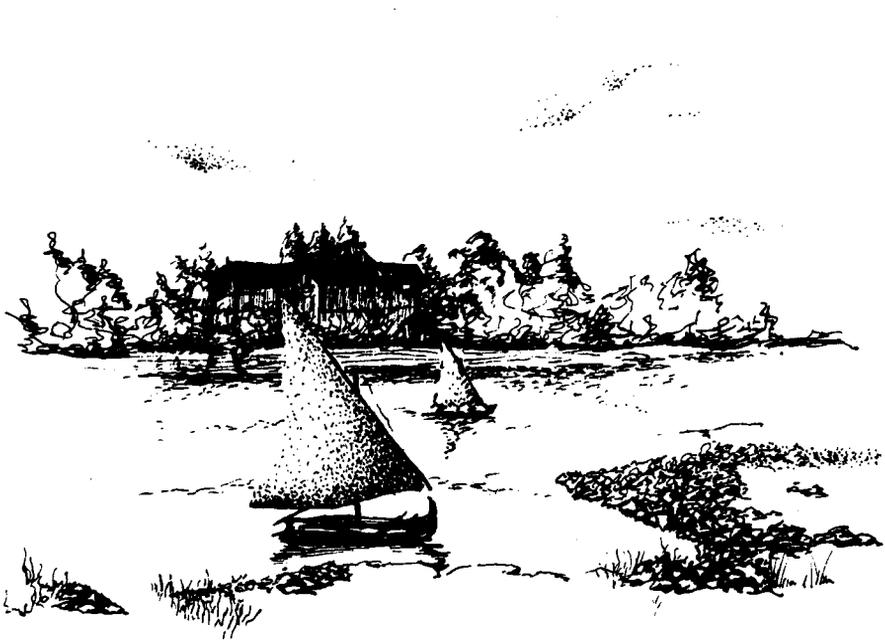


MY ISLAND IN THE NILE

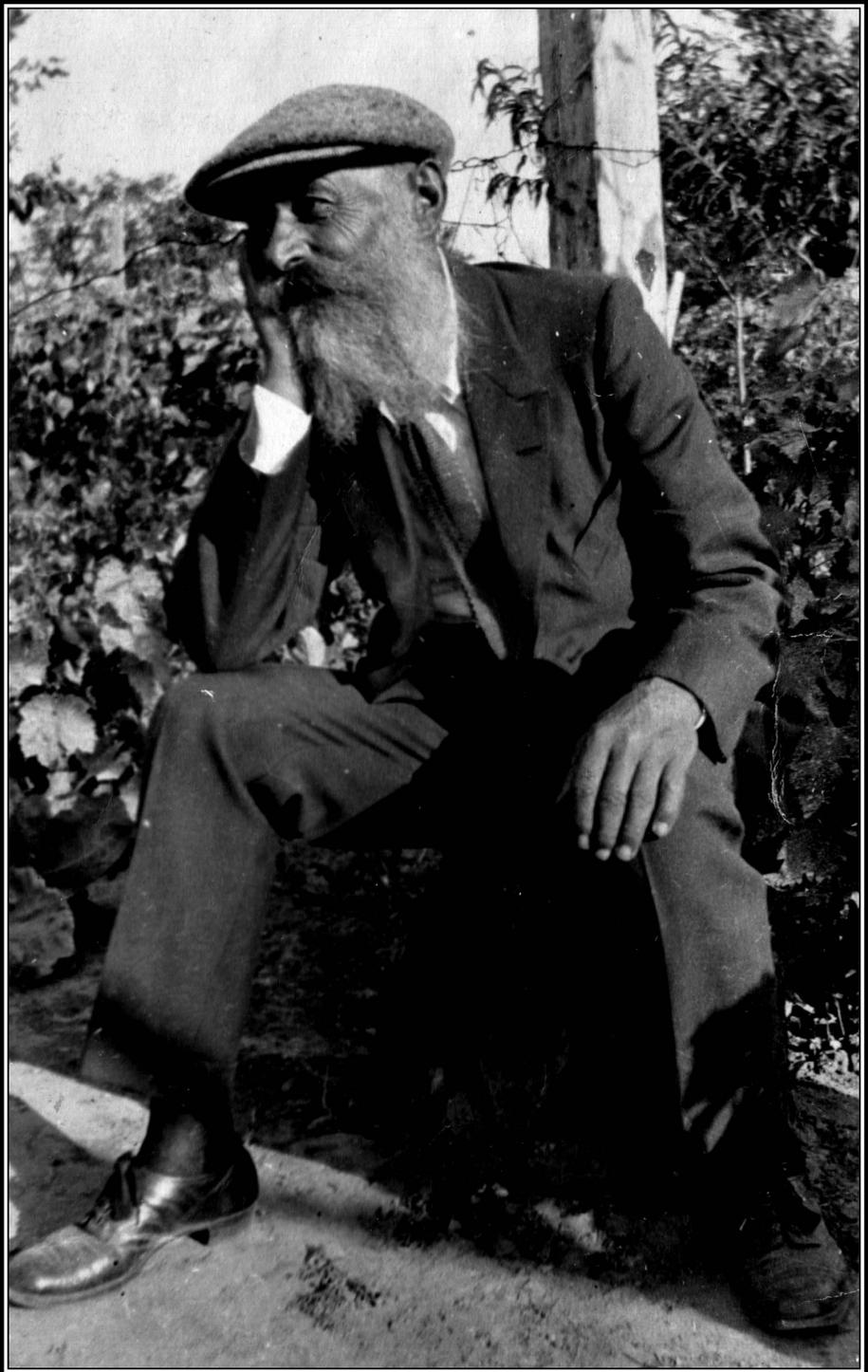


Irene Bremner

To my daughters

I wish to express my gratitude to my co-author, my daughter Adelaide, for her help in compiling this book.

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INTRODUCTION

This is the story of my family and the first eighteen years of my life which were spent in eastern Europe and in Egypt.

At the beginning of this century the map of Europe looked very different from how it does today. Austria, Hungary, part of Rumania and Poland and most of northern Yugoslavia were united under the Austro-Hungarian Empire. I was born in Belgrade in Serbia which was at that time a separate Kingdom. From there we fled to Osijek in Slavonia, an area in northern Yugoslavia near the Hungarian border. There I lived for seven years. The remainder of these eighteen years was spent on an island in the Nile in Egypt which was at the time a British Protectorate.

After four years of internment during the First World War, I met and fell in love with a Gordon Highlander whom I married. He took me to his home in a village in Aberdeenshire. I quickly learned to love Scotland and her people and have lived there for the past sixty six years.

Often during these years I have been asked where I came from and how I came to marry a Scotsman. My story was so incredible (one could almost say it was like a fairy tale) that I soon became apprehensive about telling anyone the truth.

While writing this book I have enjoyed looking back on those years which made the first two decades of my life so happy and joyous. I hope that whoever reads it will enjoy it as much as I have enjoyed recalling the memories.

GHEZIRA DABSHA

Just a wee few miles from Cairo
There's an island in the Nile,
'The likes o' which ye winna see
In many a lang lang mile.
There's peaches there the rarest style
And my hearts there forby,
And a that's fond o' peaches
Take my advice and try.

There's casuarinas towerin' there
Luxuriant in the breeze.
There's mangoes, oranges and grapes
And lots o' other trees
There's flowers forby o' ilka hue
But as far as I hae seen
There's nothing fairer or half sae sweet
As my own love, Irene.

There's shady lanes like lovers lanes
Where oft I've roamed at e'en
And glorious were the singing birds
And the sunsets I have seen.
My little Irene by my side
Oh! happy days were they
Before misfortune turned me out
And sent me on my way.

Eric John Bremner
1919

MY PARENTS

My father, Franz Steinhofer, was born in 1862 in Sopron in Hungary and was an only child. In 1880 he was a student at the University of Vienna studying for the priesthood. At that time education had to be paid for by the parents. To fail examinations was a terrible disgrace. In fact some students went as far as to commit suicide or run away rather than face their parents again. Franz had failed his Greek examination and did not feel that he could face his parents, especially his father, who was a big arrogant man. He never again saw his mother of whom he was so fond.

From then on Franz lived as best he could. He travelled around Austria trying to find work. He got a job as a



1. My father aged 18

butcher boy, in contrast to his previous aspirations, but that soon came to an end when the butcher's dog bit him. One day as he was wandering along a road rather dejectedly he happened to pass a high wall. He climbed up the wall to see what was on the other side and discovered a beautiful garden. The gardener spotted him and invited him to have a look around. He was amazed at what he saw flowers of every kind and colour, tall trees and all kinds of fruit trees. it fascinated him. As he was a fine, strong young man he was offered a job. Nowadays we would call it an apprenticeship during which time he would receive a meagre wage. He accepted it with gratitude. At last he knew that this was

the work that would fulfil his life.

He went to classes, studied botany, horticulture and agriculture and passed his examinations with flying colours. He was very ambitious and when he had finished his apprenticeship he was offered a post working in the gardens of a castle which belonged to an Austrian Count.

My mother, Zorka Matich, was born in Belgrade in Serbia in 1870 and was the eldest of three children. My grandmother was widowed in her early fifties but she had been left quite comfortably well off. Having three children to care for and feeling rather lonely, her thoughts turned to some kind of occupation. She found work in a Schloss, or castle in the Austrian mountains as a lady-in-waiting to a Countess. Her eldest daughter, my mother, took up dressmaking which was a very good career for a young girl at that time as all clothes had to be made by hand. She became very proficient. My mother knew the gardener, Franz, very well and became very fond of him. At her bedside, when she was dying, he promised her that he would 'woo' her daughter, Zorka.

