in animals, plants, stones, lightning — simply in the phenomena of the natural world that surrounded me. Later on I focused my attention on human biology, especially after having read Paul Kruif's *The Microbe Hunters*. I planned to be a physician and fantasized about becoming another Semmelweis or Robert Koch. My life and intentions radically changed with the occupation of my country, Czechoslovakia, by the Nazis in 1939. All Czech universities were closed, my father was taken away to the German concentration camps — Dachau and later Buchenwald — and thus another interest came to occupy my mind. I wanted to know how it was possible that my German friends, who came from good, usually Christian families, could become SS men, young men who before had played and skied with me and taught me their language. Now they would not hesitate a minute to kill me for the glory of Hitler and his Reich. Thus my other interest arose — in the social sciences and the study of social control. This interest was fortified by the involvement of non-Nazi intellectuals in Marxism-Leninism, a system as murderous and vicious (if not more so) than Nazism itself. My basic question was: How can decent and often well-educated people, indeed even scholars, be brainwashed into believing outdated and demonstrably false theories from the nineteenth century? I have studied these theories, always checking them against empirical facts, and regardless of who said what and how important and popular they were. I have always been interested in what actually and objectively existed out there, so that for me the only authority has been objective reality rather than the dogmatic -isms and proclamations and prophecies of commonly regarded “wise” men and women. In fact many of them have not appeared to me to be really wise.

In 1945, after the “liberation” of my country from Nazism, the safe return of my father from the German concentration camps (only to

be imprisoned a few years later by the communists), and the opening of the universities, my interest in biology re-emerged and prompted me to enrol in the medical school of my city of birth, and to study anatomy, biophysics, and biochemistry. However, with the ever-increasing influence of communism, with the Soviet Union and Stalin in the background, and the imprisonment of my father, this time by the illustrious followers of Marxist doctrine, my interest in social control and socio-psychological phenomena were again aroused. I quit the study of medicine and, of necessity, enrolled in the law school of Charles University of Prague — in the absence of any proper social science programs, this was the pursuit of knowledge closest to my interest. In 1948 I completed all the obligatory law courses; unfortunately, law was unable to answer all my burning questions and so I turned to philosophy, which I continued to study in Germany after my escape from Czechoslovakia following the communist takeover in 1948. I finally received my doctoral degree in law from my Czech alma mater, but not until the collapse of communism, in 1991.

Although philosophy showed me some interesting avenues of thought and taught me logic, it failed to provide me with unambiguous answers based on solid empirical evidence. So when I arrived in the United States I studied first economics and then sociology, receiving a bachelor's degree in the latter discipline. Again, however, I became dissatisfied, and this time I meandered into anthropology. Here, for the first time, I received answers to some of my inquiries, based upon cross-cultural empirical evidence. At last I had found a discipline that was neither arbitrarily limited to a single segment of culture (as are economics, sociology, political science, and psychology) nor ethnocentrically restricted to the study of Western Civilization. And so I became a student of anthropology in general, and comparative law in particular.

My professor H. G. Barnett at the University of Oregon first suggested that I should combine my past study of law with anthropology and write my master's thesis in that subject. This I did, accomplishing the task in 1952 by studying literature pertinent to the theory of law and legal and social control in fifty-five societies. In the summer of

that year I accepted an offer from Professor Edward Dozier to try my first field research among the Hopi-Tewa Indians of the Hano village of the First Mesa in Arizona. This research was brief, lasting about two months. I lived in the house of Faye Ayach, sharing my room in the pueblo with three other students and my wife. Although I had collected a heap of material on socio-political structure and social control, I did not dare to publish because of my ignorance of the language and the Tewa culture as a whole. Without these prerequisites, I knew I could not write anything definitive on the Hopi-Tewa culture. I did not want to join those anthropologists who published on people of whose language and whole culture they were ignorant. Rather, my examples were Bronislaw Malinowski and Clyde Kluckhohn. In his thorough study of the whole culture and language of the Trobriand Islanders, Malinowski introduced the participant-observer method. And Kluckhohn's long-term study of the Navajo Indians provided the very important dimension of time.

