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A life of beginnings

By Poly Pantelides Published on May 12, 2013



Limassol harbour in 1939 when Elsie

first arrived

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ELSIE SLONIM'S book of almost a century of twists and turns is so incredible and poignant that it could be a work of fiction. But the 95-year-old whose Nicosia home - where she still lives - became engulfed in a restricted military zone in the Turkish-occupied part of the city in 1974 has quite simply lived an extraordinary life.

A newly wed Elsie first arrived in 1939 in Limassol where her husband, David, managed a citrus farm in Fassouri. Through both choice and need, Elsie waded through the world and a long, difficult marriage, living in the USA, Romania, Austria, Palestine/Israel and France. But Cyprus was to become the returning point time and time again.

Slonim's recently released autobiography *Lemons from Paradise* not only tells the astonishingly frank life story of a beautiful Jewish girl born in 1917, but also recreates a very personal history of 20th century Cyprus, first as a British colony, then as an independent nation and finally as two communities split into two after the Turkish invasion. All of these events impacted directly on the family's many business ventures.

Elsie's life was peripatetic from the start. She was born in Brooklyn, New York to a German-speaking Hungarian family that moved back to Europe soon after she was born, first to a family estate in Sivac, that later became part of Yugoslavia, then Romania, where her father had a factory, and also Austria where Elsie and her sister, Stella, went to school.

By 20, Elsie had already been married and divorced, a gutsy move in the 30s when divorce was still taboo. Her father was livid.

“Not only had I married a man who could not bring any money, now I was disgracing the family by getting a divorce,” she said.

Elsie’s father was happy for her to immigrate to America in 1939 to stay with extended family “not because of the threat of war which was increasing every day, but because of the gossip about me which, he said, had to stop.” So Elsie and her sister, who decided to accompany her, booked tickets for the grand RMS Queen Mary (now a tourist attraction in California) and Elsie was given \$70, which was all she had. During that voyage she met her future husband, David Slomin, a Jew from Palestine, born in Siberia in 1905 and living in Cyprus where he was a manager of a fruit plantation. Following a brief romance, David proposed.

Elsie’s family were not impressed. “None of them knew where Cyprus was, and when they discovered it was in the eastern Mediterranean and a British colony, that, in other words, it would be in a war zone if, as expected, war broke out, their opposition to my going there with David increased,” she recalls in her autobiography.

Despite family opposition and a shocking ‘post-nuptial’ agreement she married David within months. Just hours after their marriage David demanded she sign an agreement in front of a lawyer that gave him the right to divorce her if she was unsatisfactory as a wife. She would lose all claims to his property and be returned to the US with 50 pounds sterling.

“The foundation of our marriage had been shattered. Even now, I cannot forget or forgive that dreadful day,” she said. Even so, she signed it and went on to have a long, turbulent yet sometimes happy marriage.

Under such inauspicious beginnings, David and Elsie landed in Limassol in July 1939. They were greeted by one of David’s partners at the Fassouri plantation who wore what “English colonists [wore] almost everywhere the climate was conducive to such attire, namely, khaki shorts, matching half-hose, a straw hat, and a white short-sleeve shirt”.

In Cyprus, David soon proved to be the workaholic he was to remain, and Elsie was mostly alone in a house with no refrigerator or ice box, and no closets or chairs in the bedroom. In the kitchen, a cage attached to an iron chain hung from the ceiling to keep the ants from getting to perishables, such as milk and butter that were often defeated by the heat.

“Was it known in Cyprus that heat rises, and that the air close to the ceiling is always warmer than the air elsewhere in the room? I never found out.”

Going around on a used bike in small Limassol and getting lost in its winding streets, she later realised that some of the locals thought she was one of the Jewish women who escaped from the Nazis and worked in cabarets.

Without family or friends, unable to talk to her husband whose life was consumed by the growing plantation at Fassouri, and just months after arriving, Elsie attempted

suicide. She made a painful recovery and in the process made friends with English ladies who had heard through the grapevine of her failed suicide attempt.