They were married and during their life together were blessed with eight children, four sons and four daughters all normal healthy children which was rare at the time. Strangely two girls and two boys had brown eyes and two girls and two boys had violet eyes inherited from their lovely mother. She was not as well educated as my father but she had great wisdom, a wonderful sense of humour and was religious. She had been brought up as an orthodox Serb but became a Roman Catholic after her marriage for she believed that two religions in a family would be upsetting. They lived in the castle for a few years after their marriage my mother worked as seamstress to the Countess and my father looked after the gardens.

BELGRADE

Eventually they decided that they would like to have a place of their own. My father, knowing what hard times were, saved every penny he could. My mother was left a small legacy by one of her relatives. They settled down in a small house near Belgrade which was in four hectares of land. The house was neatly and tastefully furnished with items of furniture left by her mother. By this time her sister had died and her brother had worked his passage to Australia. He would not be heard of again. My father put a lot of thought into how to make the best use of the land. He laid it out with greenhouses surrounded by flower beds. He was very ambitious and planted tropical fruit trees and plants. I remember seeing a photograph of him standing under a banana tree laden with fruit. This marvellous achievement gained him recognition in the horticultural journals of that day. People came from all parts of the country to see the garden and of course he was very pleased. They carried on with the garden for several years and were very successful. However, it was not to last much longer for one winter great misfortune was to befall them which was to leave them almost penniless after all the great hopes they had. It was a severely cold winter, the worst they had experienced. The furnaces had to be stoked day and night. They were full of despair as all the plants and trees died. They kept praying that the cruel weather would end but the frost and heavy snow storms continued on and on into the spring. Finally, with finances almost run out, they had to leave their home with great sorrow.

My father had had so much worry and had worked so hard that by now his health was affected. The doctor ordered him to go to Portugal for at least a year in order to regain his

health. He had to leave his wife and daughter behind. My mother knew that it would be a long time before he would be able to return and she was naturally anxious about him. However in Belgrade where she had been born she still had some relatives who helped her and comforted her in her loneliness.

My father spent most of his time away in Estoril where he could bathe and soak up the sunshine which was so necessary for his recovery from the dreadful illness, tuberculosis, from which the doctor thought he was suffering. After he had regained his strength, he managed to get some work gardening but three years passed before he set sail for home. The worst hardship they said that they had to endure during these years was the fact that letters took so long to reach their destination. My father saw a great change in his daughter as Mitzi was only a few weeks old when he left. As she grew older she was never allowed to forget her father as mother constantly reminded her of him by having his photograph displayed in a prominent place. The great day came when they set off to meet him at the station in Belgrade. He was overwhelmed with joy when Mitzi spotted him and ran straight towards him.

Now fit and well, it was time for him to look for employment. All those who returned from abroad had to report to the authorities. When it was his turn to be interviewed he was asked what kind of work he was interested in. He was told that there was a vacancy for a man with his qualifications at the royal estate of King Alexander of Serbia. He was offered the job and was grateful to accept it. The King and my father were about the same age and as time passed apparently my father became a trusted friend of the King. From what I remember my parents telling me, there was much opposition to the wedding of the King to his childhood nurse. Her name was Draga Masin. She was very beautiful

but was much older than he and the people knew that there would be no heir to the throne.

Our family were housed at the King's summer estate in Nish a hundred miles south of Belgrade. The family had grown during our time there to three daughters and one son. I, the fourth daughter was born on the estate in January, 1902. My mother told me that Queen Draga often came to visit her when she was at the estate. She was very fond of children, of course, and my mother told me she had kissed me when I was just a baby. I hope she blessed me!

The estate nestled in deep pine forests. The gardens were beautiful with all sorts of exotic flowers and huge chestnut and walnut trees. There were also large tortoises which roamed the grounds. I was frightened of them. One, I thought, began to follow me one day. I took to my feeble legs and ran as fast as I could. I fell over a barrel, which was by a wall to catch the rain water, and split my lip. My mother was very distressed at the thought that I might be disfigured. The wound healed but left a little scar which I still have today.

My parents were very happy there. My mother was very proud that my father was working on the royal estate and they both thought it an ideal place to bring up a family with such freedom and in such beautiful surroundings. At last they had everything they could wish for and this compensated for all the misfortunes of the earlier days of their marriage.

Alas, the tranquil life was not to last long for in 1903 King Alexander and Queen Draga were brutally assassinated by a revolutionary group called the Black Hand who believed the King to be too pro-Austrian and who historians believe were responsible for the murder some years later of Archduke Ferdinand of Austria which led to the outbreak of the First World War.

We were fortunate to be in Nish at the time. What fate might there have been for us had we been in the capital! When news reached us of the murders there was nothing for us to do but flee. On the night of our escape my father harnessed two horses to a wooden cart. He packed only those belongings essential for our survival such as warm clothing, blankets and down filled mattresses to keep us warm during the long winter journey. We also managed to take food, kitchen utensils and all the money we had. Notes were hidden in the mattresses and as little money as necessary in my father's pockets.

The journey was very dangerous and hazardous for if we encountered any tziganes or gypsies they could be very hostile to outsiders. We were lucky for when we did meet them they were very kind, gave us food and fed our horses. The journey was made more dangerous for at that time in the mountains there were many wolves which would attack us had they been hungry enough. At twilight, one night, we had to cross a large stretch of snow covered barren land which was surrounded by forest. In the distance my father heard the wolves howling. Soon after he saw a pack of them raging towards us. Without a seconds thought he cut one of the horses loose. The Wolves ran after it and we were saved.

Cold, tired and with few possessions we arrived in Osijek, in Slavonia. We had travelled about two hundred miles. That was quite a distance to travel in an open cart!

OSIJEK, YUGOSLAVIA

We had gone to Osijek in the state of Slavonia as we had some friends there who gave us food and shelter until my father could get work. The town at that time was fairly small and picturesque and we soon settled down there happy and contented. My father was not long in securing a post with the government with responsibility for the gardens. The children who were old enough started school. Fortunately there was a house with the post and it was not long before we moved in there.

In the winter, when there was snow on the ground, our feet got very cold and wet. We wore boots but even the very best did not keep out the wet. I remember my mother used to wrap our feet in paper to keep them warm. We used to see the shepherds when they came down from the hills to replenish their supplies for the winter dressed in their long sheepskin coats down to their ankles, their hoods and boots lined with sheepskin or made entirely of skin. To us children they looked so funny but so cosy in their attire.

At the bottom of the garden there was a small lake. In winter it froze and the people of the town passed their leisure time skating. Some of them were dressed so elegantly, the ladies in their hats and ankle length fur trimmed coats and the gentlemen also in their hats and long coats. Their skates were just an iron bar attached to an iron frame which came around the boot and was tied with straps. The frame was adjustable to the size of the boot, which women as well as men wore in those days, by a rivet and screw. Oh!, they skated and waltzed on the ice so beautifully! We little children watched with surprised eyes wondering how they managed to stay upright.

Spring was always so welcome after the long cold winter. it was a special time for me. I would go and pick violets which were my favourite flowers. There were lots of large ones which peeped out from under the green hedges so peacefully at the end of the cemetery which was close to our house. I was full of joy at having such a big bunch of violets to give my mother when I entered the house. I hoped she would never find out where I had picked them for I had to cross a ditch about ten feet wide and several feet deep by walking over a very narrow plank of. It Was forbidden for us to cross the ditch but like all children we sometimes disobeyed our parents. The feeling of excitement while crossing this narrow bridge was frightening. Our hearts would thump in our chests and we were speechless till we reached the other side. We had to endure it all again on the return journey as there was no other way home. It was all great excitement in our young lives. My sister, Anna, once fell at the edge of the ditch trying to cross. She landed in a patch of nettles. With the stinging, the heat and her scratching, she was on the verge of tears and I hoped she would get to bed without our mother noticing for she would have got a good spanking had she been found out. Not far from the ditch there was a little sanctuary on a small patch of land with a fence around it. There we used to watch passers-by and travellers enter and kneel to pray by the crucifix.

Every time spring came around and the grass was fresh and green, we went to a field nearby to see if we could catch some tiny frogs which were as green as the grass and no more than one inch long. They were sweet little creatures. We took them home where we had made ready preserve jars full of water with some grass which was carefully placed at the bottom. Against the side of the jar was placed a little ladder made from match sticks. If the frogs went up the ladder it would be a nice day but if they stayed on the bottom it

would be dull and rainy. They were really good forecasters.

Our house stood in the fruit garden. Once a year a meeting of government officials was held. The meeting took place in a large square in front of the house. Tables and chairs were arranged under the shade of an enormous walnut tree. I remember when we came home from school that day we had to enter at the rear of the house as we had neither to be seen nor heard. We had to climb in by a rear window which was too high for us to get in by ourselves and our mother had to pull us in. It was a happy and lovely place with plenty of room to play and roam around.

When I think of the little town there were really quite a lot of activities going on. There were many dancing teachers because people wanted to learn how to dance. My sister, Mitzi, now a teenager, was very attractive and was a good dancer. Of course, she had the best teacher in town whose name was Weisman. At the end of each season he gave a ball for his pupils and their friends. At one ball, in particular, he wanted a very young couple, children aged between six and eight, to open the ball. The dancing teacher knew that Mitzi had a young sister who was about six years old. He thought that his own son, Fritz, and myself would make the ideal couple. Many evenings of practice followed before the ball took place. I thought Fritz was rather too short and too fat for my liking but we danced beautifully! I remember my mother making my dress which had to be a very special one. It was made entirely of broderie anglaise and the skirt had a layer of this gorgeous white lace. Around my waist was placed a wide blue ribbon tied in a large bow at the back and in my hair I wore a matching ribbon. To complete the outfit I wore black stockings and black patent shoes. I did think I looked nice and my partner looked very handsome in a navy blue sailor suit with a big white collar in the corners of which were embroidered small anchors. On his feet he wore black boots.