My first opportunity to carry out such a definitive study came at Yale University, where I had to decide on a culture and topic for my Ph.D. dissertation. By then I realized the shortcomings of the various theories of law, which were mostly speculative rather than based on solid cross-cultural evidence. So I wanted to design a cross-culturally valid theory of law based on solid fieldwork in several societies, complemented only by the necessary library research of the pertinent anthropological literature. These societies had to be at different evolutionary stages (hunters and gatherers, tribesmen, chieftainships, and civilized societies) and, as far as possible, unaffected by the influence of colonization. It had become clear to me that as their first task colonial governments destroy, of necessity, native legal systems by imposing their own law and "justice," and that my colleagues writing on such societies typically studied remnants of the aboriginal legal systems — some sort of "decomposed legal cadavers" — rather than viable systems of social control.

Thus my first choice was to go to the southern part of the Guianas or to the northern part of the Amazon Basin to study an isolated Indian tribe. However, my professor George Peter Murdock talked me

out of this scheme by pointing out that I would have to study another Western language (Portuguese) and travel many miles into the interior, while there were still unexposed societies in the eastern part of New Guinea, not far from the coast, where the official language of the colony was English. So I settled on New Guinea. I corresponded with Siegfried Nadel at the Australian National University, asking for advice and possible support. His answer was not satisfactory to me: there would be support, but I would have to get my Ph.D. at his university. Then I had a stroke of luck. During the spring semester of 1954 at Yale there was in our department a visiting professor from Utrecht University, Theodore Fischer. He and Professor Murdock recommended I do my research in the western part of New Guinea (then a Dutch colony) that had the anthropology professor Jan Van Baal as its governor. In subsequent correspondence he expressed interest in my project and promised support and permission to conduct my research in "an uncontrolled territory," a place where most of the people had never seen a white man. This was a very exciting offer, and I accepted the invitation immediately.

In September 1954 I left New Haven by train to Oregon, where I stopped to visit my parents. From Portland I flew to Hawaii and, after having spent several days there visiting friends, flew via Canton Island and Fiji to Sydney, Australia. There I stayed for six days with my old Czechoslovak friend Jaroslav Latal and, while visiting Sydney University, made the acquaintance of professors Adolphus Peter Elkin and Arthur Capell. From Sydney I flew to the international airport on the island of Biak, part of Dutch New Guinea. From a propeller plane, the sight of the island where I planned to spend about one and a half years of my life impressed me. Flying from the south at an elevation of about fifteen thousand feet we flew over the central mountain chain of New Guinea, which rose from sea level in one heave to a peak of over sixteen thousand feet (Carstenz Toppen) towering above us on the east. This gigantic rocky "frozen wave," covered with an uninterrupted green carpet of tropical rain and mountain moss forests, would be my new home for the duration of my research. After crossing the highlands we descended over the immense forested plains of the

northern part of New Guinea, bisected by silvery ribbons of rivers, half covered by the overhanging canopy of the endless tropical rain forest. From above, these plains showed no evidence of human habitation.

We landed on the raised coral island of Biak. I took a room in a simple but clean and comfortable KLM hotel located next to the airport. During my brief stay on Biak I had an exciting encounter with a waterspout, a sort of a small tornado rotating over the sea. It approached while I was lying in a sling chair on the beach near the hotel. Its rotating funnel was picking up water, lifting it into an overhanging black cloud from which it was raining back onto the sea. I wondered whether I, too, was about to be lifted, but my sling chair neighbour assured me that there was no danger, that the waterspout would disintegrate as soon as it hit the nearby coral reef. I took several pictures of the waterspout as I prepared to run for my life. And then, over the outlying coral reef, the spout disintegrated and collapsed in a spectacular cascade of colourful, glittering water drops magically illuminated by the late afternoon tropical sun.

After several days of exploring the local beaches, an old U.S. World War II airport overgrown by jungle, and rusting, crippled vehicles and landing crafts along with a downed airplane in a lagoon, I flew in an old Dakota plane to Hollandia, then the capital of the Dutch colony. There I moved to the government hotel, located next to the governor's residence in Hollandia Binnen. The accommodation was excellent. I had a room, a shower, and a terrace facing the adjoining jungle, and at six o'clock each morning hot tea was served. I shared the terrace with an Australian businessman. This arrangement was fortunate for me for several reasons. The Australian gentleman acquainted me with the life and bureaucratic procedures of the Dutch administration, along with all the local gossip. On one occasion he proved very helpful. When we were having our six o'clock tea a large venomous snake slithered out from the jungle and studied our appearance with great interest. Somehow I was more appealing than my acquaintance, and so it slid menacingly within striking distance from me. "Don't move," ordered the Australian, then screamed some words in Malay and assured me that help would be coming. Meanwhile the