“One by one each lady wearing a hat and glove arrived in a coach... beautifully attired in clothes that fitted her upper class status. In accordance with custom, each stayed about ten minutes with me chatting about the weather and other innocuous topics, and then departed, leaving with me visiting cards. ... I was to call within two weeks.”

Life improved as Elsie became part of “a friendly circle of elderly ladies” and the proud owner of the first refrigerator in Limassol.

Her autobiography describes visits to Kyrenia at the beginning of the war, where the couple stayed at The Dome whose guests included retired high-ranking British army officers, governor, commissioners and “well-to-do people who liked the colonial life and all that went with it”. During dinner, “almost every other lady wore an eye-catching, sleeveless long evening gown with a conspicuous dicolletti.”

In 1941 with Cyprus expecting a German attack, Elsie and her husband were evacuated along with other Jews to Palestine where Elsie’s parents and her sister now lived.

The years that followed were hard. Within weeks of their arrival in Palestine, a restless David returned to his farm in Cyprus, risking his life to make the dangerous journey, while Elsie, now pregnant, raised their son, Reuven, until she could return to Cyprus in 1945.

Inspired by a need to help the new state of Israel with his agricultural know-how, David relocated the family back to Israel in 1948, when their daughter, Rachel Daphne, was born.

When their life there failed to go as planned, the family returned yet again to Cyprus in 1953. With his position at the Fassouri plantation no longer available, they moved to Nicosia determined to make a fresh start. But Cyprus had changed. Waiting in the wings was EOKA and the push for Enosis.

“We were little prepared for the civil strife that eventually would change life forever,” Elsie recalled. Animosity between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots grew, and the family noticed the growing hostility towards the British. David’s business venture - another plantation - failed, partially because the troubles made the transport of his produce so difficult. When he was offered a job in Paris, it seemed sensible to accept, but by 1967 he was eager once again to return to Cyprus where he aimed to invest in tourism, real estate and another plantation.

At first, all went well. Business boomed. They built a house in Nicosia to which David with astonishing prescience added an air raid shelter. In 1974, the family hid in it while fighting raged and when it stopped, they were allowed to stay in what was now a restricted military zone.

“It is a lonely house. ... The mansions of those who were our friends and neighbours stand empty and are gradually falling apart,” she says of the place where she still lives.

The family lost virtually everything in the invasion. Leaving David behind to spend his days desperately and fruitlessly trying to find ways of regaining access to his property in the north, Elsie finally returned to the United States in 1975 where she worked for many years as a companion to wealthy elderly people. David would visit up to three times a year but after he suffered a stroke on one visit, she returned to Cyprus with him. David died in his sleep in 2007, aged 101.

Even then, financial security eluded her. Elsie lost all her savings in an American bank that defaulted in 2008, and she started selling her silver to survive until a Swiss family friend caught wind of her situation, cleared her debt and persuaded her to accept money so she could get back on her feet. Elsie then discovered an old pension application, and now gets by on a pension from the Austrian government. Elsie lost her daughter to cancer in 2009 and her son in 2011 from a massive stroke. The clue that Slonim's book has been the sum of her experiences is in what she leaves out, such as how four generations of her relatives came to die in the Nazi concentration camp of Auschwitz. Was it too painful to write about? "Yes," she nods. But she is willing to tell the story.

"Do you want to hear it?"

It is a harrowing tale, but she is not sure if she should relay it during a book reading next week.

"Do people want to know? They have their own troubles," she said.

"Lemons from Paradise" is available at the Moufflon bookshop for €19.97. A book reading under the auspices of Limassol mayor Andreas Christou is due to take place in Limassol this Tuesday at 6pm at the Historical Archives and Research Centre at 6pm. Elsie Slonim is also due to talk about her adventures at the Goethe-Institut in Nicosia on June 12, at 7pm.