It was my first ball and how exciting it was to be sitting in a 'fairy' carriage drawn by two horses with my mother and Mitzi. Mother was the chaperon, of course. We entered the ballroom which was already packed with the guests who stood around the room. The ceiling was decorated with streamers and ribbons of all colours. We two little ones entered, hand in hand, to great applause and walked to the centre of the floor. As the orchestra struck the first chord of the "Blue Danube" Fritz and I opened the ball and later we



2. Fritz and I

were joined by the rest of the dancers. During the ball, somehow the streamers were released and showered the dancers. The ball ended at midnight and we entered our 'fairy' coach and drove home in a beautiful starry night, very tired.

What delighted us often when we were young, was to sit around our mother in the cold wintry evenings by the glow of a lovely fire and listen to her tell us of our childhood. It seemed that being the youngest I was thought much of and was probably a little spoilt. My mother

remarked on what a determined child I was.

There were very few houses with central heating at that time. In the main living room, in the corner, there was a high furnace which reached from the floor to the ceiling. It was quite wide and was decorated all over with pretty tiles. The door was near the middle of the furnace which was mainly stoked with wood. It was very efficient and kept the whole house warm night and day.

My father never seemed to need much sleep and always rose early in the morning, summer and winter. He passed the hours until light reading, writing and drinking his beloved black coffee which he enjoyed preparing for himself. This was a habit which never changed throughout his life-time. When he got up the first thing he would do was to stoke the furnace. It did not matter how carefully he tried not to disturb the family, I would nevertheless wake up every morning at the slightest creak of the furnace door. I was so restless that my mother had to take me out of my cot, take me down to my father and put me in my high chair. One of my doll's cups which was made of china and decorated with violets, was filled with coffee by my father and I watched him as we both sat and sipped our coffee. My mother said I beamed with delight and I dare say a great deal of self satisfaction.

The summers were long and warm and in the school holidays we had all day to play in the sunshine. We used to look forward to spending a day on a farm which was owned by friends of our parents. We usually went before harvest time as we were allowed to go into the fields of grain to gather the beautiful wild flowers such as poppies, cornflowers and marguerites to take home.

In Osijek, Easter time always seemed to be lovely with the birds singing and the trees shooting out their tender green leaves. Easter morning was very exciting, our parents

made eight nests, one for each child was placed under different trees in our large garden. Whichever nest you found was yours, of course. All the nests contained some red and blue coloured hard boiled eggs and each had a little bunny filled with tiny almond eggs. After all the nests had been found we went off to church. In later years the eggs had pretty pictures on them and this was achieved by wrapping them with coloured transfers while they were still damp. These transfers had chickens and rabbits on them and the eggs looked very pretty.

We often wondered what the significance of dyeing eggs on Easter Day was. When we grew older we had the courage to ask. Children were not encouraged to ask questions in those days. So my parents told us that as a woman walked to Jerusalem with a basket of eggs on her head she stopped a traveller to ask if it was true that Jesus Christ had risen to which he replied, "It is as true as the eggs in your basket will turn red."

The feast of Saint Nicholas took place on the fifth of December. On that evening we cleared out the largest room in the house. The floor was stripped bare of carpets and rugs and all sorts of chairs and stools were arranged around the walls where we children sat. Many young children of our ages who lived in the street were invited to meet our Saint Nicholas. We were all seated ready and waiting. We all became very quiet as we heard his heavy footsteps coming along the hallway. Then at last a lovely Saint Nicholas appeared with a long white beard and a twinkle in his eye. He welcomed us saying, "You have all been very good children this year and so I have come to give you the 'goodies' you so well deserve." Then he took the huge sack from his shoulder and scattered the contents on the floor. There were all kinds of sweets, fruit and nuts. We all scrambled to gather as much as we could. Then we sang songs and had a very

happy time.

Saint. Nicholas was celebrated in other ways also. Many children placed their boots on the window sill of their bedrooms. The shinier they were, they believed, the more would be put into them. While the children were asleep their boots were filled with fruit, nuts and sweets and a toy. For many children this was the main festivity.

The Christmases which were spent in Osijek were particularly lovely. Usually on Christmas Day the snow fell steadily and at night the crisp frost and starry sky was so beautiful. We imagined that it would have been the same on the night that Jesus was born.

On Christmas Eve we were put to bed very early. I and two of my sisters slept in one big bed in a large bedroom. We were dressed in our very best night dresses trimmed with ribbons and lace. A little before midnight mother woke us and we followed her downstairs to the main room where there was a tall pine tree decorated with numerous kinds of sweets. Walnuts painted in gold and silver were hung by pieces of thin wire, and there were lots of different coloured candles all lit and shining brightly. My sister, Mitzi, was dressed as an angel and stood by the tree. Around the tree were placed lots of toys which were mostly made by our parents. We all stood silently as our father said the Lord's Prayer. Then we sang carols in German as this was the language we spoke at home. "O Tannen Baum" was always my favourite. It was all so beautiful and so long ago.

The highlight of Christmas Day took place in the evening when the one-man theatre was brought out. It was about four feet wide and about three and a half feet high. All the little pieces of scenery and the characters were cut out of coloured paper and glued on to pieces of wood. As our father was quite well educated he was familiar with Shakespeare's

plays and spoke all the parts in whichever play he was performing. The theatre was only presented at Christmas when friends of our parents and their children were invited to the entertainment. The theatre was a wonderful thing at that time as people had to make their own amusement.

The festivity ended with the dinner which had all the usual trimmings. There was roast goose, and all sorts of cakes and wines, all of which were home produced and, of course, excellent.

As soon as the theatre performance was over everything was quickly packed away until next year and we used to wonder where it went to and just how it worked. The mystery was solved when, one day in winter, we were sent up to the loft to fetch some apples. We loitered there for too long and our mother was starting to call us. There were lots of interesting things there, tins of coins and all sorts of other things. We came upon a large cardboard box and when we opened it, what did we see but all the pieces which belonged to the theatre? We only then realised that our father spoke all the parts. At last the mystery was solved but we kept it to ourselves.

During my lifetime I have seen advances in technology which have enabled men to walk on the moon and allowed us to see the other side of the moon. Halley's comet is now nearing Earth and I well remember the last sighting of the comet in 1910. People in Osijek were preparing for the Day of Judgement. There were posters all over the town and even close to the sanctuary depicting the end of the world. We little ones looked at them with fear. However the comet passed and all was well.

Today I can still visualise my mother in the kitchen in her long dress down to her ankles, her spotless white apron drawn at the waist with a huge bow at the back. Around the

kitchen were wooden tables where she prepared the food. She used to boil straw in the water with which she scrubbed the tables and chairs and this gave them a beautiful golden colour. Around the walls, here and there, were hung white cotton panels. These were sewn in red thread and scalloped around the edge. Each represented a motto and the one I liked best was of a butcher carrying a pig over his shoulder. Underneath was sewn, "Man cannot live by bread alone." My mother cooked on a big black stove in the middle of the kitchen. It was stoked with wood. It had six rings on the top and around there was a border of bright shining metal. On the walls also hung spotless copper pots. My mother now had quite a family to feed and nothing was ever wasted. She loved to make preserves and to bottle fruit which was stored in the attic. She was a wonderful cook and housekeeper and was very resourceful. She strongly believed that cleanliness was next to godliness. All her abilities and virtues were to be stretched to the limit a few years later

LEAVING OSIJEK FOR EGYPT

We were nicely settled in Osijek, attending school, making friends and enjoying a happy childhood in a loving home. During the seven years we were there three boys had been born. My father was happy during these years tending the garden.

One day he was told that his services would no longer be required as the cemetery was to be extended and ground for this would have to be taken from the garden. As a result of this there would not be enough work to justify his employment. Having known previous hardships he and my mother knew that they were capable of coming out on top of whatever situation might befall them.

Somehow or other he found a vacancy for an experienced horticulturist to develop land which was owned overseas. One of the posts was in Natal in South Africa and the other was in Egypt. This was not very good news to my mother but she was persuaded by my father that it would be a challenge and it would be exciting to go to a country of which they knew nothing. They fully realised the complications but my father was something of a 'Robinson Crusoe' and could stand isolation and adapted to any situation. My mother did not like the prospect of going to Natal for it seemed so far away. So my father decided he would accept the post in Egypt. Going there would present a greater challenge and opportunity to prove his skills. He was to start a garden on a deserted island in the Nile about eighty kilometres south of Cairo. There was nothing there except sand and the typical spiky grass called 'hagney'. My mother wondered about lots of things such as where the family would go to school, and whether there were hospitals near. Although she could speak Serbian, German and a little Russian she did not

know Arabic. She would need all her courage, resilience, resourcefulness and faith.

My father set sail for Egypt alone, quite sure that to go there was the right choice. Before the rest of the family could join him he had to ensure that there was a clean, safe supply of water as the Nile water could not be used for drinking. He employed a water diviner who eventually found a source and a deep well was dug.

Soon after he sent for my mother and my sister Aurelia. My eldest sister Mitzi was left in charge of the other children in Osijek where we lived in a rather miserable furnished house. She was glad to shed the responsibility for us when we set sail, in 1910, for a country so remote to us. We never again saw Slavonia. One of my daughters, sixty years later, visited Osijek. The match factory was still there and, of course, the cemetery. The town had not changed very much.