snake and I watched each other. I recalled John Wayne spitting into the eyes of a coiled rattlesnake and readied myself to employ the same trick. The only trouble was that I had no experience of spitting at snakes or, for that matter, at anybody or anything. So instead of using Wayne's remedy I just stared and sweated. Finally a Kanaka, a local coastal Papuan, appeared with a machete and slowly moved behind the snake. Then with a swish of steel the snake collapsed and my ordeal was over. Without the Australian's help and the Kanaka's skill, my acquaintance would have probably had to share his tea with the snake.

After two days of waiting for an appointment with the governor I decided to try to see him without the normal protocol. I walked to the governor's mansion, the former residence of General MacArthur, passed the sentry with little difficulty, and climbed up the veranda steps. Suddenly the door to the interior of the house opened and two gentlemen stepped outside, followed by a man in a dressing gown. Here was Governor Van Baal. After saying good-bye to his visitors he turned to me and asked: "And who might you be?" I introduced myself as a student of Professors Murdock and Fischer, who supposedly had written to the governor about my arrival. The governor admitted that he was surprised I had not been shot by the sentry and remarked that probably all successful political assassins in history got close to their noble victims. After this observation he kindly told me to come to his house at the same time tomorrow, and that now he would like to finish shaving. Thus I succeeded in making a swift appointment without being shot.

The next day the governor seemed transformed. Properly dressed and very cordial, he not only granted me permission to study a group of unpacified Papuans who had never seen a white man, but introduced me to a young anthropologist, Van den Leeden, whose job it was to acquaint me with local conditions, help me with purchasing equipment, and introduce me to important members of the administration and other individuals who might help me with my fieldwork. He himself, having just finished work among the coastal Papuans of the Sarmi region, proved to be an invaluable adviser in my research. Thus I met the legendary Victor de Bruijn, an experienced Dutch administrator

known for his brave fight against the Japanese during World War II. At that time he was “kontroleur” in charge of the administration of the Wissell Lakes area, a region occupied by the Kapauku around the three lakes Paniai, Tigi, and Tage. The lakes were discovered by a pilot named Wissell who flew over them in 1937. The outbreak of war surprised de Bruijn there, so he decided to fight behind the Japanese lines with a bunch of Kapauku warriors. These exploits earned him the title “Jungle Pimpernel,” and a book of the same title was published about his experiences.

For my research area de Bruijn suggested two central mountain areas which would suit my purposes: the Grand Baliem Valley, recently “opened” by some missionaries, and the unmapped and unpacified Kamu Valley, a part of the Kapauku territory to the southwest of the three lakes that had not yet been brought under governmental control. My advisors were in favor of the Dani tribe because, they claimed, they were more formally organized and had an established headmanship, while the Kapauku were believed to be so egalitarian that they lacked any kind of leadership, and therefore also law. Since I did not believe in any truly egalitarian and leaderless society, the Kapauku would be a challenge and I made my decision. This choice had one great advantage: in Enarotali on the Paniai Lake, the only Dutch administrative outpost in the interior of western Dutch New Guinea in 1954, Marion Doble was stationed. Doble was an American missionary who, having had training in the Summer School of Linguistics, had succeeded in analyzing the Kapauku-Paniai dialect and written a dictionary of about two thousand words and a grammar of the language (1953). In previous correspondence she had assured me of her help with learning the complicated Kapauku language. Although the people in Hollandia advised me to learn Malay, an easy language, and take with me a Paniai Kapauku as an interpreter, claiming that I would never learn the Kapauku language, I decided otherwise. If a three-year-old could learn the language, I reasoned, so could I.

