

# MIGRATIONS OF THE CHILDREN OF THE ALEXANDRIAN WOMEN FROM THE 1930S TO THE 1960S

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## ABSTRACT

### **Migrations of the Children of the Alexandrian Women from the 1930s to the 1960s**

The article presents the migrations of the children of the Alexandrian Women, with a particular emphasis on the relocations in the period from the 1930s to the 1960s. It describes the main migration flows of the children between Goriška and Egypt, the age of the children involved, and the principal reasons for their migration. The migrations are discussed in relation to the family situation, as well as in the wider context of the relevant economic and political developments in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In addition to the migrations of the Alexandrian Women themselves, many of their children relocated more than once, and the article sheds light on a perhaps less known aspect of the migration of Slovenes to and from Egypt.

**KEYWORDS:** migrations, children, Alexandrian Women, transnational migrations, Goriška, Egypt, migrations from Egypt

## IZVLEČEK

### **Migracije otrok aleksandrink od tridesetih do šestdesetih let 20. stoletja**

V prispevku avtorica predstavi migracije otrok aleksandrink in pri tem poudari migracije v obdobju od 30. do 60. let 20. stoletja. Predstavi glavne tokove migracij otrok iz Goriške in iz Egipta, starost otrok migrantov in poglobitve razloge za njihove migracije. Migracije otrok aleksandrink umešča v družinski kontekst, postavi pa jih tudi v širši ekonomski in politični okvir dogajanja v prvi polovici 20. stoletja v navedenem geografskem prostoru. V ozadju migracij aleksandrink so potekale številne selitve njihovih otrok, zato nudi članek vpogled v do sedaj morda malo manj znano plat selitev Slovenk in Slovencev v Egipt in iz njega.

**KLJUČNE BESEDE:** migracije, otroci, aleksandrinke, transnacionalne migracije, Goriška, Egipt, migracije iz Egipta

## INTRODUCTION

In this article I will deal with some of the fundamental characteristics of the migrations of the children of the Alexandrian Women<sup>2</sup> from the 1930s to the 1960s. To a great

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<sup>2</sup> This involves the migration of Slovene women and men to Egypt, who in the social sciences and

extent, what is outlined here is part of a wider research project carried out at the Slovene Ethnographic Museum, which focused on the formation of the heritage of the Alexandrian Women and its evaluation among their descendants.<sup>3</sup> The testimonies of those who took part in the research revealed numerous migration currents, which also included the children of Alexandrian Women, not only their adult relatives. I discuss primarily the main migration currents from the Goriška area of Slovenia (near Nova Gorica on the Italian border) to Egypt, rather than from other Slovene regions. The reason for this is that the basic research work carried out by the Slovene Ethnographic Museum was in the Goriška area, as was research by certain other authors (Makuc 1993; Miklavčič-Brezigar 2003; Škrlič 2009). Thus comparison with other parts of Slovenia could be unsatisfactory, as we have far less suitable data on migrations from these other areas to Egypt.

With regard to migrations from Europe to the Near East, the period from the 1930s to the 1960s was exceptionally rich and dynamic. After World War I and to the mid-1930s migrations flowed from north to south, from Europe to the Near East and North Africa. Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and by the mid-1920s, Britain, France and Italy had already consolidated their political and economic dominance over many countries in this region. Not only Egypt, but also Sudan, Jordan, Iraq and the then Palestine were in Britain's hands; France had control of Syria, Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia; and Italy had Libya (Warnock Fernea 2002: 67). This transfer of political and economic strength facilitated migrations from Europe by numerous individuals and families seeking to make a living and, frequently, to start a new life. Not only Slovenes moved, but also Italians, Greeks, Jews, Armenians, Maltese, Britons and French (Haag 2004). These migration processes also involved the Alexandrian Women and their children. Dorica Makuc, the author of key research into the Alexandrian Women, has noted that in the mid-1930s, when there was an Italian policy of trying to Italianise Slovenes living within Italy's borders, the Goriška quæstorship was very happy to rapidly accede to requests from Slovenes for a passport, including for children (Makuc 1993: 127).

