
Cautiva en Arabia

Report by Annella McDermott

This is the extraordinary story of Marga d'Andurain, a Frenchwoman from an upper middle-class family, who spent her early adult life, in the 1920s and 1930s, in the Middle East, with her husband and two sons. In Cairo she frequented the British Sporting Club and spent time with members of the British Intelligence community and high-ranking British military officers, such as Sir Archibald Wavell. This, as well as an affair with a British Major, led to accusations of spying from the French authorities.

Moving to Syria, Marga and her husband ran the Hotel Zenobia, close to the ruins of Palmyra, from 1928-33. There she mingled with the local Bedouin sheiks, lending them money, sharing their meals, sleeping at times in the women's tents, and participating in gazelle hunts, aboard the Buick convertibles that were the favourite mode of transport of the richest tribal leaders. The Hotel over the years attracted a number of famous guests, such as the Queen of Rumania, the French writer Jean Giraudoux, the Spanish King Alfonso 13th, and Agatha Christie, as well as engineers, geologists, scholars and archaeologists working in the region. Nevertheless, Marga seems eventually to have tired of this life.

She divorced her French husband, arranged to convert to Islam, and paid an impoverished camel-herder to marry her, all with the intention of obtaining permission from the Saudi Arabian authorities to visit Mecca and Medina. While awaiting this permission in Jeddah, Marga resided for ten days or so in the harem of the Vice-Governor, and published a series of articles describing the daily life of the women. Released eventually from the harem and allowed to take a room in a hotel, she was arrested and charged with having poisoned her new husband, who had died suddenly, and spent two months in prison in Jeddah before being sent back to France.

This was not the only time Marga was accused of murder. In Paris in 1945, a nephew with whom she was in dispute over the tenancy of a flat collapsed after visiting her and accused her of poisoning him, though he withdrew the charges before he died a couple of weeks later.

Marga's life was characterised by violent deaths. One of her lovers committed. Her French husband was murdered in Palmyra when Marga's was absent, and she herself was almost certainly either murdered, though her body was never found. Her activities during the Second World War are mysterious; there are suggestion of collaboration with the Nazis, but also hints that she participated in the 'passive Resistance'.

This biography is the work of a young Spanish woman who obtained a great deal of information from one of Marga's sons, now an elderly man, living quietly in a residential home in France. This fascinating story is told in a clear and straightforward fashion, with striking photographs.

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