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Searching for the Traces of Aleksandrinke, Slovene Migrant Women, in Egypt

Slovene economic migration to Egypt

The paper discusses economic migration from the Slovene ethnic territory to Egypt from 1870 to 1935. Migration was quite intensive during this period but discontinued after 1935. This was mainly due to the increasingly complex political and economic conditions in Europe in the years leading to World War II, though many Slovene families remained in Egypt until 1956. In the years 1956–1958 almost all Slovene migrants left Egypt, so that there is now no Slovene diaspora left in the country. The paper addresses the endeavours of the descendants of these migrants to find and preserve traces of the former Slovene community in Egypt.

Egypt and the Slovene ethnic territory were both part of a wider, global context in the 1870–1935 period. At a certain point in history their paths crossed and joined. After the construction of the Suez Canal, Egypt gained a new and very important economic role in the Mediterranean. Its economic significance was further boosted by the development of the cotton industry, when Egypt became

the world centre of cotton production, not only to England and the rest of Europe, but also to the USA. Egypt's flourishing economy attracted many merchants, cotton growers and cotton processing manufacturers, and other professions from the middle and upper middle classes of many European countries, but chiefly from England, France, and Italy. In addition to the upper-middle-class people who came to Egypt from the Ottoman Empire or Europe and prospered, many people of different nationalities found a place for themselves in Egypt: Armenians, Greeks, Jews from various countries, Maltese, Slovenes, and others. Egypt gradually changed into a cosmopolitan society where employment was not hard to find.

The Slovene ethnic territory had a very different fate during this period. From 1870 to 1918 it was still a part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. It had always been a territory which the Slovenes were leaving for various parts of the world as economic migrants: they went to France as miners, to Romania as forest workers, to Switzerland as masons, the USA as miners and forest workers, to Brazil and Argentina as agricultural workers, etc. Women as well sought employment and were mainly hired as maids and nannies. In the 1870–1914 period and within the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, women sought and found employment in the big cities of the great common state – in Trieste, Gorizia, Vienna, etc.

But how did the economic migration from the Slovene ethnic territory to Egypt come about? Initially, Slovene women who were employed with prosperous families in these big cities moved together with them to Cairo or Alexandria, and this started a chain reaction of women migrating to Egypt to seek work there.

The Alexandrines in the thirties of the 20th century, in Egypt.

They were very well paid in Egypt, much better than in Vienna or Trieste, and the first women who arrived in Egypt started to invite their female relatives to join them. They in turn invited their own relatives, etc. This led to a migration trend that lasted a full sixty-five years.

In the initial period of migration to Egypt, up to the First World War, Slovene women chiefly migrated because they could earn well in Egypt, enough to improve their material position at home, renovate properties, and buy additional land. The second half of the 19th century was indeed a period when the Slovene ethnic territory was still marked by a predominantly agrarian, peasant economy, and land was *sacred*. People's quality of life depended on how much land they owned. Every purchase of an additional piece of land was of vital importance to them. The money earned in Egypt allowed families to advance economically. When the First World War broke out in 1914, it was to have disastrous consequences for the Slovene ethnic territory. In particular in its western part, where it became the scene of one of the greatest war fronts (the Soča/Isonzo Front). Entire villages were razed to the ground, many people were made homeless and became refugees. During the initial post-war period, from 1920 to 1925, there was consequently the highest increase in economic migration to

Egypt. People had to earn money to rebuild their homes. Most migrants were women, and only occasionally they were accompanied by other family members. They found employment in Cairo and Alexandria as maids, nannies, cooks, governesses, and wet nurses. They were hired by the prosperous classes of society and families of different nationalities: British, French, Italians, Jews, Greeks, Copts, Egyptians, and others.