My fourteen-day stay in Hollandia was made very pleasant for me by Governor Van Baal. Not only did he provide me with advisors and access to supplies from the government store, he also loaned his chauff-

four and car to help me with these purchases and my visits to various administration officials. This generous loan, in one instance, resulted in a memorable a comedy of errors. One afternoon when I was swimming in Sentani Lake the governor's chauffeur appeared with his black limousine flying the governor's flag, informing me that I had been invited to a dance and reception for the captain and crew of a Dutch warship, at a restaurant on the pier in Hollandia harbour. I was to go to my hotel, change into formal dark dress attire loaned by the governor, and be driven to the pier for the festivities. There, to my surprise, the crew and the captain of the ship were lined up with the inevitable brass band, awaiting the arrival of the governor. As my car, flying the governor's flag, moved past the row of military personnel, the brass band started to play. Everybody saluted me, obviously mistaking me for the governor. Out of courtesy I responded with a salute. The car stopped in front of the captain, who was startled to see a new young governor unknown to him step out of the official car. The bandleader, also shocked, hesitantly stopped swinging his baton, while the puzzled musicians, one by one, slowly muted their instruments. Some of the guests broke into laughter; while the captain and I, trying to maintain propriety and decorum, shook hands. It was then that I introduced myself as a Yale student. I think the greatest "kick" (as he said) of the incident was had by the governor, who later even toasted me on my "promotion."

Purchases made, official and unofficial visits completed, and full of advice, I finally departed by plane to the island of Biak. Two days later I boarded a World War II amphibious plane, a Catalina, and started my journey to the highland country of my research. After a brief stop on Japen Island to deliver some people and goods, we flew into the interior of New Guinea. The flight was fascinating. To look down upon the "sea" of the tropical rain forest with its meandering silver ribbons of glittering rivers, the green vastness broken occasionally by a red blooming tree or a white heron gliding over the canopy, was certainly the experience of my life. It was extraordinary to think that all this country was still unexplored, with people living in it who had not yet experienced the blessings as well as the ecological devasta-

tion that Western civilization brings with it. In fact, my elation at nature's beauty was punctured periodically by the mental image of the future devastation civilization would exact on this virgin paradise. Humanity's greed and short-sightedness would certainly cut down those forests, destroy the habitat of exotic fauna with its marsupials and birds of paradise, expose the natives to the ravages of introduced diseases and exploitation, and destroy their culture, especially their political and legal structures and religion.

I was jolted from my daydreams by the fast approach of the foothills and mountain chains of the Central Highlands, with their towering peaks and razor-sharp tree-clad ridges. On the horizon to the east were the blue walls of the massif, which rises to the glacier-covered Carstenz Toppen, the highest mountain in the Pacific (nearly 16,500 feet). The weather was splendid, and small cumulus clouds floated beneath and around us. As we passed one mountain crest there appeared below us three huge lakes glittering like diamonds and sapphires set between the green cliffs and forest-covered mountains. We started to descend upon the northernmost and largest lake, Paniai. In the early anthropological accounts the lake's name was falsely attributed to the then mysterious inhabitants of this highland region. The mistake originated with some explorers of the southern coast of New Guinea who, being ignorant of the local language, pointed to the mountains and asked who lived there. The coastal Papuans, not understanding the question, indicated the most spectacular feature of the mountain: the huge lake. In this way, the mysterious inland dwellers became the "Paniai mountain pygmies." As it turned out Paniai was neither the name of the people nor the mountain, but a lake; and the people, who were over five-foot tall, were not pygmies.

After landing smoothly on the lake we cruised to the pier of the village of Enarotali and anchored the plane about 200 feet offshore. A motorboat with two uniformed officials set out from the pier to meet us and took us ashore. One of them was Raphael Den Haan, the district officer of the Paniai region. He addressed me in French, and so I, assuming he spoke no English, replied in the same language as best as I could. We talked about the flight and my research. Finally Den Haan

asked me, "But you are not French?" This was the biggest compliment I have ever received concerning my proficiency in French. When I apprised him of the fact that I am an American citizen of Czech origin he switched to perfect English.

At the pier, another surprise awaited me. A row of people awaited our arrival. Most were local natives, some were Dutch officials, and among them was Marion Doble. From our correspondence I had pictured her as an elderly unmarried woman. To my amazement there stood instead a most attractive smiling young blonde dressed in white and pink as though she were about to attend a Sunday church service. This was not the only surprise. I received a real shock as I looked more closely at the rest of the group. Next to this beautiful, smartly dressed young woman stood a row of natives in their local costumes, the women bare-breasted with a garment consisting of a strip of bark that passed between their thighs and tucked behind and under a belt. Their buttocks were fully exposed. The males were completely naked except for a belt holding an orange bottle gourd, a penis sheath, surmounted by a kangaroo fur stopper and held in an upright position by an orange belt. They gave the impression of all having a magnificent erection. The contrast between Marion Doble and these Kapauku, the first I had ever seen, was so stark that I lowered my eyes and did not dare look up again. As the amused Miss Doble explained to me later, "It was quite a sight to see an adult man blush." My entrance into Kapauku society was certainly not heroic.

