

*Narrating History:  
The Reality of the Internment Camps in  
Anita Desai's "Baumgartner's Bombay"*

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**B**AUMGARTNER'S BOMBAY is a text deeply concerned with intrusion of history into an individual's interior life. Desai weaves Hugo Baumgartner's experience of *Kristallnacht* and pre-holocaust Germany with descriptions of India's partition riots in order to create a realistic—and historical—image of “[t]he clash between the inner and the outer [worlds]” of Baumgartner's sensibility (Desai, Interview 166). Much critical study of the novel focuses on discovering the foundations for its events and perspective in Desai's German lineage and multicultural background.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, such critical attention mirrors the novel's narrative structure, for just as Lotte attempts to piece together the fragments of Baumgartner's postcards in order to imagine his life story,<sup>2</sup> scholars seek further resonances and connections among the novel's events and biographical particulars. In fact, Desai explains that her narrative structure contains “a certain mystery, a puzzle at the heart of it” (Bliss 529) which compels the reader to tease out its sources and associations.

More significant than such narrative puzzles, however, is the historical context needed to understand Baumgartner's situation. The pivotal historical situation that frames the central section of *Baumgartner's Bombay* is the phenomenon of the Indian internment camps. Nonetheless, it is difficult to provide historical context for Baumgartner's six years in confinement; little record remains of British India's wartime sequestration of foreigners whose nationality rendered them enemies of the British Empire. In an interview with Lalita Pandit, Desai describes the frustrating process of uncovering substantive information about the conditions of these internment camps: “All I had to go

on was the material about the detention camps in the West. . . . There was material about internment camps in Canada and England, and I read all of those" (170). Faced with the surprising paucity of information, Desai relied on conversations with former captives for information to create her depiction. However, one major chronicle does record a prisoner's experience in the Indian detention camps. The first two chapters of Heinrich Harrer's *Seven Years in Tibet* (1954) recounts his own confinement in and escape from these camps.

In fact, although criticism of the novel registers no debt to Harrer, Desai clearly drew on *Seven Years in Tibet* to create her vision of Baumgartner's camp. Many events in Desai's novel parallel those found in Harrer's account. In fact, Harrer himself, an Austrian mountain climber, actually appears as a character Baumgartner encounters, the "Hüber" who later writes of his confinement experiences. Desai hints at the intertextuality by directly alluding to Harrer's record near the end of her narrative, when a former captive exclaims to Baumgartner, "Did you know that the man who escaped, that fellow Hüber, he wrote a book about the whole experience? But, Hugo, it must be read—a man we knew, shared the camp with, he goes and writes a book about it—is it not fantastic?" (198). In a fictional world composed largely of actual events, this textual reference signals the novel's intertextuality and provides historical authentication for Baumgartner's experience in the camp. However, *Seven Years in Tibet* is important not only for the positive information it provides about internment but for rendering salient the particular purposes of Desai's rendition. Selectively appropriating and manipulating Harrer's events and characters, Desai forges a vision of Baumgartner's camp which resonates with the larger themes and issues of her novel. First, Desai's use of Harrer can be read as part of the novel's insistence on narrative repetition and circularity,<sup>3</sup> for such allusions point back to Harrer again and again. Second, intertextual allusions to Harrer cohere in general with the text's other references to global historical events, like the holocaust and India's independence, for both work to establish the narrative's historical rootedness. But while Harrer's text records the sociohistorical event of internment, it also chronicles

one man's response to the experience; thus, Desai draws also on Harrer's personal experience, just as she includes her mother's German lullabies along with world events. By using Harrer, Desai speaks at once of both the public historical experience and the private; this double-voiced intertextuality is especially significant in echoing and underscoring the tension between the "inner and the outer [worlds]" (Desai, Interview 166) of Baumgartner's sensibility.