Men did not migrate to Egypt in similar numbers; many lost their lives in the First World War, and many others had lost their health and were no longer capable of working; young men also preferred to migrate to Argentina, where they found employment in agriculture and settled in the country. Egypt attracted mostly daughters, young mothers, and widows. In the families where the husband had survived the war, he learned a trade, stayed at home, and took care of the family, and a small farm. These families thus made a living off farming and the money sent from Egypt by mothers, sisters, or aunts. Young girls migrated to earn enough for their wedding and create a family of their own; some women were later joined by their husbands and children. Fairly large Slovene communities were thus gradually established in Cairo and Alexandria, consisting not only of individual narrow families, but also extended families. The men found employment as drivers, park wardens, masons (especially in Aswan), mechanics, shop assistants, etc. The children who came from Slovenia or were born in Egypt attended French, Italian, or German schools. As they grew up, they learned a trade and became fully integrated in Egypt's multicultural society of the 1930s.

The Suez crisis in 1956 put an end to Slovene migration to Egypt, but it had been preceded by the Egypt (Arab) – Israel war in 1948, and the social and political transformation of Egypt in 1952. Many European and Jewish families employing Slovene economic migrants suddenly left Egypt in a hurry. The Slovenes were thus left behind without their jobs and the families they worked

for – their economic basis. And so they too had to leave. The women, their children and families left Egypt and settled in various countries around the world – Italy, the USA, Australia, Canada, Yugoslavia.

For many years this particular migration was a taboo theme in Slovenia. The first research and first book on the theme was published in 1993 and the author Dorica Makuc, entitled it *Aleksandrinke* – The Alexandrines. This gave the Slovene migration to Egypt its special name and defined it as female migration. The name comes of course from the Egyptian town of Alexandria where most Slovene women were employed. Historians estimate that 8.000 Slovene women were employed in Egypt in the 1870 – 1956 period, and this is quite a high number considering that they left from a small area in western Slovenia.

There are a number of reasons why this migration remained a taboo theme in Slovenia: in the patriarchal peasant environment it was very hard to accept that the female migrants earned a living for their families, that they were in demand as workers in Egypt, while their husbands had to take care of the impoverished farms at home. There were also bitter changes to family life, since migrant mothers sometimes remained in Egypt for 10, 15, or even 20 years. Young mothers were employed as wet nurses in Egypt and had to leave their own babies at home in the care of female relatives. They went to Cairo or Alexandria as wet nurses where they were exceptionally well paid. This specific migration therefore had a strong emotional aspect and was a sensitive theme in the families. Another reason was economic: the western Slovene territory was part of four different countries in the period from 1870 to the present; this process led from the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy (until 1918), via Italy (1918–1946) and Yugoslavia (1946–1991) to the contemporary state of Slovenia after 1991. The transitions between four different countries included several currency devaluations and two world wars with catastrophic damages to the territory. All

this devalued the economic contribution earned by the Slovene women working in Egypt, even though it had been very high. In the places they left behind at home, a single question thus remained: Why did the mothers leave home?! This was the judgement that had survived in the awareness of their descendants for a long time.

Revisits

The memory of Egypt survived. It lives on in the children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. They return to Egypt in the footsteps of their mothers and grandmothers. They visit the particular places the Slovene migrants used to frequent in Egypt: churches, cemeteries and religious centres. The *hidden migration story* led to the wish to preserve the history of the migration of Slovenes to Egypt and save it from oblivion. The wish seems to have surfaced at the family level after the parents died, because much was left unsaid and unsolved in their relationship. Their children are today all over sixty and some over eighty years old. They wanted to see Egypt, the country where they spent their childhood, once more. Concerning the children, there are basically two groups: those who lived in Egypt for some time, and others who never lived there, but whose mothers and grandmothers worked there. Nowadays they live scattered around the world: in Australia, Canada, the USA, Italy, Switzerland, France, and some in Slovenia. They like to visit their relatives in Slovenia and these visits are opportunities for conducting ethnographic research interviews with them. In the 2005–2008 period a large number of interviews with the descendants were done by the Slovene Ethnographic Museum.