We were soon on our way full of excitement. We had never been on a train journey, had never seen the sea and had never been on a large ship. We travelled for three days to Trieste by train where we were to board the steamer 'S.S. Helwan' for Alexandria. The train was very slow and primitive and so was the steamer with its one long funnel. Whenever we went up on deck to get some fresh air our clothes got covered in soot which poured over us. There were no portholes only tiny little windows with shutters. There were washstands with basins and jugs and in a storm they rattled from one side to the other and some were shattered which amused us. When it was calm, and only then, we were allowed to go on deck accompanied by Mitzi. We would lie in the coolness of the evening looking up into the cloudless, clear blue sky with the moon brilliant and the stars twinkling and wonder what we would find at the end of our journey apart from the joy of seeing our parents and sister. The

Mediterranean was calm and clear as we berthed in Alexandria where our father was waiting to meet us. Everything was dry and dusty and there seemed to be sand everywhere. There were few trees and very little greenery; such a contrast to Osijek. But we felt happy to be reunited with our parents. Another long journey faced us the one to Cairo. At that time Cairo was a beautiful, clean city. The square at the station was crowded with 'fiacres' which were driven along by beautifully groomed and harnessed horses. There was none of the noise of the modern Cairo. The wide streets were made of concrete. There were lovely buildings and large hotels such as the 'Continental' and 'Khedival' and large restaurants such as 'Lyons' and 'Groppi'. An electric train ran to Heliopolis, a suburb of Cairo, and another train ran to Helwan. They were beautiful trains with seats woven of fine straw which gave a wonderful cool effect.



3. The island - sand and grass

After our short tour of Cairo it was time to return to the station to catch the train which ran as far as Luxor in Upper Egypt. There were three different kinds of compartments, one for ladies, one for men and one for natives which was for both sexes. This latter carriage had no seats and so

everyone sat on the floor with their legs crossed and their baggage beside them. We travelled in the ladies' compartment with some very upper class Egyptian ladies. They were the wives of Pashas and Beys with their children. The women were truly beautifully dressed, all in black pure silk and veiled in white silk or tulle. If this was meant to hide their faces it did very little for we could see their lovely pale faces, and pink cheeks. Even at that time they wore lipstick and their nails were beautifully manicured and painted with red henna nail varnish. But what amused us most was when they took out their silver cigarette cases and began to smoke. However, we were soon distracted from these lovely women by the countryside during our long journey for the train stopped at every station and village along the route. We could see hectares of wheat, maize and native corn which grew to a height of about eight feet and at the top of each stem was a cone with pink coloured seeds. These were ground into flour and was used to make 'fellahin' or native bread. It was mixed with water into a dough, rolled out thinly and fired on a hot stone. There were also long stretches of lovely lush 'lucerne' which was the only grass which the animals had to eat. Of course the palm trees put the finishing touch to the landscape. It was June and very hot but we kept out of the heat of the sun by drawing the curtains. We were not hungry or thirsty as we had plenty of provisions and had water which our father had provided for the water which the natives sold in 'oolas', though cool, was forbidden to us.

At last we were nearing our destination. We looked out for Matania station where our journey was to end. At this nice station we were surprised to see donkeys lined up waiting for us. None of us had ever ridden one before but it was surprising how quickly we adapted to our new form of transport. It took about an hour to reach the bank of the Nile. The surface of the road was only earth and sand and was very

dusty. Along the route we met people driving their cattle home or moving them to another field. We also met some children with sweet faces but very dirty, who were carrying baskets on their heads. To our absolute amazement, they were there to gather up the droppings from the pathway with their bare hands. Some hurried to catch the droppings before they fell on the ground. We found out later that this was the only fuel the natives had and it was very precious. Sometimes it was mixed with earth and straw to make bricks which were dried and hardened in the heat of the sun.

The bank of the river was in sight and we dismounted from our donkeys. We said goodbye to the children who had followed us so diligently. It would not be the last time we would see them as we would require the services of the donkeys in the years ahead for by train was the only way we could go to Cairo. We ran down to the river bank where the feluccah was waiting to take us to our island home. The boat had a huge white sail and it all looked so clean. Beside the boat stood the boatman smiling, happy to see us. The island, in the distance, looked very bare and all we could see were the sand dunes and the native grass growing. What a glorious evening it was as we crossed the water! By now it was beginning to be cooler, the sun was setting with flaming rays and the sky blue without a cloud visible. The river was calm and the cool breeze was very welcome after our first experience of a very hot day. What little breeze there was soon diminished and so the boatman had to tie a rope to the mast with the other end tied round his waist and pull the boat up river so that when the rope was untied the boat would drift down stream with the current. By use of the rudder he could guide the boat to the bank of the island. In the shallow water he used a long pole to push towards the bank. Soon we were safely home. We had seen few birds on our journey and were delighted when we saw, in the distance, a pair of pelicans

preening themselves for the night.

Darkness was coming down quickly as we stepped on to the sandy shore and the beautiful sunset had disappeared over the horizon. There was not a tree to be seen on the island, not even a palm, which was so strange after all those we had seen on our journey by the train. In the distance we could see little mud houses in a little village on the other bank of the Nile. This village on the east bank was called El Saff and the one on the west bank, Matania. These two villages were to serve us very well in many ways in days to come.

As we were wading through the deep sand we saw a lone figure, our mother, waiting for us and happy to see us safely home. It was quite a long walk before we reached the house. We could feel the sand in our shoes still very hot from the day's sun. After our emotional reunion we left our parents behind and rushed up to the house. We were surprised that it was a large white painted bungalow with three bedrooms, a large sitting room and a lovely large roomy kitchen with an American stove which our mother was delighted with. We were soon seated at a large table laid with all our favourite foods which we were so pleased to taste again, such as Hungarian goulash, French pancakes and apple strudel. Everything was so good that we ate too much and had rather a sleepless night. Probably the excitement had something to do with it for we had come such a long way.

The house was built of native bricks covered with a thin layer of cement inside and out and painted white outside and cream inside. Each room had a long narrow window which reached from the roof almost to the floor. Each window had green wooden shutters which were opened early at dawn and closed at sunrise so as to keep the house cool. The floor was covered in cream coloured stone slabs which were

from the Mukattum hills and they made a lovely cool floor. Here and there were laid straw mats. There was only one door which was at the entrance to the house. The other doorways were draped with curtains held back with cords. Everything was designed for coolness which was so necessary for the summers were very hot and for three months in the year the temperature rarely dropped below one hundred degrees in the shade. It was difficult to adjust to this hot climate without ice or a refrigerator but one way or another we did overcome it. We had a large earthenware jar which held about ten gallons of water which was filled with the cold water from the well and put in a shaded place. Butter, milk and many other perishable foods were stored around it and it kept everything cool.

My mother, of course, was busy looking after her family. At this time there were only six of us at home. My eldest brother, Miki had stayed in Europe to complete his grocery apprenticeship which he found very boring. He was still in Europe at the outbreak of the First World War and was called up for military service in the Austrian Army in which he served until the end of the war. He then joined us on the island and worked with my father. He was more interested in agriculture than he was in the grocery business.

My sister, Mitzi, obtained a position in Cairo with a wealthy Bey. He had a beautiful house and five wives in his harem. Her duty was to look after the needs of these ladies and sometimes had to make special clothes for them as she had done her training in Osijek. She had a very good and interesting time as she went everywhere with them. My other teenage sisters stayed on the island helping my father with the fruit harvest as the island developed and they also helped in the house making clothes for the family.

THE CONVENT OF SAINT. TRINITY, HELWAN

Three months after our arrival in Egypt my brother Alex, and I were enrolled at the Convent of Saint. Trinity, Helwan for the start of term. Of course I learnt to speak Serbian in Osijek but was only at school for one year there. At home we all spoke German as this was the language our parents always used. At the convent I now had to learn to speak French as that was the language of the convent. I was now nine years old.

Even now Palm Sunday has a very special meaning for me. It reminds me of palm trees and sand and going to church on Easter Sunday at the convent. On that day we



4. The author at the convent in Helwan

walked to the church carrying a palm branch. We were dressed for the first time in our summer outfits for the morning service. Our dresses were made by the nuns and were of cream coloured viyella tucked around the yoke. and with a cream lace collar. With this we wore a cream panama hat. We had to change into our Sunday afternoon uniform as soon as we returned from the service. This dress was of blue and white striped cotton with a white cotton collar finished around with English embroidery. We also had a cape, should we need it, which was made of a light chocolate coloured fine woollen material lined

with red taffeta. The capes were also worn on cool winter days with a navy blue serge dress with matching hat. I used to think how lovely the uniforms were. Our everyday school uniform was quite different. It consisted of a kind of overall which was worn over a skirt in the winter and was of black sateen with a yoke and box pleats. It had long sleeves with deep cuffs and two red buttons. The white collar was often embroidered by the pupils themselves. At the neck was a red ribbon tied in a bow and a red belt around the waist. Our parents had to provide other garments. Each child had to have six of everything - night dresses, petticoats, underwear, handkerchiefs, socks for the summer and stockings for the winter. Each child had one pair of shoes for weekdays and one specially for Sundays. The shoes had to be black and mine were usually patent leather with a strap across the front. My black stockings were knitted by my mother in fine crochet cotton and were the envy of many of my friends.

At this time, in Egypt, there were many Europeans working. The convent school was the only Roman Catholic school in the country and so children of many nationalities attended. I had many friends but my best ones were a Greek girl and a Swiss girl who was very good at sketching people and landscapes. I used to watch and try to learn from her but to my disappointment I made no progress. My Greek friend, Yvonne, was a very good pianist and had piano lessons from one of the nuns who trained at the Conservatoire in Rome. We were not allowed to accompany any of the pupils while they practiced their piano lessons but Yvonne, on a Thursday afternoon, our half-day off, used to tell me when she was going to play and I would stand under the music room window and listen to her. She always played 'La Paloma' for me as that was my favourite. They were my happiest schooldays, I would say.

There were another three buildings beside the school.

There was the church which served the Catholics in Helwan, a house for the nuns and the boarded girls and across the street was the boys school run by the brothers. Life in the convent was very strict. Noise, even talking, was not allowed except on the recreation ground where we played games which children everywhere play, such as skipping, games with marbles, roller skating and singing games. Our favourite singing game was where we made a long line holding each other around the waist. The tallest girl was at the head of the line and another was chosen to be the wolf. We were supposed to be in a forest and we sang, "Promenons-nous dans le bois, pendant que le loup ne sera pas. Le loup est la." The 'wolf' approached us furiously and in spite of our resistance managed to catch us all in the end. Another game was when we held the lovely "Marguerite" in her castle. One of the girls was put in the centre and the rest of us gathered around her to make a deep wall and sang, "Ou est la Margurite, dit le gai cavalier." We replied in loud voices, "Elle est dans le chateau oh gai, oh gai cavalier." He replied, "Je veux enlever une pierre (one girl)," and of course proceeded to pull each girl away until all the stones were lifted. Then "Marguerite" ran away and the "cavalier" had to catch her.