Migrations by the children of the Alexandrian Women were numerous and diverse, both in terms of the direction of migration and the causes for it, while the age of the children involved varied greatly. Further research needs to be done into the migration of children prior to World War I. In this discussion I focus on the period from the 1930s to the late 1960s, as my main source is the testimonies of Alexandrian Women's children, who actually took part in these migration processes.<sup>4</sup>

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humanities are referred to as Alexandrian; see also Miklavčič-Brezigar 2004: 5; Kalc 2002; Makuc 1993.

<sup>3</sup> Koprivec, Daša (2005–2010). *Aleksandrinke in njihovi potomci* (The Alexandrian Women and their descendants), research project of the Slovene Ethnographic Museum. Field interviews. Audio recordings 1–25 and fieldwork notebooks 1–19.

<sup>4</sup> Testimonies recorded as part of the museum research are used. These are kept in the Department for Slovene Emigrants at the Slovene Ethnographic Museum in the form of audio recordings (AO) and field notes (TZ) of interviews conducted in Goriška (Koprivec 2005–2010).

## **MIGRATIONS BETWEEN GORIŠKA AND EGYPT**

The migration of Alexandrian Women's children was in three main directions: from Goriška to Egypt, from Egypt to Goriška and from the mid-1940s onwards from Egypt to other parts of the world. These migrations were not only part of the family context, but also part of the wider economical and political circumstances of the time. More than adults, the children can be thought of as in some senses *objects* of these migration flows, as their migrations were dependent on a parental decision – sometimes by both parents, sometimes by the mother alone, depending on the situation within the child's primary family. Children were not party to the decision, they just had to come to terms with it and accept it. Many participants in our research told us how when their mother or aunt came to get them they could not come to terms with the migration from their home in Goriška to Egypt. Many of them tried to hide and to avoid the move.

I didn't want to leave, but what could I do? I hid under that bridge over there...but my sister knew. She picked me up and carried me... Yes, I was there, and then they took me off to Egypt.

This was told by the son of an Alexandrian Women, who went to Egypt in 1935 as a six-year old, with his eight-year-old sister, when their mother came from Egypt to fetch them. He spent twenty years in Egypt, moving in 1955 from there to Australia, where he lived until 2008 when, after seventy-two years abroad, he decided to spend the rest of his days in his birthplace Goriška.<sup>5</sup>

Child migrations between Goriška and Egypt can be divided into three groups, according to age. The first group is babies; the second is boys and girls between the ages of six and ten; and the third is adolescent girls aged fifteen to seventeen. The reasons for the migrations of the different groups were different.

## **MIGRATIONS INVOLVING BABIES**

Migrations of babies mainly took place from Egypt to Goriška: in other words, they were born in Egypt but their mother could not take care of them because of work obligations. The women were employed as maid servants who lived and worked with the employer's family and there was no room there for servants' children. While they were in this situation, Alexandrian Women in Egypt could not have their own family with them, as they had to become surrogate mothers, friends and companions to various members of the employer's family.<sup>6</sup>

Some of them got pregnant when they were on a visit home and returned to Egypt

<sup>5</sup> Koprivec 2005–2010: AO8-04.

<sup>6</sup> This did not happen only to the Alexandrian Women, but was one of the basic features of *live-in* work and part of the fate of migrant women workers who were also mothers (Hrženjak 2007: 40–42).

not even knowing that they were with child. Some months after the birth, the child would be sent home to be cared for by relatives or neighbours. These babies would have a wet nurse paid for by the mother (Humar 2007: 11). Some of them would eventually rejoin their mother in Egypt if she was still working there. This happened after they reached the age of six, because then they were old enough to attend one of the many boarding schools in Cairo or Alexandria where the children of different immigrant groups spent their first school years (Warnock Fernea 2002). Thus the children of some Alexandrian Women went through a number of migrations: after being born in Egypt they were sent home to Goriška, then as boys or girls they moved back to Egypt and in the mid-1950s there was a massive wave of migration, when numerous Slovene families, after the Egyptian national revolution of 1952–1956, sought new homes in Australia, Canada and Argentina. This is the kind of story told by the son of an Alexandrian Woman, who in 1924, as a six-week-old baby, was sent from Alexandria to Goriška, where he lived until he was six, mainly with his father and older sister, while his mother and two older sisters lived and worked in Egypt. Then at the age of six he was sent back to Egypt, where he lived for thirteen years, attending school and acquiring a career. After World War 2 he emigrated to Slovenia and then in 1952 to Canada, where he still lives (Koprivec 2009: 113).

