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The life of the women and girls, torn between the native village and the rich city where they lived and worked for their own and the foreign family, was not easy at all. They rarely came home to visit their families, and they returned for good only after their families had recovered economically with the help of their earnings. Due to the social changes after WWII they lost in Egypt the possibility of employment. Some of them, after hard work and only caring for others, found their last peace on the cemetery in Alexandria or Cairo. The documentary material and the literary opus, which place the Aleksandrinke in the cultural heritage of the Slovene nation, prevent these women from being forgotten. The memories of them are collected and kept in the Regional museum Goriški muzej in Nova Gorica, in the Society for the Preservation of the Cultural Heritage of the Alexandrian Women in Prvačina and in the Slovene Ethnographic Museum in Ljubljana, which includes these in the permanent collection of the Slovenian Folk Culture.

The Memorial Plaque in Alexandria, a masterpiece of the sculptor Janez Lenassi, was erected in the School Sisters of St Francis' Asylum for girls in Cairo to honour the »Alexandrian« girls and women. There the Slovenian women and girls found their first shelter in the foreign world. The initiative had been launched by the retired diplomat Mr. Ivan Martelanc, the realization however, was made possible by the Society for the Preservation of the Cultural Heritage of the Alexandrian Women, the Municipality of Nova Gorica and the Office of the Republic of Slovenia for Slovenians Abroad - Urad za Slovence po svetu. At the unveiling of the Memorial plaque on 7th November 2007 the School Sisters



of St. Francis of Christ the King from the Trieste Province received the State Award of the Republic of Slovenia conferred to them by the President Dr. Janez Drnovšek - a symbolic gesture of gratitude for the Sisters' humanitarian work with the »Aleksandrinke«. Present at the ceremony were the Sisters Martina Arhar and Kristina Bajc, who are still working in Cairo and in Alexandria, from Trieste, however, arrived Sister Gabrijela Koncilja and the Sister Prioress Suzana Masten who in the name of all the Sisters received the Award from the hands of the Ambassador of the Republic of Slovenia H.E. Mr. Borut Mahnič.

At the poignant ceremony in Alexandria numerous descendants of the Alexandrian Women from the native country were present. After the festal address of the Ambassador of the Republic of Slovenia in Egypt, of the Mayor of Nova Gorica Mr. Mirko Brulc and of the President of the Society for the Preservation of the Cultural Heritage of the Alexandrian Women Mrs. Dejana Baša, the Slovene folk song about the Lepa Vida was sung and then two deeply moving letters, one from a child to its mother in Egypt and the answer from the mother torn between the native village and the foreign country, took us all back to the days still vivid in our memory.



In memory of the
 Aleksandrinke -
 the Alexandrian Women



The Karst marble Memorial plaque represents the route of the Slovenian women and girls across the sea to Egypt, masterpiece by sculptor Janez Lenassi, 2007

“ You don't know how many tears were shed here on Sunday afternoons; we saw the suffering of the young mothers, who in order to save their homes, in most of the cases deep in debt, gave their milk and healthy body to an unknown, foreign child and when they gave birth for the second, third time, they always came back to Egypt, as the job of wet nurses was the highest paid job available to women, and with every child the family farm became larger, but the suffering of these women as well. ”

School Sister Franka Martelanc, Cairo 1974

Text taken from the book by Dorica Makuc “Aleksandrinke – The Alexandrian Women”, Gorizia 1993

The School Sister Franka Martelanc was born on 24 June 1894 in Bukovica, a village in the Goriška region. As a sixteen year old girl she came to Cairo to earn her living and in the year 1927 she entered into the congregation of the School Sisters of St. Francis of Christ the King in the subsidiary in Tomaj on the Karst. With the help of the Slovene School Sisters from Alexandria she founded in the year 1929 the School Sisters of St Francis Asylum for girls in Cairo, where she worked for a very long time and where in 1981 she also died. She is buried there in the Holy Land Cemetery. Sister Franka Martelanc was conferred in the year 1973 the Sadat Peace Award for work by the Egyptian Ministry of Health and Population. The stories described by Sister Franka Martelanc about the contacts and meetings with the Slovene wet nurses and maids were published in the book by Dorica Makuc “Aleksandrinke – the Alexandrian Women” (Goriška Mohorjeva družba, Gorizia 1993, reprinted in 2006). The journal-list and publicist as well as researcher of the Slovene past history, especially the one of the Goriška and broader Primorska region, Mrs. Dorica Makuc from Gorizia, acquainted in her TV documentary film »Žerjavi letijo na jug – Cranes Fly South« the Slovene public already in the year 1975 with the phenomenon of the »Aleksandrinke – the Alexandrian Women«.