Not everything went wrong on my arrival. I made such a good impression on the district officer that he invited me to stay in his house as his guest. His residence stood on a hill overlooking the large lake, swamps, forest-covered mountains, and a Dutch village with a picturesque Catholic church. The interior of the house was very well designed, comfortable and well furnished. The drawing room was equipped with an excellent and well-stocked bar. There were constant visitors to the place, so I could certainly not complain of boredom. Den Haan made it his business to introduce me to the local residents, especially the physician and his nurse who ran a small hospital, the parish Catholic priest of the Franciscan order, the manager of the gov-

ernment shop, and Mr. Post, the head of the Protestant missionaries of the American Mission Alliance. Mr. Post and Marion Doble invited me to several dinners, so that during my short stay I became acquainted with most of the mission personnel.

While waiting to trek into the unchartered territory of the Tago Lake region and beyond, I had an interesting opportunity to witness the trial by the Dutch government of an elderly Kapauku woman accused of murdering a child. The charge was serious indeed. The woman had allegedly killed a four-year-old boy, and subsequently eaten the body. So it seemed that I was going to study cannibals. This was another surprise for me. A young government official translated the court proceedings for me so I could follow the arguments. The accusers and witnesses were very specific in their statements and extended testimonies. The accused woman sat still, her head lowered. She did not speak at all and did not object to the charges. After the hearings were concluded the district officer decided that the evidence, although quite solid, was still inconclusive. He explained to me that in similar cases the testimonies, although well-delivered and convincing as to their accuracy, were subsequently proven to be biased and based at least partially on personal prejudice. No matter what the actual outcome, however, the charge of cannibalism was certainly a serious matter.

So, it looked like I would be studying cannibals for about one and a half years, which I did not find to be an encouraging prospect. I surveyed my physique in the mirror and concluded that since I was rather skinny, I would not be considered appetizing. I recalled that even sharks preferred fat seals and sea lions to skinny sailors and swimmers. Also, it was likely that the cannibals focused on their traditional enemies. However, this knowledge of cannibalism did not invoke any fear with me. As strange as it may appear to the reader, I was not afraid or worried of what would happen to me if I were killed. Indeed, I was not even afraid of death.

This lack of fear dated back to my childhood when, at the age of five, I was afflicted with appendicitis which ultimately burst causing peritonitis. It was 1928 when there was no penicillin or other antibiotics

to help me recover. The hospital believed I was doomed and advised my parents that my case was hopeless. My father refused to accept this verdict, boarded his private plane and flew to a summer resort where he unceremoniously picked up my vacationing uncle Robert Pospíšil, M.D. who was a well-known surgeon. Together they flew to my native town, where my uncle operated on me in his sanatorium at eight o'clock in the evening. He had to flush out of my abdomen the mess my treacherous intestine had produced. During the operation, he discovered that the cause of my appendicitis was tuberculosis of my abdominal glands, which he removed. During these operations my heart stopped and I had a strange dream that haunted me afterwards but later fortified me for the rest of my life. I dreamed I was running on a parquet floor with cracks big enough for me to fall though into a fiery glow beneath. In front of me was a brilliant golden light which I was trying to reach. Suddenly, my feet left the floor and I floated into the embrace of the golden light. What a marvellous experience! Though I survived the operation, my abdomen remained open for several months. During the first five weeks, it had to be opened and cleaned every afternoon around four o'clock. What I dreaded most was the closing of the wound with spiked clamps due to the intense pain it produced.

The aftermath of this childhood experience was a relative tolerance of pain, no fear of death, and a deep scar in my abdomen which proved to be most helpful in my New Guinea research, as I will explain later. My lack of fear of death was most helpful during my resistance to Nazism and its brutality, which sent my father to the concentration camps of Dachau and Buchenwald and three of my uncles to the various "accommodations" of the Gestapo. Beside such experiences, of course, made my initial stay in the strange "Stone Age" of the Kapauku Papuanas was not only bearable, but actually very pleasant and exciting.

After ten days at Enarotali, my leisure period ended. The district officer introduced me to some natives and helped me organize my party. He also suggested the southern and southwestern parts of the uncontrolled Kamu Valley as the most promising areas for my study.