Not only is this layer of intertextual reference important in establishing the novel's larger themes, but a contrast of Desai's text with Harrer's brings into relief critical aspects of Baumgartner's characterization. First and most obviously, awareness of Harrer's vigorous physical reaction to confinement stresses Baumgartner's tractable and submissive nature. More important, the contrast between the texts sheds new light on Baumgartner's character by revealing the precise nature of his passivity. Baumgartner's compliance with captivity derives not from a listless insensibility to his surroundings—what one might commonly associate with passivity—but from an overwhelming absorption in the camp's sensory detail. Enthralled by the camp's auditory and visual attributes, Baumgartner cannot imagine physical escape from internment, unlike Harrer's character, who conducts several escape attempts. But by concentrating on his senses, Baumgartner is able, if only temporarily, to evade his troubling past. What appears as passivity, then, becomes a mode of action, Baumgartner's means of escape from a history that is always with him. Finally, however, Desai uses Harrer's escape attempts to call into question the efficacy and pragmatism of Baumgartner's escapist contemplation.

In establishing the historical veracity of Baumgartner's internment, Desai models the broad outlines of his confinement on Harrer's account, but with important differences in perspective.<sup>4</sup> Both Baumgartner in Desai's novel and Harrer in *Seven Years in Tibet* spend time at "the great internment camp at Ahmednagar near Bombay" (Harrer 20), or "the central internment camp in Ahmednagar" (Desai 106). Both are transported to a "final internment camp" (Desai 107) in eastern India, which Harrer explains is "a few miles outside the town of Dehra Dun" (21). In

describing the setting, Desai significantly excludes details from Harrer which Baumgartner could not know, such as the presence of a "summer residence of the British and rich Indians" (Harrer 21) on a hilltop community outside the camp. Desai offers little sense of the size of the compound at Dehra Dun or its relationship to other internment facilities, presumably because Baumgartner's perspective and experience precludes such knowledge. Unlike Baumgartner, Harrer recognizes this final camp as the "greatest P.O.W. camp in India" (21) and, looking down on the compound during an escape attempt, describes the prisoners as numbering "two thousand" (25).

Not only is Desai's selection and reinterpretation of Harrer's material contingent on Baumgartner's limited perspective, but it also contributes to Baumgartner's characterization. Desai appropriates many of Harrer's reactions to the camp and reimagines them to create Baumgartner's individual response to confinement. Early in the text, Desai emphasizes Baumgartner's tendency to rely on sensory impressions for conclusions about his surroundings. Baumgartner is often "[r]avished by the sights, the sounds" (91) of his various environs. Ultimately, this becomes Baumgartner's mechanism for coping with confinement. In depicting Baumgartner sensory absorption, Desai transmutes Harrer's idealistic response to his environment into Baumgartner's preoccupation with the camp's new and immediate sensory perceptions. For example, Desai recasts Harrer's awe of the Himalayas into Baumgartner's heightened sensitivity to his surroundings. To Harrer, the mountains represent freedom and reflect his own integrity and courage in the face of incarceration in a valley: "'No,' I thought, 'this atmosphere is too different from the sunlit, lonely heights of the Himalayas. This is no life for freedom-loving men'" (Harrer 20). In contrast, when Baumgartner contemplates the Himalayas, he loses himself in a sensitive apprehension of the scene: "There they were—an uneven line of smoke wavering against the pale glass of the sky, leaving upon it a faint smudge. The Himalayas. He thought he could smell them: sap, resin, wood-smoke, a tingling freshness, from that immense distance and height sending down some hint of ice and snow and streams" (107).

In addition to applying Harrer's material to Baumgartner's characterization, Desai also manipulates Harrer to underscore the risks and limitations of Baumgartner's sensory preoccupation. Harrer reacts to the "steep, straw-thatched roof[s] that had been put up to protect the sentries against the tropical sun" as an avenue to escape: "If we could climb over one of these roofs we should have crossed the two lines of barbed wire at a single bound" (23). Drawing on Harrer's description, Desai also allows Baumgartner to contemplate the same enclosure, but with a vision circumscribed by his trust in sensory impressions: "Baumgartner, looking about him, seeing the barbed wire fencing, the gates guarded by guardhouses on stilts, the barracks and the cinder paths and water tanks, knew that no one would leave, that they would all be staying" (107). Of course, Baumgartner concludes incorrectly, for the group of mountain climbers in Desai's text eventually do escape the compound. Misled by his senses, Baumgartner cannot imagine that physical confinement could be avoidable.

