

COVER STORY

Trapped in a Human Zoo examines tragedy

By MICHAEL KORB © ZAP2IT

An all-expenses paid trip to Europe sounds like the deal of a lifetime. It certainly was for an unsuspecting group of Inuits who were exhibited like animals in Europe in 1880.

Quebec producer Roch Brunette's documentary *Trapped in a Human Zoo: Based on Abraham's Diary*, premieres Thursday, Feb. 11, at 8 p.m. on CBC Television's *Nature of Things*.

It's the incredible story of eight Inuit from Labrador who, in 1880, departed for Europe, lured by promises of adventures and wealth,

only to realize they had been trapped in a world that time has forgotten — the world of human zoos. In fact, it's estimated that 35,000 indigenous people from around the world were recruited for these zoos.

At the time, Europeans were enamoured by the treasures colonial explorers were discovering (and pillaging) from far-off lands. Travelling zoos sprung up with all manner of exotic animals, but soon crowds grew tired of the tigers and elephants and promoters upped the ante by sending scouts across the globe looking for rare cultures ripe for exploitation.

"This is a great human interest story," says Brunette. "The P.T. Barnum of his day, Carl Hagenbeck, discovered that when he put on display Africans, Asians and Eskimos, people would pay to see their exotic features. So he brought them over to Europe for zoological exhibitions. But they were basically human zoos."

But Abraham Ulrikab, an Inuk from Hebron, Labrador, was well educated, a devout Christian and could play violin and speak multiple languages thanks to the teachings of Moravian missionaries in his area. And his curiosity to see the world (and earn money toward his

debts) convinced him to accept an offer from Hagenbeck to bring his family and another to Europe for what they thought would be an adventure.

"They were supposed to be back in a year," says Brunette. "He had heard of Europe and wanted to know what it was all about."

Unfortunately, someone forgot to get them vaccinations for small pox upon their arrival, which was a legal requirement at the time, and the unthinkable happened. One by one the group fell ill and perished while on a tour stop in Paris.

But Abraham kept a diary — the only known diary of the tens of

thousands of indigenous people brought to these zoos. His diary was returned to his homeland shortly after his death and forgotten.

A chance encounter sparked the interest of France Rivet and she began a personal crusade to learn more about Abraham and his group. Remarkably she discovered that skeletons of five of the group, including Abraham, had been displayed in a Parisian museum.

This is the remarkable story of that discovery and Abraham's modern-day Inuit leaders who are trying to bring the group home to their final resting place.