“ One whole century the Slovenian women came to Egypt as wet nurses, nannies, cooks, nursery governesses, dressmakers and needlewomen ... saving with their earnings their own families and farms from ruin. In the years from 1860 up to 1960 thousands of women and mothers earned their living in Egypt. The School Sisters of St. Francis in Alexandria and Cairo helped the girls and women generously throughout their stay and work there. The present Memorial plaque commemorates the crusade of the Slovenians, les Goriciennes, les Slaves, les Slovenes. ”

Marjan Tomšič, writer

The writer Marjan Tomšič, born in 1939 in Rače near Maribor, moved after his Slavistic Studies in Ljubljana to Istria, where he worked a number of years as a teacher and journalist. He dedicated his literary opus to the villages and towns in Istria and the litoral region of Primorska and its inhabitants. He depicted the stories of the Alexandrian Women in the novel »Grenko morje – Bitter Sea«, (published by the Kmečki glas in the year 2002) and in the collection of novelettes »Južni veter – South Wind« (published by the Društvo 2000 in Ljubljana, 2006).

The history of mankind consists of many heroic acts – some of them are great and represent the turning points in history, others however, are ordinary, many times a matter of course and so often forgotten. The story of the Slovene Alexandrian Women, women and girls from the Goriška region, is one of the minor heroic stories from real life which connected two countries – Slovenia and Egypt. In the mid-19th century, when the Slovene territory was still under the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, and when the Suez Canal was built by French and British engineers, women and girls from the Goriška region started to



work for European families in Egypt. At first they left for Egypt above all as wet nurses, as this was the highest paid job. A great many children would have died but for the wet nurses from the Goriška region, and also so many farms in the villages in Goriška and the Vipava Valley would fall to ruin but for them. The wet nurses saved thus with their money families and family farms from ruin. They left their own babies for many years in the care of the grandparents or other relatives. Surviving meant sacrifice, suffering and the destruction of their family's happiness. It marked the mothers, the children and fathers of many families in the Goriška region for good.

The Slav Association »Sloga«, meaning harmony in English, took care of the Slovene emigrants in the years between 1895 and 1898. Later it transformed itself into the Slovene Association »Slovene Palm by the Nile River«. Within this association the Asylum for unemployed girls named after the then Austro-Hungarian Emperor »Azil Franja Josipa« was active. Later the congregation of the School Sisters of St. Francis of Christ the King of Maribor, which set up subsidiaries on Slovenian territory and abroad, started to take care for the Slovene girls. In the year 1908 the Sisters from Tomaj on the Karst took thus over first the subsidiary in Alexandria and later also in Cairo. The School Sisters ran kindergardens and elementary schools, societies and associations met there, and every Sunday the Slovenian women and girls gathered for mass

in the church. For the spiritual welfare of them and the other Slovenes in Egypt the unselfish Slovene Franciscan priests, who were operating in the Holy Land and in Egypt, took care.

After the First World War the employment in Egypt continued and even increased, since many homes were destroyed during the war and had to be repaired. Many wet nurses thus continued their employment with the families in Egypt as nannies, governesses, cooks, dressmakers and needlewomen, chambermaids, chaperons ... After the first the second generation of women and girls went to Egypt and the emigration to Egypt became known in the Slovene society as the Aleksandrinstvo - Alexandrianhood, and the women were called Aleksandrinke – the Alexandrian Women, named after the city of Alexandria. Here a real small Slovene community developed. In the years prior to the Second World War there were about 4500 Slovene emigrants in Egypt. On the whole there were over 7000 Slovenes, women and men, in Egypt who came alone or together with their families. The villages Prvačina, Gradišče, Dornberk, Bilje, Renče and many others from the Vipava Valley and the Goriška region developed also with the help of the Alexandrian women.

