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A child remembers Easter in Russia

Galway Advertiser, April 01, 2010.

The busy city of Harbin is the 10th largest city in China, and regularly features on our TV screens for its famous winter ice sculptures. In the 1920s, Harbin, practically on the borders of Russia, was a refuge for thousands of émigrés, fleeing the Bolshevik revolution and the blood bath that followed. The Russians, many of them wealthy, brought style and glamour to this once far flung post on the Trans-Siberian railway. Among those seeking refuge was a 74-years- old Galway/Russian woman Kathleen ffrench, who was not only the chatelaine of Monivea Castle and its 10,000 acre estate in Co Galway, but who also had inherited vast estates on the Volga from her Russian grandparents.

The ffrenchs (Ffrench), whose ancestor came to Ireland in the company of the Anglo-Norman nobleman Strongbow in the 12th century, was one of the 14 Tribes of Galway. Kathleen's father Robert, whom she adored, served in the British diplomatic service, and met his young wife Sophie Alexandrovna de Kindiakov while working in St Petersburg. Although Robert was in his thirties and Sophie was just 18, and from a totally different culture, it was considered a brilliant match. Robert would inherit Monivea; while Sophie's family were known from the 16th century as great landowners, breeders of fine horses, who harvested enormous acres of wheat and vines south of Simbirsk on both sides of the river around Kazan, about 600 kilometres southeast of Moscow.

The one thing, however, both families had in common was that while they were rich in assets, there was little, and sometimes no, cash. The couple would later have one child, a daughter Kathleen, and during her life-time, both families would not only lose everything, but would become destitute.

Sophie and Robert were married on Wednesday April 29 1863 at the British embassy in Paris; and immediately afterwards, surrounded by a lively wedding party, proceeded to the richly decorated Greek Orthodox church where the choir sang, candles blazed, the couple were blessed, and crowned with flowers. Robert proudly brought his young wife to Brussels to take up a new appointment.

The celebrations were echoed in Monivea. The Galway Vindicator, May 6 1863, reported that the people of the estates of Monivea, Menlough, Derrydonnell, and Greethill, ‘testified their respect for their noble, liberal, kind and generous landlord, Robert Ffrench Esq, JP, DL, of Monivea Castle, on the occasion of the marriage of his son and heir Robert Percy Ffrench’... ‘Bonfires were lit on every conspicuous place on the estates. Dancing and merrymaking commenced at an early hour, and continued up to midnight. Mr Ffrench gave an abundant supply of drink to the people on each of his estates on the occasion of the rejoicings. Nor did he forget to give an donation to each poor widow. Many a hearty cheer was given for their good landlord, and many a fervent prayer was offered up for the future happiness and prosperity of the noble young couple whose happy union was being celebrated..’

Breakdown

Sadly, despite this auspicious beginning, the marriage was a disaster. At first Sophie was just considered wild and unconventional. Her husband was the archetypical diplomat, an aristocrat by his education and background, and ideally suited for genteel diplomacy. While he moved through the salons of Brussels and Paris, his wife was participating in political demonstrations, attracted to radical outspoken women, and becoming a subject of gossip for ‘dancing inappropriately when pregnant’.

While none of this would raise an eyebrow today, at the time it was considered scandalous for the wife of a leading diplomat to behave as she did. As the marriage went on, and the relationship soured, Robert gradually put a distance between himself and his wife. He accepted assignments that took him far from home. There were rumours that he was having an affair. Divorce was eventually mooted. But who would raise Kathleen? A compromise was reached when her grandparents, Emile and Alexandra, argued that both parents’ lifestyle was unsuitable for the raising of a child, offered to raise the child on their estates. Both parents agreed.

It was a civilised arrangement, and it provided Kathleen with a warm, carefree childhood full of her grandparents’ love, and the friendship of the hundreds of serfs who worked on the estate, who watched out for her welfare. She was surrounded by the much-loved animals on the farms, as well as dogs, horses, and a pony and a young peasant named Videnye, to keep her safe, and an English governess, who became her life-long companion, Jenny Thompkins. Her grandparents grew to love Kathleen ‘with her fair corkscrew curls and captivating smile’ to such an extent that, over the head of their daughter, they passed on their estates to her.

Later poor Kathleen’s mother does appear to have become deranged. Despite frequent and terrible rows, Kathleen kept her close, and provided for her, during her lifetime. Sophie must have been frustrated and angry by her parents’ decision, and consumed with jealousy over Kathleen’s love for her father. She regularly upset Kathleen’s plans to make the Volga estates profitable. To collect the insurance money, she once burned down a barn. The fire spread uncontrolled, and burnt half the village.

Sleigh ride

But all that was later. The woman who sat in her long conservatory at 16 Bolshoi Prospect, Harbin, in 1938, had prematurely aged. Yet despite having lost her teeth, and other signs of age, she struggled, like many other ‘great’ families before her, to keep up appearances. Her most precious belongings were in a near-by room. These were boxes of letters, papers, documents, and books all relating to her interesting and eventful life. They were later to find their way back to the Simbirsk library, where they were all neatly catalogued. How they got there from Harbin I don’t know, but thankfully they allowed Jean Lombard to bring Kathleen’s period and adventures vividly to life, when she began following her footsteps in 1991.*

Kathleen recalled her first Easter when she was considered old enough to go to midnight Mass. She was tucked into the sleigh between her grandparents, the fur covers drawn over them. ‘There was a full moon lighting the way on that cold, crisp night, the swish of the sleigh runners and the tinkling of the sleigh bells were the only sounds. The horses’ misty breaths were like little puffs of smoke.’

As Kathleen’s sleigh approached the town of Simbirsk, the golden spires glittered faintly in the moonlight. From time to time they passed groups of peasants walking along, warmly wrapped against the cold. Voices of greeting could be heard as neighbours’ sleighs approached and gathered round the church.

‘The small church was packed, many holding candles. The atmosphere was intense. The strong smell of incense mingling with body odour, badly cured furs and skins, and the smell of smoke from the candles flickering in the

dim light. Gold from the icons sparkled, and the voices from the choir soared as they sang Easter hymns a cappella. On the stroke of midnight the priest knocked on the door and when it opened, cried: 'Khristos voskres' (Christ is risen!). The congregation responding powerfully and joyfully with 'Voistinu voskres' (Indeed He is risen!). As they re-entered the church, the bells rang out in celebration.'

Next week: Kathleen's visit to Monivea Castle, and following the death of her father, the construction of the beautiful mausoleum.

NOTES:

* Jean Lombard (nee McMurty) originally comes from Dublin, but met her husband John, related to the Blakes of Ballyglunin, when he worked as a journalist with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. When the ABC opened a bureau in Moscow in 1988 the Lombards went along. John's mother gave her some documents belonging to Kathleen French and asked her to see if she could find out more about her life in Russia. While John reported on the collapse of Soviet Communism, Jean travelled widely researching Kathleen's eventful life. Her findings are now published in *An Irish Woman in Czarist Russia*, Ashfield Press 2010, now on sale €15.00.

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