Slovene children were born in Egypt to married couples (where both husband and wife were working in Egypt) and to Alexandrian Women involved in other relationships. The decision to separate from a child was always difficult and marked both mother and child. But the child in particular was most affected, especially when migration from Egypt to Goriška meant long-term separation from the mother (who stayed in Egypt and never returned to Goriška, or only after so many years that the sense of alienation between mother and child was difficult to overcome) and is connected with traumatic memories that burden the children of Alexandrian Women even in old age.

I was sent home like a parcel, less than three months old. I have no memories of mother being home. Even now, at the age of 80, I miss my mother. What your mother gives you no one else can replace.

This was the daughter of an Alexandrian Women born in Egypt in 1930, who was sent home to Goriška at the age of three months. Her mother, who had joined her mother in Egypt in 1906 at the age fourteen returned to Goriška in 1947, after an absence of forty-one years.<sup>7</sup>

The decision by a mother or both parents to have a child raised by relatives in Goriška was dictated by difficult circumstances: due to the nature of the work in Egypt care of the child was simply not possible.

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<sup>7</sup> This was said in an interview with a TV Slovenija team. Documentary footage of RTV SLO: SŠ–2009. Noted down by Koprivec 2005–2010: TZ 18.

## **MIGRATIONS OF YOUNG GIRLS AND BOYS TO EGYPT**

The children from Goriška who migrated to Egypt in the 1930s were born in the years 1922–1929. Most often, the mother went to work in Egypt and was later joined by her husband if he found suitable employment. The transfer of the children to Egypt was because the parents wanted their offspring who had at first stayed behind in Goriška to join them. This was a reflection of a *wish* for the family to be united once the parents had established themselves in the new environment.

I went to Egypt because my mum was there. She first went when I was two years old. Then my dad went, a year before me. And so I was six when my mum came to get me. Mum and dad were initially in the same house with the same family and when I came to Egypt I went to my aunt's for two years to be looked after. Then my parents rented a flat, my dad got a job in a mill and then I started to attend the French school.

This is the narrative of the daughter of an Alexandrian Woman who was born in Goriška in 1928, lived in Alexandria from 1934 to 1946, and then after twelve years returned to the village of her birth in Goriška.<sup>8</sup>



Photo 1. Lucija left Goriška to live with her mother, grandmother and aunt in Egypt. Taken in Alexandria at the end of the 1930s. (Slovene Ethnographic Museum Archives)

<sup>8</sup> Koprivec 2005–2010: AO7-07.

Some Slovene children lived in Egypt without their father, who had died; also others whose father decided not to go to Egypt and stayed at home in Goriška. Some fathers migrated to other places to find work, for instance to Argentina, Italy or Switzerland. Complete families in which both parents were Slovene were in a minority in Egypt. Most common were widowed mothers and those whose husbands had migrated to Argentina but who then failed to maintain contact; such women had to provide for their children themselves and sought work in Egypt in order to do so.

My mum married very young. She had a daughter, my half-sister. Because of the economic crisis at that time, her husband went to Argentina to earn money. There followed years of waiting for the promised money and a summons to bring the child and join him in America. Instead of that, after a number of years, she found out through others that her husband had met someone else down there and started a family. She was indescribably disappointed. She went to Egypt to work. She left the four-year-old daughter with her grandparents. She worked in Egypt as a servant for a rich family. Then she came back for a short time and took my half-sister back to Egypt with her.