Baumgartner's reaction to the mountain climbers in the novel similarly emphasizes this contrast in perspective. Including Harrer and his compatriots as individuals Baumgartner observes in the camp, Desai incorporates details that accord with Harrer's text:

He heard a mixture of German and Italian voices and turned to see two or three men in lederhosen, thick boots and woollen stockings, standing in a group and talking of the mountains—Nanga Parbat, Nanda Devi, Kanchenjunga—in strangely technical terms, and he gathered they were actually mountaineers who had climbed some of those peaks before being arrested in Karachi where they had been waiting for a boat back to Europe. (107)

Much of this description, especially that of the climbers' arrest, comes from Harrer's account, which again indicates Desai's interest in realism, historical authenticity, and narrative circularity. Additionally, Baumgartner's impression of the mountaineers coheres with Desai's construction of Baumgartner as a man engrossed in his senses, for he is "[b]affled by the mountaineers' terminology" and puzzles "at their naivete, their unshaken belief that they would climb the mountains again" (107), considering the solid physical barriers between the climbers and freedom.

Both intertextually (in Desai's reinterpretations of Harrer's text) and intratextually (in Baumgartner's response to the climbers as characters), Baumgartner is estranged from the mountaineers and their belief in possible escape, for his reliance on physical impressions prevents him from imagining a physical liberation from the camp.

Interestingly, Desai inflects her portrait of Kurt, another countryman from whom Baumgartner is psychologically alienated, with intimations of the mountaineers. Kurt carries a rucksack, like the climbers, and walks "heavily as though he were struggling up a mountain" (144). Additionally, Farokh fears a kick from the young traveller's boot, "the boot in which he climbed Himalaya" (13). Desai also employs Harrer to construct portions of Kurt's psychedelic and mythological personal history. Harrer mentions encountering "deep footsteps in the newly fallen snow" (85) of the Himalayas. He speculates, "They might have been made by a man. People with more imagination than I possess might have attributed them to the Abominable Snowman" (85). Kurt, a character with an excess of imagination, also allegedly contacts such a creature: "In the Himalayas, in the snows beyond the monastery where he stayed, he had met and grappled with a yeti. The yeti had picked him up by his ears, lifted him off his feet, and hurled him down" (160).

Desai conflates two of Harrer's tales in depicting another of Kurt's "memories." On a few occasions, Harrer speaks of the Tibetan tradition of bodies "dismembered" (228) and "bones of the dead . . . broken to pieces, so that they too could be consumed by the birds and that no trace of the body should remain" (80). In an unrelated phenomena, Harrer also describes "lamas who could hold up hailstorms or call down showers of rain" (155). Desai draws on these suggestive images to design portions of Kurt's history, for Kurt tells Baumgartner that in Tibet he witnessed

corpses laid on the rocks under the sky, being cut into quarters with knives, into quarters and then into fragments, and the bones hammered till they were dust. When the men who performed this ceremony for the waiting birds saw that he was watching, they drew clouds into the clear sky, lightning out of those clouds, and made the thunder roll . . . they had loosed a storm upon Lhasa, hailstones the size of eggs, rain in sheets. (158)

Desai's allusions to Harrer lend if not a glimmer of realism to Kurt's fantasies, at least a suggestion of historical antecedents which might help us read Kurt's hallucinations as, in some sense, grounded in an experience of Tibetan myth and mysticism. Moreover, by colouring Kurt with shades of mountaineering and elements from Harrer's text, Desai draws an implicit connection between the Aryan climbers in the internment camp and the German youth who murders Baumgartner. Although not ideologically similar to Kurt, the climbers are just as estranged from Baumgartner as is the German wanderer. Both Kurt and the mountaineers perplex Baumgartner, leaving him "confused" (160) and "[b]affled" (107) by their alien concerns and goals.

