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## HOME INTERNATIONAL

by Joan Lithgow Croft de Moura

So many were the sad stories about young women, foreign to Portugal, who came here early in the century lured by misleading advertisements that in 1903 two Lisbon ladies, one British, Mrs. Robert Lithgow (my grandmother) and the other Swiss, Melle Kohly, decided to take some action. They were assisted in their enterprise by a grant from the "Amies de la Jeune Fille" in Geneva, by local subscriptions and by a group who met ships and trains from abroad and took girls into the protection of the new venture. This started what later became known as the Home International.

The aim of the Home was to help working ladies of all nationalities and religions, away from their own countries and it was the only institution of its kind in Portugal.

Accommodation was provided with rooms let at very reasonable prices and in the case of less fortunate ones these were made welcome free or at merely nominal charges until employment was found for them through the Home Employment Bureau or, as in some cases, other solutions were found for their problems. The "Employment Bureau" was consequently an immediate necessity to the Home. It functioned twice a week and families looking for teachers or governesses or persons looking for companions would apply personally or would send in their requests and the Bureau would then try to find a suitable candidate from among the many ladies on their lists. In 1907, only four years after its opening, 35 ladies stayed for variable lengths of time at the Home, 165 requests for governesses were received and 47 ladies satisfactorily placed. In subsequent years these numbers grew considerably.

The Home was run by a committee of ladies who had as their mission the raising of funds, either through subscriptions, donations or by running small sales, the overseeing of the running of the Home and of the respective finances. There was a President, a Secretary and a Treasurer and the committee would meet once a month. The committee consisted of 10 to 15 members and each

would have a designated charge: social welfare, household affairs and the manning of the Employment Bureau.

Throughout its 90 years many were the ladies who sat on the committee and as many nationalities were represented on it as those of the ladies the Home assisted. The first President of the Home was the Countess of Tattenbach and in subsequent years various wives of ambassadors of different countries occupied the Presidency.

The Arch-Duchess Anna of Austria sat on the committee for various years and took great interest in the Home. Names well known in the British community were among the most active and dedicated members of the committee: Mrs. Lithgow, Mrs. Jayne, Mrs. Dartford, Mrs. Lewis, Mrs. José Croft de Moura, Mrs. Fulford Williams, Mrs. Gladys Cannell, Mrs. Reynolds, Mrs. Lowndes Marques, Mrs Johnson, Mrs. Bucknall.

Growing demands on its shelter and hospitality kept the Home moving to ever larger premises until the outbreak of the first World War when a mostly reduced income restricted its accommodation to two rooms in the home of a Mrs. Mello in the Rua do Patrocinio. It was not allowed however, to remain thus for long as through the enthusiastic interest of a Dutch ambassadress and others who organized several small sales, the necessary funds were provided for the Home to restart its activities in July 1920.

Monthly Sunday teas were held and were well attended by a very cosmopolitan and appreciative number of ladies and everything was done to make all present feel that they had a home away from home. It was usual for 30 to 40 ladies to attend these teas. At Christmas and at Easter there were special festivities. There would be a Christmas tree, there would be music for there was always someone more than willing to play the piano, small gifts would be given and a delicious tea provided by the ladies of the committee.

The even tenor of life was at times disrupted for with ladies coming and going of various nationalities and temperaments, this was hardly surprising. One American lady arrived in a car and with a dog but when it came to payment stated "I have not any". Her eviction was difficult and recourse had to be made to her consul. Another lady made of day night and night day - she would cook, wash clothes, take baths, all this in the early hours of the morning. Again there was difficulty in getting her to leave as she would lock herself in. Eventually her Embassy found her other accommodation.

Great help was given to refugees of various nationalities particularly the Polish, Hungarian, and Russian formed a truly distressing part of the Home's undertaking. Several stateless women lived there depending entirely on it for their living and for hospital treatment, when required. Some, for when the Home

had no available accommodation, went daily for meals and were given some financial assistance towards the cost of lodgings elsewhere. Among the refugees helped were people who formerly had held high positions. There were several very sad cases - one in particular comes to mind. A Polish lady had witnessed the killing of her father and brother and this deranged her mind. She was interned in a mental institution but one day on being allowed out to visit her mother who was a resident of the Home, in an act of fury attacked one of the members of the committee with a knife seriously wounding her.

The fees for room and board in no way covered running costs so money had to be raised to defray these. Consequently, at first resort was made to jumble sales, these then became more ambitious sales and eventually, in 1943, the first large bazaar took place at the Hotel Bela Vista in the Rua do Ataíde. It raised the grand total of Esc. 16.398\$00!!! From these small beginnings they quickly became one of the events of the year. It was a highlight in Lisbon's social life. From very early on the Portuguese Government allowed diplomatic missions to share their duty-free blessings with the public. In 1968 no less than 23 embassies participated in the annual Bazaar which was held at the F.I.L. Newspapers gave wide coverage to these events showing crowds surrounding the various stalls and remarking how ladies would be accompanied by retainers with baskets which they hoped to fill with the "fiel amigo" (bacalhau) then hardly to be found on the market, plus Brazilian coffee, dainties from France and Belgium, silks from Italy and Japan, none of which were to be found in the shops at that time. In 1960, at the request of the then Nuncio, Cardinal D. Giovanni Panico, the bazaar was held in favour not only of the Home International but also of the Portuguese Red Cross. From that year onwards the Bazaar was always held in favour of those two institutions. Most decidedly it was these bazaars which Dra. Manuela Eanes, the then President's wife, decided could be used to good purpose solely for Portuguese charities. This was a deathblow to the Home International for we suddenly found no embassy able to help us and our revenues were consequently drastically reduced.

Over the years all kinds passed through the portals of the Home and latterly it had become "An Old Ladies Home" for many of the residents had never been able to save from their meagre salaries to make provision for their old age. One lady gained great notoriety - Helle Cristina Habsburg-Windsor who died at the Home in her 101st year. She declared herself the daughter of King George V and Queen Maria Cristina of Spain. Mrs. Habsburg-Windsor arrived in Lisbon as a refugee with no papers. She made a living by teaching English and very kind Portuguese family looked after her for many years. She was eventually

persuaded to go and live in the Home. Here she happily lived until her death in 1990.

With monies falling short and with only 4 ladies in residence, the Committee after considerable thought, decided that the Home would have to close. We were fortunate in having been able to place all 4 ladies in comfortable homes.



*Home International, a home away from home for the desperate and needy, on the Rua Gustavo Matos Sequeira*

**Joan Lithgow Croft de Moura comes from an old and long established Anglo-Portuguese family. She is the grand daughter of Mrs Lithgow, founder of the Home International and she herself was its last President.**