This was how the daughter of an Alexandrian Woman born in Alexandria in 1930 described how her mother came to be there. When she was one year old her mother took her to Goriška and left her with a neighbour's family. In payment for the years of childcare, the mother gave this family everything she owned apart from her house. She took the first daughter with her to Egypt, from where in 1952 the latter moved to Australia with her family. The narrator never lived with her mother.<sup>9</sup>

*Girls aged fifteen to seventeen* moved from Goriška to Egypt for *economic reasons*. The research literature contains testimony regarding this kind of migration even from the period before the First World War and immediately after it (Škrlj 2009: 168). Mothers sent for their daughters from Goriška as soon as they had finished primary school and could work. They found employment with the families where their mother or some other close relative worked. This kind of migration was the result of the family's financial need and the requirement that every member of the family contributed to the family budget. Thus even adolescent girls went to Egypt to work as nannies or maids and supplement the mother's earnings. Most of these girls stayed in Egypt and married there, usually to someone of a different nationality. After the Egyptian national revolution, from the mid-1950s onwards most of them emigrated from Egypt with their families (see also Škrlj 2009: 161–170; Makuc 1993).

In families of Alexandrian Women where there were a number of children and the gap between the oldest and youngest was twenty years or more, some may have been in Goriška while others were in Egypt. Daughters aged between sixteen and twenty would live and work with their mother in Egypt, while the youngest was being brought up by

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<sup>9</sup> Koprivec 2005–2010: A08–06.





Photo 2. Nadin left Goriška to live with her mother in Egypt. Taken in Alexandria at the end of the 1930s. (Slovene Ethnographic Museum Archives)

relatives in Goriška.<sup>10</sup> Different migration processes took place within the same family, in a constant state of flux. Relocations from Goriška to Egypt and back took place over several generations, and we have testimony about them from those who recount the departure of their mothers for Egypt in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, some of them as sixteen-year-old girls who immediately started work. Later their children and grandchildren began to move, while in some cases in the 1960s great-grandchildren were involved, the end of a sixty-year chain and the fourth generation, moving from Egypt to Australia, Argentina, Canada and elsewhere (Koprivec 2005–2010).

## **MIGRATIONS OF CHILDREN FROM EGYPT**

The migration currents from Egypt after World War 2 involved those children of Alexandrian Women who moved to Egypt as well as those born there. With regard to the

<sup>10</sup> Koprivec 2005–2010: AO7-06.

latter, most of those mentioned in the museum research were born in Egypt in the years 1937–1948. They represent the last generation of children born to Slovene parents in Egypt. They are children of Alexandrian Women who migrated to Egypt in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Many of them married and had children with non-Slovenes: Italians, Swiss, Maltese, Lebanese, Jews, Greeks, Armenians and Egyptians.

The migrations from Egypt that began after World War 2 were collective; they were never planned or wished for. One participant in the museum research expressed the following widely held conviction:

If it had not been for the revolution and Nasser all of these people would have stayed there, none would have come back. They left because they had to leave; the Jews, English and French left, and so it was all over.<sup>11</sup>

After World War 2 the social system in Egypt changed quickly, with the greatest changes happening in the years 1948, 1952, 1956 and 1958.<sup>12</sup> Following the Egyptian national revolution in the period 1952–1956, the property of rich families without Egyptian citizenship, which represented the majority, was nationalised. By the end of the 1950s, the English, French and Jewish families who had employed Slovenes had left Egypt, and with their departure ended the economic situation that enabled Slovenes to make a living there.

Some Slovene families left Egypt as early as 1946, with the Overseas Brigades (Žigon 2003: 39). Alexandrian Women who were married to Jews left soon after 1948.<sup>13</sup> Most of the other families involving Alexandrian Women in mixed marriages left gradually. The first wave between 1946 and 1948, the second from 1956 to 1958, and the last between 1960 and 1962.