While Baumgartner's dependence on sensory impressions distances him from the mountaineers and their aspirations for physical freedom from the camp, he employs this attention to detach himself psychologically from his traumatic past. What at first glance appears as a passive reaction to confinement becomes a vital tool for Baumgartner's mental and emotional escape from history. Baumgartner finds that in the camp "there was too much time and emptiness now, and into that vacuum thoughts flooded in that would have been better not to have" (118). Unlike Harrer, who often discusses his desire for the "empty spaces" (22) of freedom in Tibet, Baumgartner finds that the camp's own "empty spaces" (108) of unfilled time provide room for his troubling memories to resurface. To escape the presence of history, Baumgartner labors in the fields, observes village women make fuel from cow dung, and fastens his attention on his immediate environment: "he tried to tear his mind from the nightmare by focusing it on whatever he saw, sometimes the wasps that were building a nest in the rafters" or "the columns of ants" (119). In this situation, Baumgartner's immersion in sensory experience becomes a constructive attribute; while before confinement Baumgartner is often tricked by his trust in appearances, in the camp he can, in a sense, trick his own consciousness into forgetting and suppressing the past by immersing himself in the physical details of his environment.

To develop Baumgartner's dependence on physical sensation as a means to elude disturbing memory, Desai relies on details

from Harrer's account. Interestingly, Harrer's text does not discuss Baumgartner's form of coping mechanism. Instead, Desai appropriates particulars of camp life from Harrer and imagines Baumgartner's specific responses to them. In *Seven Years in Tibet*, Harrer describes his companion's reaction to Indian cigarettes when they escape from the camp: indigenous people offer them "those small Indian cigarettes which Europeans find so distasteful. Marchese . . . could not resist the temptation of asking for one; but he had barely taken a couple of puffs when he fell unconscious, as if he had been poleaxed!" (27). Baumgartner also partakes in these powerful diversions and reacts in a way similar to Harrer's companion: "his cigarette stank—it was a local one, wrapped in a *tendu* leaf, fierce enough to make his head swim" (110). Baumgartner, however, soon utilizes the cigarettes' intense physical sensation to avoid reliving his memories. When, arrested by worry about his mother in Germany, Baumgartner sinks into disconsolate thoughts of

*Nacht und Nebel*. Night and Fog. Into which, once cast, there was no return. No return. No return. . . . Then he would heave himself up, search for a cigarette, go and look for a match. Extraordinary how a cigarette could retrieve a man from the lip of hell and insanity. Drawing upon it for his life, he watched the others, lying on their bunks, smoking, playing cards, talking and talking. (119)

Baumgartner's sensual attention, his desire to make "his head swim" (110) in order to forget the past, appears an active and deliberate attempt at imaginative escape.

Temporarily safe from history by focusing on his senses, Baumgartner begins to imagine his environment as secure, homogeneous, and comforting. In this new stage of responding to his locale, Baumgartner draws on his observation of people who surround him in order to envision them as characters from mythologized versions of Germany. Judie Newman's article, "History and Letters: Anita Desai's *Baumgartner's Bombay*," convincingly delineates the ways in which Baumgartner imagines the compound as an idealized pre-war Germany. In addition, Desai takes details from Harrer to construct one dimension of this image, the camp's safety and its homogeneous population.



Desai's most drastic divergence from Harrer's account is her omission of the numerous ethnic details Harrer includes. While Harrer describes the camp at Ahmednagar as "a babel of conflicting opinions and talk" (20) and describes the diversity of nationalities in the camp, Desai speaks vaguely of the "'hostile aliens' from all over the country [who] poured like ants from a closed fist into a bowl of dust, and swarmed there in a kind of frenzy" (106). Although Desai retains Harrer's sense of chaotic activity, she virtually eliminates mention of non-German nationalities, with the exception of one brief reference to an Italian accent. Instead of highlighting the variety of peoples confined in the camps, Desai characterizes the camps as a great confluence of German Jews and Aryans. The English authorities in Desai are even more homogeneously minded; as one character says, "[t]hey don't even know there are German Jews and there are Nazi Germans and they are not exactly the same" (106). Such omissions help Baumgartner escape his past, for Baumgartner is able to fix his attention on the homogeneous population that surrounds him, to lose himself in the German community that forms around him.