In the evening when it was cooler and the moon was shining brightly, as it seems to only in Egypt, we used to walk six abreast around the courtyard singing "Au clair de la lune" which seemed appropriate, as well as other songs. All our recreation periods were ended too soon by the inevitable bell which was rung to call us to bed. But first we had to go to prayer in the beautiful chapel behind the dining room. In the corner of the ground there was a lovely old apricot tree which we had to pass. There were usually some apricots lying on the ground which we would pick up, put in our pockets and eat when we had the chance! They were delicious and some-

times eased our hunger for we got nothing to eat between meals.

Breakfast was at eight and consisted of coffee and as much bread as we wished. The French bread was in a huge basket cut into slices and I used to like best the crusty end pieces which I filled with jam. The midday meal consisted of a main course and fruit. Then there was a short break in the afternoon at three when we ran to our lockers to get some of the 'goodies' which were provided by our parents and were, of course, mainly cakes, biscuits and chocolate. Parents were allowed to visit once a week if they could. Mine came seldom so my 'goodies' were usually sent if my mother could not come. After our two course meal at eight we spent the remainder of the evening in the recreation ground.

To get to the dormitories we had to climb forty steps. There were three dormitories, one for each age group. Some of the children were as young as four years. one of the nuns slept in each dormitory to look after the needs of the children at night. The beds were all made of black iron and the bed linen and covers were all white. There hung a mosquito net over the bed at night which in the morning was held back with a ribbon tied in a bow. All the dormitories were the same except that the nets were tied back with different coloured bows. The youngest children had pink bows, the middle group had light blue ones and the eldest children had mauve ones. The dormitories looked lovely with all the beds perfectly made and everything tidy. There was a small locker beside each bed in which we kept our Bible, toilet things, shoe brushes and Sunday shoes. At the foot of each bed there was an iron wash stand with a jug and basin. There we washed in the morning. At six o'clock. we had to rise, wash and get dressed and leave everything spick and span before going to mass at seven. Breakfast was at eight followed by the washing-up and clearing of the dining room. The dining

room was huge and seated two hundred children; it had a very empty atmosphere. Above the entrance door was a crucifix. The walls were completely bare. There were long bare wooden tables and long benches to sit on. The tables were laid by the nuns. We each had our own place and beside the cutlery was placed each child's individual napkin. Each napkin bore the child's personal number. Mine was ten and every article which belonged to me bore this number. My napkin had initials. I.S. embroidered in the corner by my mother. The napkin had a dual purpose. One corner was laid on the table and served as a tablecloth and the opposite corner was tucked in under the chin. In this situation we had to sit very still and not fidget otherwise we would have had our soup in our laps.

We had to be up to the classroom by nine for the start of lessons. Each day we had one hour of sewing when we did tapestry, petit point, richlieu work and many other kinds of sewing. The day finished at three in the summer and four in the winter. In the summer, by three o'clock the heat was too much to endure but we had to put up with it for there were no fans or air conditioning to keep us cool only the wooden shutters kept out the hot glare of the sun. Endurance, discipline and sacrifice were the hallmarks of our upbringing.

The bathrooms in the convent were very primitive. Each one was just a very small room with a cement floor with a hole in the centre where the water ran out. There was a big iron pipe on the wall with a large rose on the end that splashed the water over us. Oh! how good it was to cool us in the heat it was divine! The nuns took great care of us and it was a rare thing for any of us to be ill. Few of the children had any of the usual childhood illnesses. Perhaps they had had them before coming to the convent. The nuns were very strict on hygiene and everything was kept scrupulously clean. Our half day off was the time for cleaning. We used to

wash each other's hair and massage paraffin into the hair to kill off any foreign bodies we might have. It was good for our hair too for after it was washed out it was clean and shiny. This treatment seemed to make it grow more quickly which was good as long hair was very fashionable in those days. Of course we had none of the shampoos and conditioners available today. Simple soap and a lot of brushing and washing kept our hair clean and healthy. Nor did we have all the variety of toothpastes. All we had was a big box of carbolic powder which our parents provided and which had to last us for the whole of the school year. We brushed our teeth once a day as we had to be very economical.

Many times I was sent to look after the smallest children on my half day. The little ones would get tired with the heat and so I used to get them to fold their arms on the desk and let them go to sleep for a while. I thought then that I would like to be an infant teacher or a governess when I grew up. I so loved these little children.

Helwan, at that time, was a lovely little resort town and was beautifully clean. There were large houses, electric street lamps and wide pavements. It was famous for its sulphur baths and people from all over the world who suffered from rheumatism and arthritis came to seek a cure. As more and more people heard about the baths two large hotels were built one on each side of the town. We thought the 'Ayjat' was the better one. Although it was situated among the barren hills it was brilliantly lit up at night and it was amusing to see gazelles jumping over the boulders in the grounds and having a lovely time. Of course they were fenced in the garden which surrounded the hotel. In the garden there were palm trees, all kinds of cypress trees, different coloured bougainvillea and tropical plants and in the centre was a beautiful swimming pool. All the water for the pool came from a deep well. The 'Savoy' on the other hand seemed to us very unin-

teresting as it was an enormous square building with only sand around it. However in the large courtyard there were flower beds and trees and the swimming pool was indoors.

One day in 1912 the nuns heard that a French plane was to land near the 'Savoy' and they thought it would be nice if the pupils could be there to see it. This meant getting up very early as it was quite a long walk and the plane would not stay for very long. We were very excited at the prospect of seeing a plane for they were very rare at that time. We set out at eight o'clock. The cloudless sky would be a great advantage to the pilot who would have to land on the sand with no-one to direct him and no runway. At last after a long wait the plane appeared out of the sky like a huge black bird, coming down slowly and carefully. It was painted dark brown and green and on some places we could see the bare metal. It had two sets of wings and the cockpit was uncovered. A lone Frenchman came out of the plane and spoke to the nuns. Soon he was off again. He cranked the propeller, jumped into the cockpit and was off. We were never told where he had come from or where he was going. We thought how wonderful it must be to be up in the sky. Now we had our long journey home. We had enjoyed the outing and the cups of coffee which the nuns had brought for us were most welcome. When we got home that evening we went to the chapel to thank God for the lovely day we had. We were very tired but this did not prevent us from pulling a few grapes from the vines growing on the pergola which ran along the dormitory verandah and were very tempting to us. That night I lay in bed wondering where the plane with its young pilot would be.

On our half days off from lessons the nuns would often take us for walks up into the Mukattam hills. Once we were taken to have a look round the only observatory in Egypt which was situated there. We found it extremely inter-

esting.

Many of the children were homesick even though most of them went home for Christmas, Easter and summer. I was less fortunate and only went home for the summer holidays. It was very hard to leave my family and the beautiful island and I was dreadfully homesick. I would cry when no one could see me and this was at night under the bedclothes. No words of comfort were offered to me by the nun who slept next to me in her black iron bed. The nuns knew that each child had to learn to cope with it in her own way and left us to work out our own method. Brothers were allowed to visit their sisters once a week but never vice versa so I did see Alex quite a lot. The services at the church were always combined so we were able to see the boys. I rather liked a little Italian boy and presumably he liked me for he used to pass notes to me via Alex. In spite of missing our homes it was a happy life in the convent and the nuns were very motherly towards us. The one who slept next to me truly took the place of my mother. She was always ready to give advice and comfort. I shall never forget Sister Martha for whenever I had an irritable cough she would stretch out her hand from under the mosquito net and hand me a sweet saying, "Prends cela, Irene. Ce sera bien pour votre touse!" There were many times when I was glad that she was so near to me. I thought that the robes worn by our nuns there were lovelier than those of any others I had seen. They were, of course, black and around the headdress was a white band. They had a white collar with a few red silk covered buttons on the front and a large crucifix suspended on a red silk cord. They looked so serene and elegant.

As the months passed we looked forward to our summer vacation which was from the middle of June until the beginning of September. At the end of the summer term a school concert was given by the pupils with singing, recita-

tion, gym displays and theatre. The plays were mostly from French history such as Joan of Arc and Marie Antoinette. Each year was different. Many inhabitants of Helwan as well as parents would attend. The pupils were all packed ready to go home when the concert ended. We tearfully said our goodbyes to our friends whom we might not see again as they came from many parts of Egypt and abroad. I often laugh when I recall the song so often sung before the last day of school. "Vive le vacance, point de penitence, les cahiers au feu et les livres au milieu!" But instead of books we substituted 'La maitresse!'

Education at the convent was of a very high standard. Unfortunately my education was cut short at the age of thirteen due to unforeseen circumstances. During my summer holidays in 1914 the First World War was declared. Sorrowfully I was never to return to the convent but the happy memories are still fresh in my mind.

Tragically, in that same year, my sister Mitzi died. This was a sad blow to all of us but especially to my dear mother. She loved her dearly as she was the eldest child and her life had ended at the tender age of twenty one. My mother had such great hopes for her for she was not only beautiful with her golden hair which glistened in the sun and her violet eyes but she was wise, intelligent and had a beautiful nature. Her death broke my poor mother's heart and she was never again the happy mother that we all had known.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE ISLAND “GHEZIRA DABSHA”

The reason for my parents going to Egypt was to create a profitable fruit garden for the owner of the island.

Father bought two Nile boats or feluccas, one for the El-Saff side of the river and one for the Matania side. From these villages he employed workmen, sometimes as many as two hundred. They worked all year round with no time off. In the summer they worked from five in the morning until three in the afternoon.



