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NOTES ON MY LIFE
AT PANASQUEIRA MINE 1947 - 1952
Janet McBeath

When I came to Portugal as a young girl, soon after the end of World War II, I went to work at the Panasqueira Mines (Beiralt Tin and Wolfram) a mostly British-owned concern. I was there for five years as secretary to the General Manager. My connection with Portugal stemmed from the fact that my mother was Portuguese whilst my Scottish father initially came to this country in 1913 on behalf of the budding British motor car industry. Cars were beginning to be popular all over Europe at that time and my father went from country to country training motor mechanics and installing car repair shops. He even went to Greece and Istanbul! In Portugal he was based in Oporto, which in those days was a good market since it was considered to be much wealthier than Lisbon, and that was where my parents met and married.

To get back to my own story: the Panasqueira Mines were situated at a very remote spot, about 40km from Fundão, high in the hills, and were a place of a certain sophistication in the midst of very primitive little villages, the nearest of which was a small place called Cebola (it is no longer called that) about four km away. I remember that my younger sister and I walked there one day, and the whole village came out to look at these strange creatures!

The mining company had housing for its staff, including some accommodation for a number of miners. The remainder of the miners came every Monday morning to work and stayed the week in bunk houses. At 3 or 4am if we looked out on the

hills there were hundreds of little lights of the men coming from distant villages.

In addition to housing, staff were given free electricity and water, as well as wood, our only fuel. This was used in the huge kitchen stove, which was lovely in the winter and hell in the summer. In order to have a bath one had to go out to the garden where there was an outhouse containing a boiler. Under this boiler we lit a wood fire which heated the water and as the boiler was rusty our bath water was mostly brownish!

The company also ran a store selling basic necessities, a hospital with a doctor and two nurses (males), a chapel and a chaplain, the latter a local man, paid a stipend by the mine. The chaplain's mother was a strong-looking village woman who told me the following story. She was the mother of many children, her husband being employed by the mine as a guard on the explosives depot. She helped the family by twice a month walking all the way to Covilhã, many kilometres away, across country, over hills and dales, with a large basket on her head with eggs to sell. With the money she made she bought Serra de Estrela cheese to sell at the mine. One day, when she had walked halfway, she was overcome with birth pains, went behind some bushes had her baby and then rested for a while. Then, she told me, she was not going to lose the money from the eggs, so made room beside them, wrapped the baby in her shawl, put it in the basket and accomplished her mission, there and back! When I read *The Good Earth* by Pearl Buck, I realized that I had been told the Portuguese version.

In those days the company had a total of almost 1,000 employees, and one woman - me. In the office building of about 50 men - mining engineers, draughtsman, clerks etc. - they had

to build a separate toilet just for me. They did employ some miners' widows to deliver loads of wood to our houses. There was a trap-door in the kitchen leading down to the cellar and the wood was flung down there.

The women living at Panasqueira (myself and the wives of the staff) all had sewing machines so we could hack out some clothes with Spanish materials bought from *contrabandistas* who used to come round with huge bundles on their backs, and a lot of wonderful haggling went on.

When we wanted to buy something, for example shoes, we would write to a shoe shop in Fundão and they would send us ten pairs to choose from. On rare occasions we would actually go to Fundão, then a very small place but served by the railway. There was one bus a day and in the early days of my stay the road was a dirt track. In the winter one had to put up with all the muddy ruts, and in the summer one arrived covered from head to foot in dust.

The company also had a cinema which ran a Portuguese film on some rare occasions. In the winter everyone turned up with blankets and hot water bottles. It didn't matter if you were British and couldn't understand a word, it was always a festive gathering.

There were also tennis courts and we used to play early in the morning before going to the office.

In winter there were fierce storms, and on several occasion we woke up during the night because the roof had flown. One winter my sister and I went for a walk and came to a fast-running icy stream where some women were washing clothes. When they

saw us, they ran and picked us up (we were less hefty then) and carried us across.

The village people, although outwardly Catholic, were deeply pagan at heart. It was absolutely taboo for a woman to enter any part of the mine. Once, an English geologist came on a study visit, accompanied by his wife, who was also a geologist. They both visited the interior of the mine on several occasions to the profound horror of the miners. In order to remove the curse and ill-luck, they killed a white cock and sprinkled its blood around the mine entrance.

These are some of my memories of a world long gone.

JANET McBEATH was born in 1929 in Barcelona, daughter of a Portuguese mother and Scottish father. During the Spanish Civil War, Janet, aged six, her mother and her small sister, then aged two, were rescued by the British authorities and taken on board a Royal Navy corvette. The little family was put ashore at Marseilles and went by train all the way to Aberdeen, where their grandfather lived. Janet still remembers the awfulness of that journey, separated from her father, who was abroad and was unable to get back into Spain to join them. After her five years at the Minas de Panasqueira Janet moved to Lisbon and worked for the remainder of her career in multi-national companies, becoming an enthusiastic founder member of the British Historical Society of Portugal. She still lives in Lisbon and to this day maintains her lively Scottish sense of humour.