In Desai's attempt to construct the camp as nationally uniform, the novelist excludes much of Harrer's description of the Italian camp residents. Harrer talks at length about his companion on his first major escape attempt, "an Italian general" (23) named Marchese, one of nearly 40 Italian officers confined in Harrer's camp. Not only does Harrer chronicle Marchese's particularly "Italian" traits, such as his physique and "warm southern temperament" (24), but he also describes stilted attempts at communication with the general: "At the outset we had difficulties in understanding one another. He spoke no German and I no Italian. We both knew only a minimum of English, so we conversed, with the help of a friend, in halting French" (23). In Harrer's text, prisoners struggle to accommodate each others' dissimilar ethnic, national, and linguistic traits; such labours and differences are notably absent from Desai's version. In fact, Desai further underscores her camp's unvarying German population by altering the name of Harrer's companion. Desai changes Marchese's name to Galitsino, a designation which at first glance

implies Italian nationality. However, Galitsino is not simply an Italian appellation; it is actually the name of an Eastern European region which was a former crown land of Austria. A site for conflict between Russians, Austrians, and Germans in World War I, Galitsino was divided between Germany and the USSR in 1939 and fell to the Soviets after World War II.<sup>5</sup> Considering this area's history, Marchese's name change becomes particularly suggestive, for Desai not only eliminates Marchese's Italian heritage, but also transforms him into an emblem of German and Austrian historical empire, a dominion which, like Baumgartner's impression of the camp as an idealized Germany, collapses at the end of the war.

In addition to constructing a nationally homogeneous camp, Desai also manipulates Harrer to create an image of the compound as predictable and comforting, a characteristic which permits Baumgartner to use the camp's details to avoid memories of the holocaust. One detail Desai appropriates from Harrer is the availability of publications in the camp. Harrer, naturally, uses the texts to prepare him for escape: "I now set to work to learn a little Hindustani, Tibetan, and Japanese; and devoured all sorts of travel books on Asia, which I found in the library, especially those dealing with the districts on my prospective route" (22). Desai employs the reading materials to create the camp as an "extension" (116) of pre-war Germany, for prisoners use the texts to continue developing and pursuing their interests as though no conflict had interrupted their lives. Schwarz, a scholar, "pored over books night and day, Sanskrit and Pali dictionaries, Buddhist scriptures, the Vedas, and Upanishads, and even more esoteric and lesser-known titles that he ordered through the library" (123). Although both Harrer and Schwarz read works which expand their cultural knowledge, Harrer is motivated by his desire to escape while Schwarz uses the texts to make the camp his "natural home and setting" (124). Similarly, books become crucial to Baumgartner's escape into the camp's details, for the prisoners "all became involved in some occupation that might give them the sense of continuing the life that they had led in the world outside. Some had ordered and obtained books and were studying Sanskrit, Arabic, astronomy or

homeopathy" (125). By surrounding Baumgartner with characteristics of a stable and homogeneous Germany, Desai assists Baumgartner in his attempt to escape the camp psychologically; Baumgartner loses himself in the immediate detail of his idealized, depoliticized surroundings.

With the diversity and multiplicity of Harrer's camp in mind, the image of Baumgartner's psychological escape from holocaust history becomes much more explicit, for Desai also ignores images and particulars from Harrer's account that would threaten her vision of the camp as a homogeneous community. Primarily, Desai downplays the presence in Harrer of a hostile English military force which, if included in her narrative, would undercut the progressive isolation and protection of Baumgartner's Jewish community. In Desai's novel, the "laxness of the regime" (108) of English military rule enables Nazi Germans temporarily to assume authority over the Jewish inmates. An ensuing conflict between the Nazis and Jews results in the segregation of Baumgartner's Jewish community, a critical protection from the threat of Nazi violence which enables Baumgartner to concentrate on the details of a community that is truly safe and homogeneous. Harrer describes the compound's guards and their inviolable power: "The sentry's rifle was made fast to his belt with a chain, so that no one could snatch it away" (20). Harrer's text emphasizes the English military force to such a degree that, if included in *Baumgartner's Bombay*, it would prevent the scenario which isolates the camp's Jewish population and enables Baumgartner's temporary escape from history.