6. The island from El-Saff

The area of cultivatable land, that is the land which lay above the high water line when the Nile was in full flood, measured approximately half a kilometre east to west and one and a half kilometres north to south.

Father's first priority, of course, was to find a source of clean water which he had done prior to our coming to the

island. Once a house had been built my father proceeded with flattening the sand dunes and removing the coarse grass which covered the island. This was done by oxen and very primitive implements. Below the flattened dunes he found rich fertile soil.



5. Railway and canal with mulberry trees

Before anything would grow some form of irrigation had to be devised. A canal was built along the southern end of the island and was continued along the length of the island north to south. The canal was built of cement four feet high and the same wide. At the southern end a water pump was installed which pumped the water from the Nile into the canal. Every four metres there were pipes which could be opened and closed as needed to allow water to irrigate the fields. This distribution of water was made effective by trenches leading into smaller gutters. Each plot of land was divided into squares by ridges of earth a few inches high. By

the deft use of their feet the native workers would manipulate the flow of water to each plot of land. They had a natural instinct when it came to irrigation. By this method each plot of land was irrigated effectively.

My father wanted trees to be planted around the island which would be green all the year round. He sent to Australia for casuarina seeds which he propagated. The trees grew very quickly and they gave quite a lot of shade. Most of the casuarina trees which can be seen in Egypt today originated from the island. He also planted cypress trees which lined the walks and divided the fields giving shade to the delicate plants and conserving water.

My father employed a carpenter from one of the villages. He was a Kopt and was a very good craftsman. He built pergolas, sheds and even made furniture for the house. On the large pergolas which were built along most of the length of the island grew many varieties of grapes. Trellises were also erected on which grew peaches, apples, pears and quince. These fruits along with strawberries were the only Northern European fruits grown. The only vegetable grown was asparagus which was a very profitable crop. There was also a large area which was used as a nursery. The remainder of the garden area was a huge orchard of oranges, mandarines, limes, grapefruits, mangoes, guavas, bananas, cape gooseberries, melons, papaya and anonas. There were also fields of vines as well as those grown on the pergolas.

As the island began to produce fruit a wagon railway was laid along most of the island. The wagons were pushed along manually to the landing stage where the boxes of fruit were loaded on to large feluccas which transported them to Cairo.

My father was very interested in entomology particularly the silk worm. He planted mulberry trees along the

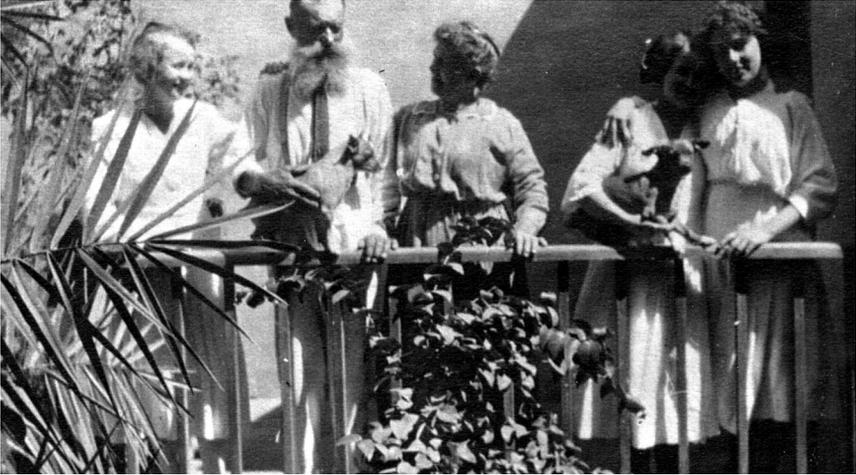
entire length of the canal on both sides which not only satisfied the finnickty appetites of the worms but also shaded the canal for when the water was still it quickly evaporated in the heat of the sun.



7. Family group - Cypress hedge

Landing stages were built on both sides of the island. The main entrance was on the west bank as most visitors came by train to Matania station from Cairo. There were steps up to a pathway which was lined with a dark green cypress hedge which led into a rose garden and eventually to a beautiful house in which we lived until half of the island had been cultivated. Later for the convenience of my father another house was built in the southern end of the

island. This was done so that he would not have so far to walk to work. This house had three bedrooms and two living room. The windows were small with solid plain shutters with a diamond shape cut out of the centre of each. These shutters reminded me of Yugoslavia. The garden was surrounded by casuarina trees and the house with beds of shrubs and flowers. A patio extended along the front of the house to the edge of the trees. The canal was quite near the house and at night we were serenaded by the frogs and in the



8. Aurelia, Father, Mother, myself and Anna on the balcony

morning we were awakened by the cooing of the turtle doves which mostly rested on the casuarinas. The original house was then used as an office and a depot for the fruit. Later a third house was erected. It was a pre-fabricated mock Tudor style house and I believe had been imported. It was wooden and had a balcony which ran along the upper floor. Over this grew scented jasmine which gave off a heady perfume in the night air. This house was mainly for any visitors who came to the island. It was still there when I returned to the island in 1975.

When the Nile was in full flood it was a furious river. The water rose up to twenty eight feet and more. When it was in full spate some of the land would be carried away with the full force of the river's fury especially at the southern end. Some of the vines and banana plantations had disappeared into the river one year. My father ordered hundreds of tons of large stones. These were brought by the large feluccas and dropped into the river at the southern tip of the island. This certainly halted any further erosion.



9. The Tudor house

One night, in particular, when the Nile was unusually high, my father told us to pack our things and be ready to leave the island. Two fellucas stood by to transport us to the mainland. The river was so high we could feel the water squelch under our feet. The water pump at the southern end was in danger of disappearing with the current and the workmen had to dismantle it as the water gradually washed away the foundation. Our Sudanese engineer lived in a house with his family close by the pump house. Their house disappeared into the river but fortunately no one was in it at the time. Some of the plantations were flooded and water had to be removed by the ancient method using the shaduf.

Most of the crops and all the banana plantations were destroyed. Fortunately the Nile had reached its maximum for that year and a few days later began to fall leaving behind the wonderfully fertile muddy silt. As Shakespeare wrote in Antony and Cleopatra :

Mark Antony [To Octavius Caesar]

*Thus do they, sir: they take
the flow o' the Nile
By certain scales i' the pyramid; they know,
By the height, the lowness, or the mean, if dearth
Or foison follow: the higher Nilus swells,
The more it promises: as it ebbs, the seedsman
Upon the slime and ooze scatters his grain,
And shortly comes to harvest.*

Immediately the native men would come over to the island and scatter their seeds on the areas of land which, they claimed, had been transferred from the banks of the mainland to the island by the current. There were many arguments as to the validity of their claims. They would plant melons and cereals and would have as many as three crops each year.

It took five years of hard work before the island began to be profitable. it was then that my father employed guards called 'gaffir' to protect the island and the family. They were all bedouins and lived on the island in their tents. They were very faithful and honest. When we were older and had any reason to be off the island one would accompany us as a bodyguard. The rise and fall of the Nile was a predictable natural occurrence. The locust plagues and the sand storms were not. One year my father was warned that a plague of locusts might land on the island. The first thing he did was to get as many native boys from the village of El Saff as he

could. He asked them to bring as many drums and tin cans as they could find so that they could make as much noise as possible in order to drive the insects away. The locusts came in a huge black cloud which darkened the island. They ate mostly the mulberry leaves and the vines which were left completely bare. While they were feeding my father directed the workmen to make long trenches and fill them with straw. The locusts laid their eggs there and later the straw was set on fire to kill them. That was the end also of the silk worms as all their food had been eaten.

Mosquitoes, of course, were a constant irritation. In the lovely coolness of the evenings sitting out on the verandah was not a great pleasure. There were no ointments and sprays so we had to cover our bare skin and veil our faces. It was far from comfortable but we had to put up with it as there was always the risk of malaria. Even at that time stagnant pools of water where the mosquitoes bred had to be reported to the government who quickly dealt with them. When I returned to Cairo, years later, I looked out of the window and thought the hotel was on fire. The gardens were full of what looked like smoke. I realised that this was the modern method of dealing with the beastly things.

From time to time some of the poultry would mysteriously vanish. One night my father took his gun and kept guard. Suddenly he saw two bright eyes glaring at him. They were the eyes of a wild cat. From then on he hunted and killed them. It remained a mystery how these animals came to be on the island. My father was interested in taxidermy and stuffed some of them while some of the skins were used as rugs. We were always amused by the dear little lizards which used to come into the house in the evening. They crawled up the walls and settled in the corner of the ceiling. There they would catch any insect that came close by and we were very glad of them. They were very efficient insect catch-

ers. By morning they had all gone outdoors. There were a lot of big sandspiders about. One species grew to about four inches long. The first one I saw was crawling on my mother's shoulder. One of my brothers managed to catch it and put it



10. *The bedouins*

in a jar of spirit. He prepared a glass box with a red velvet base on which to mount it. He was absolutely heart broken when he discovered a short time later that the ants had got into the box and eaten it.

The main menace, I think, were the ants because they got into everything. Each leg of the dining table was placed in a dish of water to prevent the ants from crawling up to the food and as an extra precaution so were such things as the sugar bowl and butter dish. There was one species of tiny black ants which used to fascinate us. One single ant would come out of a hole and crawl up the wall. It seemed to be the 'look out' ant for it would then return to the nest and bring out the rest in their hundreds. It was rather cruel but we would put our hands flat on the wall to crush them. When we smelt our hands the aroma was a lovely perfume.

Thankfully the island was virtually free of snakes. There were water snakes which sometimes appeared in the canal but these were swiftly dealt with by the native workmen. We did see the occasional scorpion but there were very few of them.