The research that has been carrying out since 2005 shows that the descendants of Slovene migrants visit particularly Cairo and Alexandria. Slovene women working in Egypt were of the Catholic faith and most of them were committed believers; those who died there are all buried in Latin cemeteries. The

descendants travel to Cairo and Alexandria, mainly to visit the local Catholic churches, the Catholic monasteries of the Franciscan nuns, and the Latin cemeteries in these towns. They bring candles and flowers from Slovenia to the graves of their mothers, grandmothers, and other relatives, and take back candles, blessed in one of the Catholic churches in Cairo or Alexandria, to the graves at home. They visit the monasteries carrying old family photographs in the hope to find traces of their relatives who once lived in Egypt.

There have been several individual visits in recent years. Descendants visited houses and hotels where their mothers and grandmothers had worked, the children who had lived in Egypt visited the schools they had attended. But the most significant was the group visit of descendants in 2007. It was the first organised visit arranged by the *Society for Preserving the Alexandrine Heritage.*

Commemoration ceremony. Alexandria, 2007.
(Photo: Vojko Mihelj)

The intention was to commemorate Slovene women who were migrant workers in Egypt. Except for two or three people, they all visited Egypt for the first time and joined the trip with that particular intention.

The principal destinations of visits

The most important places to the descendants of the Slovene migrants who visit Egypt are the two Latin cemeteries in Cairo and Alexandria. These two cemeteries indeed preserve most traces of the Slovenes who once lived and worked there; their descendants visit them first of all to find the graves of their grandmothers or great grandmothers, but not all of them do find them. In 2007 I thus witnessed several very emotional scenes when descendants failed to find the grave of their grandmother and their journey to Egypt at once lost its entire meaning.

Searching for Slovene gravestones. Alexandria, 2007.
(Photo: Sonja Mravljak)

An example of a gravestone inscription in Slovene language.
Alexandria, 2007. (Photo: Daša Koprivec)

It was hard for them to understand why they were not able to find the grave, as it should have been there according to the family history. Others found the graves and lit candles they had brought from Slovenia. These graves are in a way evidence that Slovenes indeed had lived there, since the inscriptions on the tombstones are in Slovene.

The descendants then sang Slovene songs at the graves and prayed, and this contact was deeply meaningful to them: it meant contact at the deeper level of a family's generations, a meeting after death, at the grave, while in real family life they had lived separate lives in Egypt and Slovenia.

The candles and greenery that they brought from Slovenia and put on graves in Egypt, reflect their links with them. They also bought candles in the Catholic church of St. Catherine in Alexandria, very important in the life of Slovene women in Egypt, to light them on the graves of grandmothers who had died at home in Slovenia. The symbolic meaning of the act is is significant: people kept the candles from Alexandria for one year to light them on All Saints' Day.

Candles from Egypt, lit non All Saints Day. Prvačina, Slovenia, 2008.
(Photo: Daša Koprivec)

On that day people in Slovenia remember their ancestors. The first of November is celebrated as All Saints' Day, a special and very important holiday in Slovenia, when people visit the graves, tend them, light candles and decorate them flowers.

Other important places are the San Francesco Community Centre in Alexandria and Cairo, and churches, which were attended by Alexandrines. People now visit them to obtain information about their grandmothers and great grandmothers, because there are still Slovene nuns active in them; they may be very old, but they remember some of the Alexandrines. The San Francesco Community Centre in Alexandria was twice a very important meeting place for the descendants of the Slovene women. In 2007, when a memorial stone to Alexandrines was unveiled, and then in 2008 when Slovene Catholic nuns celebrated the 100th anniversary of their arrival in Egypt. The most important church in Alexandria for Slovene migrants was St. Catherine's where they

married, baptised their newborn babies, and received the First Communion and Confirmation.

In the sense of searching for one's roots within the migration discourse, the example I presented in this paper stands for returning to the location of a diaspora that is no longer physically present, but only lives on symbolically in cemeteries, churches, and religious centres. Descendants of Alexandrines want to establish a transcendental contact with their deceased ancestors resting in Egyptian soil.

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