Similarly, Desai excludes Harrer's account of his dangerous initial escape attempt. Harrer explains that on the road to the final settlement at Dehra Dun, he and a friend attempt to flee from the transport trucks:

At the head and at the tail of the column was a truck full of soldiers. . . . We jumped off and I ran twenty yards off the road. . . . Then to my horror the whole convoy stopped—I heard whistles and shooting and then, seeing the guard running over to the far side of the road, I had no doubt what had happened. . . . I saw Lobenhoffer: he was standing with his hands up facing a line of bayonets. I felt broken with the deadly disappointment of our failure. (20-21)

Desai's exclusion of this scene results from two analogous impulses; first, as with the general descriptions of English military might, this stunted escape attempt highlights the strength of the English personnel, a potency which, if included in Desai's narrative, would frustrate her progressive isolation of Baumgartner within a Jewish community; second, such a military presence would significantly alter the tone of Desai's depiction, for its existence would prevent Baumgartner's impression that "Deutschland, the *Heimat*, was alive here, on this dusty soil, in the incredible sun, even if it no longer lived in its native home" (127). The absence of military force escalates Desai's construction of the camp as a uniform entity; by the middle of the internment camp section the scope of nationality has constricted to an exclusive depiction of the German Jews' camp experience. Isolated and secure, Baumgartner can trust in his impressions of camp life and imagine himself at home in pre-war Germany.

Desai, in her most extensive appropriation of events recounted in *Seven Years in Tibet*, recreates Harrer's two major escape attempts, initially to emphasize Baumgartner's sense of belonging in the camp's Jewish sector. The most obvious alteration Desai makes is chronological; Harrer's second major escape attempt, in which he and his compatriots disguise themselves as Indian laborers working on the camp fence and walk unnoticed out of the compound, is first in her narrative. One fundamental reason for placing this escape before the other is dramatic: the worker escape, in which Harrer and Marchese use the thatched roofs to climb over the wire fence, is much more inventive and unusual, and by foregrounding it Desai presents a novel and intriguing version of prisoner flight. But more important, Desai's description of the worker escape highlights Baumgartner's imagined membership in his community.

Desai takes much of the detail in this scene from Harrer, for the mountain climber explains, "[o]ur plan was to disguise ourselves as a barbed-wire repairing section. Such working parties were a normal sight. . . . Two of us carried a ladder. . . . We attracted no attention. . . . [one of us] was swinging a tar pot energetically" (38-39). In Desai's version, Baumgartner, an ob-

server rather than participant, witnesses Harrer — or “Hüber” — and his friends walk out of the compound, though Baumgartner does not realize who they are:

He noticed some of the camp guards, in their uniforms, walking along the path at the end towards the guard house. He shrivelled into himself, trying to become less visible, but they did not look his way. They were carrying a ladder and some paint pots and from the way they examined the fence posts, he could see they were there to do some of the perpetual repairs that went on. He stood still, staring through the shimmer of heat at the barbed wire, and watched as they turned out of the gate, past the guard house into the dust road.

(130)

Of course, Baumgartner believes his eyes and takes the climbers' costumes at face value. When the guards announce that the climbers have been caught, Baumgartner shares his fellow prisoners' visceral reaction: “no one gasped or said anything. There was a silence, the kind that follows a blow on the solar plexus, a kick in the stomach” (131). The community's reaction to the climbers' capture in some ways mirrors Baumgartner's response to confinement: the captives respond silently, focusing their attention on the physical, sensory effects of the climber's return.