11. Father with a wild cat

The most numerous and destructive birds were the sparrows. Men known as 'sparrow catchers' would come over to the island in the evening. They threw nets over the lime trees where the sparrows settled at night. These nets were tied at the bottom of the trees and in the morning when the catchers returned they pulled the nets over the trees as the fishermen might do at sea.

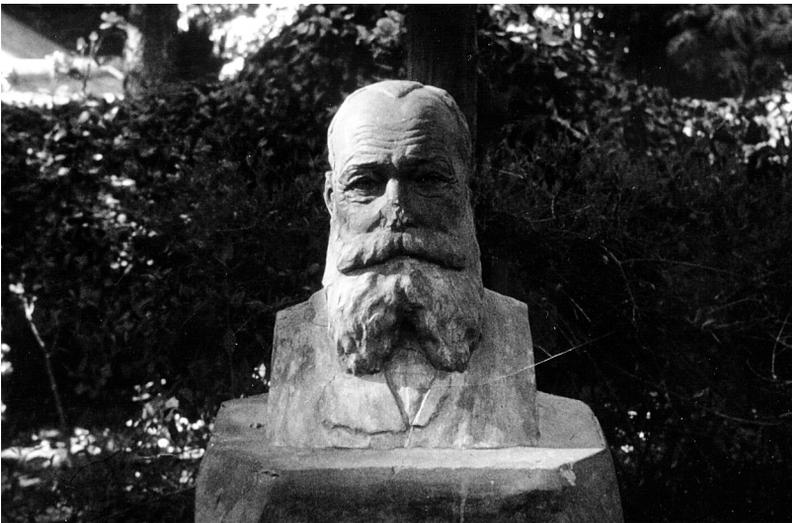
The nets were full of exhausted birds. The men killed them by beating the laden nets on the ground. The birds were then put into large baskets and were shipped off to Cairo market.

Within a few years, of arriving in Egypt, my father's hard work, knowledge and inspiration had transformed this completely barren and deserted island called 'Dabsha' into a lush, green tropical garden. Fruits which had never been grown in Egypt began to appear in Cairo market. The island was a show place which even King Fouad visited. After my



father's death, in 1937, the new owner erected a statue to his memory. He was highly respected by everyone who knew him and greatly loved by his family.

12. Welcome for King Fouad



13. Bust of my father

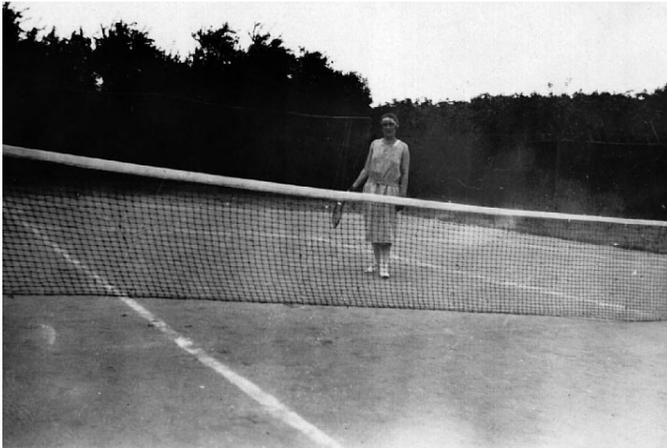
INTERNMENT

Too young to know all the details, I nevertheless remember my father going to Cairo and coming back quite concerned. We were Hungarian and at that time it did not matter in which country one was born one always took the nationality of one's father. So being Hungarian we were a family living in an enemy country as at that time Egypt was ruled by Britain. The British Authorities had told him that he would be interned unless he became an Egyptian or Italian citizen. He would rather face internment than do as they requested. Eventually the authorities relented and allowed him and the family to remain in Egypt but we would be regarded as prisoners on the island . None of us during the next four years left the island and we had no communication with the outside world apart from the news which the native workers gave us. I also lost touch with all of my school friends and would never see them again. The one thing which really concerned my father was the education of the family as none of us could go to school. We read and re-read our old school books. My two older sisters had stayed at home and there was little opportunity for me to learn any more than I had already learned at school.

Internment lasted four long years but it was amazing how quickly they passed. For music we had an old horn gramophone and a few records, mainly of Strauss waltzes, which were played over and over again. There were six of us at home so we made our own amusement.

In summer we rose early, about five o'clock. My brothers, Joseph and Alex and I ran to the shaded building where our donkeys were stabled. We saddled them and rode off around the island which took a good few hours. We were not too hard on them and most of the time allowed them to trot

at their ease. I casually rode in front and one day was taken completely unawares when Joseph kicked my donkey on the backside as hard as he could. It started off at such a terrible speed that I fell violently on to the pathway. I had a lot of sore places that night and never again ventured on a donkey's back. However I could not resist the experience of riding a camel many years later on a visit to Egypt. One beautiful moonlit night, some friends and I decided it would be lovely to ride around the Pyramids. The camels were lined up waiting for customers. I was surprised at how much I was enjoying the ride. However, the trust that I had in the animal lessened when it gave out a horrible roar, as only a camel can. I had a small native boy skillfully guiding my camel. He was only about eight years old and was dressed in a snow white 'galabiya'. He looked up at me from time to time and said the only words he seemed to know of English, "All right, Madam." "Oh, yes," I replied in a rather trembling voice. How glad I was when the trip came to an end!



14. *The tennis court*

We were very lucky to have a tennis court where we spent a lot of our time playing tennis and feather ball. We also played board

games, and walked quite a lot. In the winter mornings we usually went with the boatman for a sail around the island in

the felucca. Of course we also had our chores to do such as helping in the house and picking fruit. All of us girls were good at sewing and embroidery and we made all our own clothes, even underwear. All of my father's shirts were made by my mother on a Kaizer sewing machine. Later she was very proud when she got a new Singer. We had to make the best use of what we could get. There was very little chance of getting any material and out of the flour bags we made such things as tea towels, tea cloths, dusters and such small items as handkerchiefs. To make the tea cloths and hankies prettier I would do embroidery on them. As well as doing housework and sewing we plucked and prepared any poultry for cooking. We wasted nothing and the feathers were used to make



15. *Ibrahim*

pillows and mattresses.

The boys mainly looked after the poultry which we kept; ducks, hens, geese and pigeons. We also reared rabbits for food. We had no cows or goats and so milk, cheese and butter which was made from 'gamuza' or buffalo milk brought to us by boat from El Saff. We had a very good Arab boy called Ibrahim who helped my mother in the

kitchen and he managed to acquire things which we needed

in particular salt which came in large blocks and sugar which was the purest cane sugar. Pigs were not eaten by the Arabs but a man who lived on the outskirts of Cairo bred some and once a year we would buy one. My father killed it and my mother butchered it. First it was put into a large basin, rather like a tin bath, and boiling water was poured over it. Then everyone had to gather round, each with a metal spoon, to scrape off the hair. The meat was then salted and smoked in a little mud shed specially built for the purpose where all the meat was hung from the roof. From the offal my mother made all kinds of German Sausage using the intestines for the skins. She also made potted meat and every morsel of fat was rendered down and put into jars for use during the year. We used to love the crackling best, not a single piece of the animal was wasted. Most of our flour came from a mill which was owned by a Swiss family who lived in El-Saff. With this my mother made all the bread. She used to get up very early in the morning, before sunrise. She had a huge basin into which she sifted the flour in order to remove any of the bran which otherwise would make it almost black. She bought yeast only once, for after each batch of dough was ready she would remove some of it, wrap it in a cloth and use it to make the next batch of bread. She would bake as many as twelve loaves at a time as well as sweet cakes and biscuits while the oven was hot.

A few weeks before Christmas my mother would start to fatten the few geese we had. This was done by what may seem a very cruel method but was done daily. My mother would hold the birds firmly between her knees with a pail of soaked maize and salt beside her. She stuffed this mixture down their throats until they were, quite honestly, almost choking. With the salt they drank copiously and this helped to fatten them. As well as needing them for their meat they were a valuable source of fat which we used for cooking.

We had to use everything which was available to us for there were eight mouths to feed. We even ate sparrows since there were so many of them on the island. My father would shoot them and we had the task of plucking them. We only used the breasts and so we needed quite a lot of them to make a goulash or a pie for eight people but they were really delicious.

My mother made all the jams and preserves as well as pickles and chutneys. She was always experimenting with the tropical fruits. The cape gooseberry jam which she made was my favourite. She always seemed to be successful in everything she tried.

Very little happened during these four years but there were two events which were really exciting. In 1916 there was a total eclipse of the sun which we watched through smoked glass. Suddenly all the birds stopped singing, the frogs in the canal fell silent and there was a feeling of uncanniness. In the beautiful summer evenings we used to lie on the banks of the Nile and look up into the star studded sky. One night there was a sudden loud swoosh. It was a meteor which had landed in the river with a loud splash. That really did frighten us.

We never wearied on the island for it was a beautiful place to be imprisoned. We were never afraid and were probably the best fed prisoners there ever were. Solitude and loneliness were never a problem as we loved each other and were really one big happy family. We were never able to go to church during those years. My father was of course a devout catholic, having in his youth, studied for the priesthood. We had morning and evening prayers as well as a short prayer before and after meals. He always made the sign of the cross over the bread which must have been a custom from his native land.