The children of Alexandrian Women migrated at very different ages, depending on when they were born and when they migrated, and spent a varying number of years in Egypt. The youngest of those involved in the museum research had been born in Egypt and migrated from there when they were two or three years old. Others were six, eight, nine, or twelve years old. The latter feel a great nostalgia for Egypt as their birthplace (Koprivec 2009: 112). They left with both parents for the countries that were then most open to immigration – in the 1950s that was Australia, Brazil, Argentina and Canada. The children who left Goriška in the 1930s were already on the threshold of adulthood; if they moved from Egypt in the mid-1940s they were around eighteen years old and had lived in Egypt for twelve years or more. For this reason they had often been culturally marked and the transition was often very difficult.

<sup>11</sup> Koprivec 2005–2010: TZ 18.

<sup>12</sup> 1948: the establishment of Israel and immediate armed conflict with Egypt, which dramatically worsened the position of Jewish families in Egypt, some of which employed Slovene Alexandrian Women; 1952: social and national revolution in Egypt and Nasser comes to power; 1956: nationalisation of the Suez Canal, as well as the property of European and Jewish families in Egypt; 1958: establishment of the United Arab Republic of Egypt and Syria; 1967: renewed armed conflict with Israel (Krušič 1992: 102–103).

<sup>13</sup> The Israel-Egypt armed conflict in 1948; see footnote 12.





Photo 3. A Slovene family in Egypt, taken in Alexandria in 1955. In 1958 they left Egypt and emigrated to Goriška. (Slovene Ethnographic Museum Archives)

One woman born in Alexandria in 1946, whose family came to Goriška in 1958, mentioned how in her new home there was no running water and no bathroom, such as they had enjoyed in their apartment in Alexandria; nor was there any street-lighting or school buses.

What changes did I experience? I had to adjust to a different climate. Winters were cold and there was no central heating. In Egypt winters were never cold enough to require heating. The food was different – there we had eaten Mediterranean food. At that time in Slovenia there were no bananas, mangoes, dates, sweet potatoes or many other things.<sup>14</sup>

The children born in Egypt found it harder to adapt to their new environment and

<sup>14</sup> Koprivec 2005–2010: TZ 16.

many fell ill because of the stress involved in experiencing so many changes at once (Koprivec 2009: 110–111).

If they left Egypt even later, in the final migratory wave that lasted until the mid-1960s, then they were already grown up and some had become parents themselves. They left Egypt with their children and thus changed their migrant status from children of migrants to parents of migrant children, caught within new migration currents decades later and in a new political context.

Migrations from Egypt had a dramatic influence on the family life of Slovenes there, as well as on those who were in mixed marriages. In families with grown-up children, the different generations did not always choose the same destination for emigration. There are plenty of cases where parents and children left Egypt in the 1950s for different countries and never saw each other again.<sup>15</sup> This variety becomes even more obvious if we research the wider family. The museum's empirical research offers the story of an Alexandrian Woman and her family, five of whom went to Egypt – the mother, son and three daughters – while the father and another son stayed behind in Goriška. The mother and one daughter stayed in Egypt and died there, the second daughter moved to Brazil (1957), while the third daughter and son returned to Slovenia (1958). The grandchildren now live in Switzerland, Brazil and Slovenia.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, the fates of three young friends born in Egypt in the mid-1940s to Slovene mothers and fathers of different nationalities (Egyptian, Slovene and Italian) differ considerably. Today, one lives in Egypt, one in Italy and one in Slovenia, but they still keep in touch with each other, even though their time together in Egypt was over five decades ago.<sup>17</sup>

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Migrations of children between the 1930s and 1960s were an important part of the migration process of Slovenes to Egypt. But the movement involved was not only bidirectional, from Goriška to Egypt and back: ultimately, the move to Egypt helped to shape migration flows that those involved never planned when they first left Goriška. Many children of the Alexandrian Women that were born in Goriška had the opportunity to live in Egypt for more than thirty years, until they became part of a new wave of migration after World War 2, away from Egypt. For many, their journey from Egypt ended in Australia, Brazil, Argentina, Canada, etc. Today, descendants of the Alexandrian Women live in Melbourne, Sydney, Montreal, Calgary, Sao Paulo, as well as in Rome, Turin, Milan, Bologna, Trieste and Gorizia, and elsewhere.<sup>18</sup> *There are only graves left in Egypt*, said

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<sup>15</sup> For example, the mother to France, the father to Goriška, and the son and daughter to Australia; in another instance, the mother died in Alexandria, the father and son moved to Goriška and the daughter to Rome (Koprivec 2005–2010: AO8-01 and A08-04).