In addition to participating in the community's collective emotional response, Baumgartner assumes a privileged position as a witness to the escape, for when the community welcomes the climbers back to the camp, it simultaneously embraces Baumgartner. As the prisoners attempt “to get close enough to clap one or the other of [the climbers] on the back,” the community also overtly acknowledges Baumgartner's membership: “Baumgartner basked in momentary glory, having actually witnessed the escape” (131). Together the camp laughs “affectionately, even proudly” (131) at the climbers' failed disguise, a laughter which “provided enough of a base for friendship” (125). Interestingly, in Harrer's text, the mountain climbers' “comrades in the camp find it hard to recognize” (36) the returning escapists. In Desai's vision, however, Baumgartner's community unites around the climbers, and as a witness Baumgartner shares in the communal affirmation.

However, Desai's version of the worker escape omits a number of arresting details, which, if included in the novel, would have undermined her vision of the camp as homogeneous and sheltered. Just as Desai eliminates ethnic diversity in characterizing the inmate population, she also eradicates Harrer's many references to an Indian presence at the camp. Specifically, Desai minimizes the racial implications of Harrer's disguise. While Baumgartner sees a group of "camp guards, in their uniforms" (130), Harrer explains that "[w]orking parties consisted of Indians with an English overseer" (38). To achieve transformation into Indians, Harrer and the other climbers shave their heads and don turbans while "make-up artists" (38) color their faces black. Harrer describes their reactions: "We could not help laughing when we looked at one another. We looked like masqueraders bound for a carnival" (38). Desai's description contains none of this ethnic detail, nor its pejorative implications. Instead, Baumgartner explains that the climbers used injurious black dye to color their hair (presumably in an Indian disguise), which eventually causes their hair to fall out. Instead of having the climbers laugh at becoming Indians, Desai has the other camp members chuckle good-naturedly at the climbers' foolish baldness. While Desai does not invent these particulars (in an earlier escape attempt Harrer describes a similar experience with harmful dye), she revises the disguise scenario to eliminate laughter at Indian stereotypes; she also omits the "comic" detail of one dilatory mountain climber suddenly appearing as a black-faced Indian "swinging his tar pot energetically" (39). Additionally, Desai erases any sense that Indians are complicit in the confinement, that they exist as guards or camp workers.

Even the English fade into the background of Desai's worker escape scene. Desai omits the threat of capture Harrer endures, as he focuses on the omnipresent fear of discovery by English. Emphasizing his success in eluding the guards, Harrer explains they were "only stopped once, when the sergeant major rode by the main gate on his bicycle" (39). Harrer is proud that their disguise attracted little attention: "it was comforting to see [the guards] saluting smartly and obviously suspicious of nobody" (39). In contrast, when it mentions the English presence, Desai's

account underscores the feeble character of the English: "The men were given twenty-eight days in solitary confinement. That was not too bad, they thought, typical of that boneless British commandant. Everyone sniggered, delighted" (131). Just as Desai eliminates descriptions of camp guards and Harrer's first brief escape attempt, she downplays the proximity and command of the English military force in order to emphasize the autonomy of the German community. Desai's neglect of both ethnic and military detail together demonstrates Desai's interest in crafting a specific image of her internment camp; her concern is not exclusively with historical accuracy, but rather with creating her camp as a uniform, self-sufficient community, one in which Baumgartner is able to use his immediate perceptions to escape the past.

The final escape attempt in Desai similarly amplifies Baumgartner's sense of safety in the camp, but also implicitly questions his narrow vision and impression of the community's legitimacy. In contrast to the captives' wonder at the first escape effort, the hearsay surrounding the second attempt generates a disturbing, unresolvable communal fantasy: "The rumors were wild, fearful. They had been eaten by tigers in the forest, trampled by elephants" (131). Ignorant of the mountain climbers' fate, Baumgartner recognizes a similar nescience of his fellow prisoners' attitude toward incarceration: "What was frightening was that [the climbers] had disappeared without a trace. It was like a death. How many men in the camp would have chosen that? Baumgartner wondered, knowing he was certainly not one" (131). But just as Baumgartner realizes that his outlook may not be akin to that of the men around him, he simultaneously reaffirms his estimation of the camp as a secure, protective environment: "He huddled on his bunk, finding its familiarity a comfort. He knew it was craven not to desire freedom, but it was true that captivity provided him an escape from the fate of those in Germany, and safety from the anarchy of the world outside" (131).