One day we were surprised to see in the corner of our



16. *Family group*

mother's bedroom, a small altar which she had erected. "At last we have a place at which we can pray," she said. She prayed there every day with her little Corgi called Molly always beside her. Molly followed her mistress everywhere and was a very faithful companion. One time my mother had to go to Cairo and was away for three days. The dog fasted all the time she was away and lay

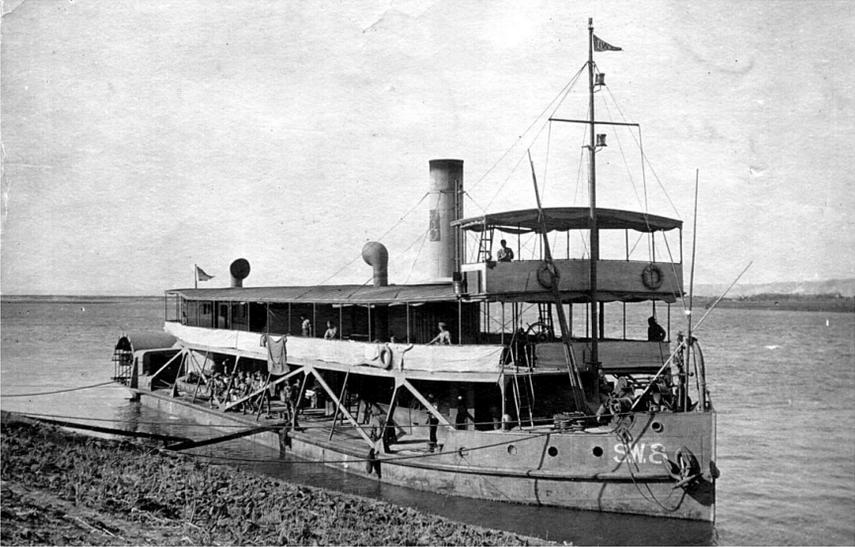
at the gate waiting for her to return. From that day my mother never left her. She had bought Molly from a little Arab boy in El-Saff.

At long last we heard that the Armistice had been declared and that there were celebrations in Cairo. When we heard the news we all knelt down to pray and to thank God we were free at last. I was now in my mid teens and wondered what my future would be. I had had very little education and for us girls there was only the hope that we might marry which would get us away from our close and very sheltered life if we were not to spend the remainder of our

lives on the island. One of my brothers went to California and my brother, Joseph, started his education at the age of eleven with my other brother, Stephen, at the school in Helwan.

All during those years there was little excitement as I have said. We saw no one except, of course, the native workers. We saw no Europeans at all. One dark evening in November, soon after the Armistice was declared we were all sitting around the table reading and talking in the lamplight when suddenly there was a knock at the door. We all looked at each other and wondered who on earth it could be. My father went to answer and when he opened it there stood a handsome British Army officer. My father could not speak English but was good at comprehending what someone was trying to say in whatever language. The officer said that he was in charge of a paddle boat full of soldiers bound for Upper Egypt and that he had been ordered to anchor somewhere for the night as it was dangerous to sail in the darkness with so many feluccas on the river. He asked my father if it would be all right if he moored at the island till dawn. My father lit his hurricane lamp and accompanied the officer to the landing stage to see that all was well. My father told him that they would be very welcome to anchor there any time they needed to. Early in the morning we heard the hoot of the siren to let us know that they were on their way.

After this occasion many more boats moored there and my father would invite the officers to join us for a meal. We got to know them quite well. Of course they were astonished to find such a lovely family and particularly three pretty young girls. After the post-war political unrest died down in Egypt the officers and boats were stationed at the Kasr el Nil bridge near the Ghezira Sporting Club. From time to time some of them would write to my father and ask him if they could spend a weekend with us. My father welcomed their



17. Army paddle steamer

visits and we were often invited to dinner on board the boats. The time came when they said that they would not be seeing us again as they thought they would soon be going home. We thought we would give a farewell dinner for them. We made out menu cards and all the dishes had funny names. The men signed the cards which we cherished for a long time after. When the meal was over there was a sing-song when all the men sang the war songs such as 'It's a long way to Tipperary', 'There's a long long trail awinding' and many others. At the end of the evening they all stood up, so smart in their uniforms, glasses in their hands and sang 'Auld lang syne'. We all felt very sad as the boat's siren hooted all the way down the river. However they were still in Egypt a few months later and so invited us three girls and my mother to spend a weekend with them on their boat anchored in Cairo. We had a wonderful time. We saw all the sights of the city and went to the Opera House. These men belonged to the Inland Water Transport Royal Engineers or I.W.T.R.E. which



18. My sister and I with members of the IWTRÉ

transported troops up and down the Nile. As a momento the men presented us with a German shell on which was inscribed one of the songs which they sang so often to us to the tune of hymn 618.

We are Fred Karno's army
We soldiers from the sea
We cannot fight
We cannot shoot
What earthly use are we?
But when we get to Berlin
The Kaizer he will say.
"Och, och, Mein Gott
What a jolly fine lot
Are the I.W.T.R.E."

Under this the names of all the men were inscribed.

After the war many British troops were stranded in Egypt waiting to be demobbed and the army authorities thought that these men, especially the officers, should be doing something useful with their time until they could be shipped back to 'Blighty'. If they were interested they were encouraged to study. There was an Agriculture College in Zeitun which some of the men attended.

One day my father received a letter from the officer in charge of the students asking him if he could bring them to see the island as he had heard so much about it. They all arrived by boat for the day and, of course, we offered hospitality to them. As they were getting ready to leave two of the students broke away from the main party and wandered off. They intended to miss the boat, of course, as they had other plans. At least one called Eric did. He and his companion named McKenzie were the only two Scotsmen in the party. When McKenzie heard of Eric's intentions he was furious. He was an evangelist and more or less told Eric that he would never pass through the gates of heaven. Eric told him to calm down, look at the river and the sunset. He might then view Eric's dilemma with a kinder heart. At last McKenzie fell asleep. Eric searched his pockets to find a piece of notepaper on which he composed the following lines to the young girl he met on the island and of whom he hoped to get another glimpse before he returned to the felucca and to the station at Matania. In his heart he knew he would never see her again.

The sun peeps o'er yon sandy waste.

The warblers hail the dewy morn.

No comfort can I find or rest

As here I lie awake, forlorn.

My native land for thee I yearn
For kin and comrades oft I pine.
Oh! glorious prospect to return
To Scotland, dear old hame of mine.

But Oh 'tis not all joy and pleasure
Leaving Egypt's sandy shore.
There I must leave a priceless treasure
The little girl that I adore.

It may be long, maybe forever
As fortune and the fates decree
But seas that roll or time can never
Separate my love and me.

Little sweetheart, ere I leave you
One last kiss my pledge I give
Though this world at times may grieve me
Still I'll love you while I live.

Angel of my soul, 'Adieu'.
With breaking heart I take my load
I send my prayer to heaven for you
And leave you in the hands of God.

ea.

They spoke about their homes in Scotland and much later Eric was to tell me that he came from a little village called Kemnay in Aberdeenshire. He'd had quite an adventurous life for at the age of twenty three he had left his farm-



19. *Students from the Agriculture College*

ing home and taken a job with a shipping company in Liverpool. He had to ship cattle out to Lagos and drive them on horseback as far as Lake Chad. In those days he had to be paid for the cattle on delivery which meant the long, dangerous journey back to Lagos was made with two heavy sacks of silver to deposit in the bank. At the beginning of this century that part of Africa was known as “the white man’s grave” and Eric caught malaria there which was to recur throughout his life. After his contract had ended he returned home to join the Gordon Highlanders at the beginning of the First World War. With the regiment he went to the front line in France, where he was wounded. From France he was shipped home to hospital in England. When he had recovered he went to Woolwich to train in the Artillery and joined the Royal Engineers. He was sent to fight in Italy then Palestine and found himself in Egypt at the time the Armistice was declared.

While the two Scots were enjoying their tea I was able to understand some of what they were saying as I still remembered some of the English I had learned at school. They were later taken over by boat to the railway station at Matania to catch the train to Cairo. Eric began to correspond with me but soon he would be going to Alexandria to get a boat home. He could have remained in Egypt had he got a job and of course he wanted to remain in the country to continue our friendship. He had, I found out later, fallen in love with me at first sight.

While he was sitting in a restaurant, very disconsolately, in Alexandria a gentleman came over to the table and asked if he could join him. This man owned a cotton plantation in the Sudan near Atbara and was returning to England for a holiday. He asked Eric if he would like to go to the plantation to help manage it in his absence. Eric was delighted to accept his offer and the man handed him a cheque for £2,000 with which to buy mules and ship them to the Sudan. Eric was amazed at the trust this stranger had in him. His reply was, "I know when I can trust a man." He was demobbed in Alexandria and soon after came to the island, where he stayed a week before going south.

He was in love with me and wanted to marry me. He wondered just how he would take it if my father refused the hand of his daughter in marriage as he was a good deal older than I. He had to pluck up a great deal of courage. However, my father knew that Eric would take care of me and so we were engaged before he left for the Sudan. It would be eighteen long months before I would see him again. I always dreamt that I would fall in love with a 'Britisher' and my dream had come true. I was very much in love. At the end of his contract he came down to Cairo, a journey of over one thousand six hundred miles.

In the late Autumn of 1920 we were married at the British Consulate in Cairo. The wedding reception was held in the Ezbekieh Gardens. I changed into a white dress with pale green accessories and later we boarded the train at Boulac Station where we were showered with rice by the family and the many well-wishers who came to see us off.

We spent our first night in the Savoy Hotel in Port Said. Next evening we sailed off aboard the liner "Durham Castle" on our honeymoon trip to Scotland. From the deck I watched, with considerable sadness, the twinkling lights of Port Said disappear from sight under a deep blue starlit sky and gently threw my wedding bouquet into the calm Mediterranean.

When we arrived in Britain it seemed like the other end of the world. The snow flakes were falling and it was bitterly cold. The last time I had seen snow was in Osijek, but Scotland looked beautiful and we were so happy to be together.

After five and a half decades I returned alone to see my island where I had met the man with whom I shared those fifty five years of happiness mingled also with sadness. It was still a romantic island full of lovely memories. The house in which the family had lived was still there and so were the tall casuarina trees. But this was not quite the 'Island Paradise' which my beloved had called it.

* * * * *

Since the building of the Aswan Dam the island is now a peninsula being joined to the west bank of the Nile. It is no longer called Ghezira Dabsha.