<sup>16</sup> Koprivec 2005–2010: TZ 16.

<sup>17</sup> Koprivec 2005–2010: TZ 17.

<sup>18</sup> Useful data on the migration destinations of descendants of the Alexandrian Women can also be found

one of those interviewed as part of the research.<sup>19</sup> But testimonies remain, as well as items of material heritage that can add an interesting fragment to the colourful mosaic of the history of Slovene emigration in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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in some of the newer local community publications in Goriška, for example in Slamič 2001: 114–121.

<sup>19</sup> Koprivec 2005–2010: AO8-01.

## SOURCE

Koprivec, Daša (2005–2010). *Aleksandrinke in njihovi potomci* (The Alexandrian Women and their descendants), research project, Slovene Ethnographic Museum. Interviews in the field: audio recordings 1–25 and field notes 1–19.

## POVZETEK

### MIGRACIJE OTROK ALEKSANDRINK OD TRIDESETIH DO ŠESTDESETIH LET 20. STOLETJA

Daša Koprivec

V razpravi so predstavljene migracije otrok Slovencev in Slovenk, ki so se v prvi polovici 20. stoletja zaposlovali v Egiptu. V Sloveniji je dobro raziskan ženski del tega migracijskega procesa, znan pod imenom *aleksandrinke*. Manj znano pa je, da so v ozadju slednjega potekale tudi številne selitve njihovih otrok. Selitve so potekale v treh pomembnejših smereh: iz Goriške v Egipt, iz Egipta na Goriško ter po egiptovski nacionalni revoluciji v obdobju 1952–1956 predvsem iz Egipta v različne predele sveta. Selitve v Egipt in deloma nazaj na Goriško so bile zelo intenzivne vse do leta 1935, ko jih je ustavilo nemirno dogajanje v Sredozemlju pred bližajočo se drugo svetovno vojno. Konec druge svetovne vojne pa pomeni začetek selitev slovenskih družin in njihovih otrok iz Egipta. Intenzivna emigracija iz Egipta se je zaključila nekako z letom 1958. Tedaj so se tudi otroci Slovencev in Slovenk pridružili temu emigracijskemu toku, ko so njihovi starši iskali nove možnosti za življenje v novih imigrantskih deželah, kot so bile Avstralija, Argentina, Brazilija, Kanada. Veliko jih je emigriralo tudi v Italijo, v Francijo in le manjši del se jih je vrnil na Goriško. Zajete so bile vse otroške starostne skupine, saj so morale Egipt v kratkem času zapustiti cele družine.

Predno se je to zgodilo pa so potekale zelo intenzivne migracije na relaciji med Goriško in Egiptom. Po starosti lahko te otroke migrante razdelimo v tri glavne skupine. Prva skupina so bili *dojenčki*, druga skupina *dečki in deklice v starosti med šest in deset let* in tretja skupina *deklice v starosti štirinajst ali petnajst let*. Prispevek temelji na analizi spominov in pričevanj otrok aleksandrink, ki so bila zbrana v okviru širšega raziskovalnega projekta z naslovom *Aleksandrinke in njihovi potomci*, ki v Slovenskem etnografskem muzeju poteka od leta 2005. Analiza je pokazala, da so bili posamezni otroci lahko tudi akterji večkratnih migracij: kot dojenčki so *potovali* iz Egipta na Goriško, kot dečki ali deklice so se lahko ponovno pridružili materam v Egiptu in kot še nekoliko starejši otroci so bili del množičnih družinskih selitev iz Egipta v 50. letih 20. stoletja. Številni živijo danes v Kanadi, v Avstraliji, Italiji in drugod po svetu.