As Baumgartner turns to tactile sensation for reassurance, his comfort is upset by his countrymen's desire for literal free-

dom. Just as Baumgartner's initial estimation of the mountain climbers reveals his limited sensory perspective, their escape and the reaction of his fellow captives reveal Baumgartner's sensory perspective as narrow and question his assumption of the camp's uniformity. Compared with the mountaineers' intrepid escape, Baumgartner's reversion into the details of camp life appears retrogressive and impotent.<sup>6</sup> The successful escape attempt highlights Baumgartner's inability to elude the pressing reality of his past, a motif that repeatedly surfaces in the novel. Just as through Kurt the holocaust Nazis finally murder Baumgartner, through the climbers Desai terminates Baumgartner's mental and emotional escape from his anguished history.

A reading of *Baumgartner's Bombay* through the lens of *Seven Years in Tibet* illuminates Anita Desai's specific designs in constructing her version of the historical internment camp. While knowledge of Harrer's account stresses the homogeneous constitution of Desai's camp, it also brings into relief salient aspects of Baumgartner's characterization. With knowledge of Harrer, the quality and significance of Baumgartner's passivity appears much more complicated and provocative than it might at first glance. His response to the camp has little to do with the apathy or insensibility commonly associated with passivity; Desai herself has repudiated critics who argue that Baumgartner's submissiveness perpetuates "the myth of the passive Jew who walked willingly into the internment camps, a willing victim of Hitlerism" by explaining that Baumgartner represents a member of "the human race . . . hoping to escape the notice of history" (Desai, "Conversation" 523). The nature of Baumgartner's passivity, his attention to sensory detail, enables Baumgartner to stage his own temporary escape by using his mind to avoid an agonizing history. Ultimately, however, Baumgartner's escapist contemplation is effective only to a point. Just as the narrative's various intertextual allusions traverse the boundaries between art and history, forcing its reader to confront the historical substance undergirding the fiction, the mountain climbers' successful escape attempt impels Baumgartner away from his invented community back into a world of historical devastation.<sup>7</sup>



## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See, for example, interviews with Desai which plumb the depths of *Baumgartner's* historical allusiveness: Libert (54-55); Pandit (155-56, 164-65, 170-71); Bliss (521-23, 526-27, 533-34); and Jussawalla and Dasenbrock (174-76).
- <sup>2</sup> Judie Newman notices the parallel between the narrative structure and the reader's experience of the text; she explains, "As Lotte's co-readers, we become equal partners in the enterprise of decipherment" (38).
- <sup>3</sup> The progress of Baumgartner's life is epitomized in the text's epigraph from T. S. Eliot's "East Coker," "In my beginning is my end," for there is a sense of circularity in Baumgartner's futile attempts at connection and communication with the various communities he encounters. Newman notes that in the novel, "Mirroring, copying and repeating are important motifs" (39).
- <sup>4</sup> Although the novel is not exclusively from Baumgartner's perspective, he functions as its central consciousness, especially in the internment camp section.
- <sup>5</sup> Many geographical indexes describe Galitsino; my information comes from *Webster's New Geographical Dictionary* (425). Galatsino, also known as Galicia, had a large Jewish population.
- <sup>6</sup> In characterizing the mountaineers' final escape, Desai notably avoids any details from Harrer's text, primarily excluding a description of Harrer's first major escape attempt with the Italian general Marchese. As mentioned, this escape emphasizes the mountaineers' difference in nationality, a feature Desai deliberately excludes from her homogeneous internment camp.
- <sup>7</sup> Many thanks to Patrick Colm Hogan and Veronica Makowsky for their helpful comments on early versions of this essay.

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