Introduction

by Walter G. Andrews

Alexander Svoboda's Journals

ON APRIL 15 1897, a young man, named Alexander Svoboda, born to a family of Austro-Hungarian origin, set out with his parents and several other travelers on a long journey from his home in Baghdad to Europe. The journey began with a caravan trek through the deserts of western Mesopotamia, passing through Syria and Lebanon on the way to Egypt whence they crossed the Mediterranean by ship.

Although only nineteen years old, young Alexander, despite the difficulties of overland travel, faithfully kept a daily travel journal documenting the conditions, events, and high points of his journey. The journal of his travel to Europe is written in Arabic and entitled *Journal of a Journey by Land to Europe Via Damascus and Beirut Starting on April 10th 1897*. This account begins with a description of the plans for the journey, the assembly of supplies, and farewells to friends and family. It concludes abruptly on July 16 of the same year, as the writer is leaving Paris and traveling to London with his parents. In his account, Alexander reveals that they were planning to go to Vienna afterwards.

We do not know why Alexander suddenly stopped keeping the Arabic journal but more than three years later he began writing a second journal, in English, documenting the return journey to his homeland in the company of his young French wife. This second journal is quite short–only 13 pages–and was originally entitled *Journey to Baghdad from Europe Via Der-el-Zor and Mosul, Oct. 1900*, which was later changed to *Our Journey to Bagdad by Mossoul from Deir el Zoor*. The return journal

begins on October 21, 1900, as the travelers were preparing to leave Dayr al-Zawr and ends unexpectedly with an incomplete first line written for Sunday October 28.

The two journals left by Alexander Svoboda more than a century ago provide us with a fascinating glimpse at life in parts of the Middle East and Europe in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Coming from a large extended family resident in Baghdad since late in the eighteenth century as members of a thriving European Christian community, the young traveler has a unique perspective on the lands he journeys through and the sights and peoples he encounters on the way. Suspended between Mesopotamia and Europe, Alexander represents a microcosm of the interplay and conflicts of values and traditions that marked the Middle East of his day. Much of the Middle East was still a part of the vast Ottoman Empire, which was engaged in a transformative program of modernization and westernization that trickled down unevenly to provinces and major cities far from the center in Istanbul. Baghdad, a city of glorious history and legend, had been left behind. As Alexander traveled, he was fascinated by the unfamiliar trappings of modernity he observed in more fortunate cities and towns, such as colleges, public gardens, museums, trains and railway stations, omnibuses, restaurants, shop windows, and richly decorated houses open to visitors. His bitterness at the backwardness of his home town and its environs grew in concert with his astonishment at the progress visible in the places he visited after traveling through the deprived villages of Mesopotamia. Dayr al-Zawr, the first small town the caravan encounters is perceived as a modern wonder. Then Damascus struck him as a city enormously privileged in comparison to his beloved Baghdad but it was only to be outshone by the stunningly fashionable Beirut and Egypt's Port Said, and Cairo with its extensive development imitating Baron Haussmann's Paris. Crossing the Mediterranean to Italy and proceeding to Paris, Alexander's astonishment rose to a peak. All of Europe seems to be in a frenzy of invention and technological

progress, emblematized by Paris, gleaming in the dawn of a modernity that reflected the light of architectural splendor, social finesse, and joie de vivre onto Parisian life.

Three years later, the return journey fragment shows us a dramatically different Alexander. Beguiled by the relative excitement and luxury of European life, he displays a somewhat bitter regret at being obliged to return with his new French wife to a Baghdad that now seemed impoverished and drab in comparison. The naïve enthusiasm of the outward journey and its progressive unfolding of modern wonders is replaced by a sense of loss as he travels back to a homeland that he cannot ever again view with the same simple, youthful nostalgia that he showed on leaving it for the first time.

We do not know much about Alexander's life after the return to Baghdad. If he wrote any more journals they have not come down to us. We do know that he lived in Baghdad for some time, that his wife, Marie Sophie Josephine Derisbourg, eventually returned to France without him, and that he, at some point, moved to Istanbul where he lived out the rest of his life until his death at the age of 67.

Throughout the Arabic journal, Alexander's youthful and unsophisticated observations provide us with a unique perspective on the Middle East. He notices things that a more seasoned traveler's familiarity might cause him to miss. He rides off on his own to view interesting sights or climbs hills to achieve exciting vistas. He reports regularly on the weather, the terrain over which the caravan passes, the fields and greenery, the rivers and water transport, the scenery, people, customs of the lands through which they passed, and the Christian churches, mosques, and communities in towns and villages along the way. He is traveling by caravan with a diverse group consisting of a British consular official and his entourage, some non-European Baghdad residents, Turkish military escorts, and assorted servants and camel, mule, and horse drovers. The outgoing British consul, Colonel Mockler, is a rather stereotypical British sportsman, who, whenever he can, hunts and hawks. He

even brings a bicycle with him to the delight of Alexander. The presence of a British diplomat in the caravan appears to have alerted the Ottoman government and local officials are sent out to greet them at major stages in their journey. The Svoboda family also has a wide acquaintance and, while in the Middle East, the news of their coming travels ahead of them and they are greeted by friends, relatives, and the priests and patriarchs of Christian churches of various sects.

Alexander and the Svoboda Family

Alexander Richard Joseph (1878-1946) is the grandson of Antone Svoboda (1796-1878), a Viennese crystal merchant of Slovak origin, who had left his home country early in the nineteenth century heading for the Ottoman Empire, ultimately going via Istanbul to Baghdad. Upon his arrival, he rented a house within the city walls near to Christian churches and the European consulates. In time, he permanently established a business in Baghdad importing crystal from Bohemia and Istanbul. As a sign of his business, he wore a signet ring inscribed AS and Co. His business activities and closeness to the European diplomatic community combined with his proficiency in a number of languages including Italian, French, German, English and Arabic resulted in close relations between Antone Svoboda, envoys and missionaries from Europe, and local dignitaries. These relations lasted during his lifetime and were continued by his sons and daughters. In February of 1825, he married native Chaldean Catholic girl from an Armenian trading family, named Euphemie Joseph Muradjian (d.1868). With this marriage, Antone Svoboda founded the Svoboda family in Iraq and particularly in Baghdad. Subsequent generations of the family lived there, intermixing with and marrying members of the local Christian, resident European and Muslim communities.

With his business flourishing, Antone Svoboda bought the first house he rented upon settling in Baghdad. Subsequently, seeking a healthier environment for

raising his large family, he built a new house in a most favorable location outside the city's south gate overlooking Tigris River amid a vast green expanse of extensive farmlands and groves of date and fruit trees. Referring to an old irrigation system, known as *kard*, which was widely used on river banks in this particular part of Baghdad, the district where the Svoboda house was located bore the name Kard al-Pasha for many decades. With the passing years, the house underwent several changes but it remained occupied by Svoboda family members for more than a century down to its last occupant, the highly regarded Baghdad architect Professor Henry Louis Alexander Svoboda (1928-2005).

Antone Svoboda had four sons and seven daughters born of his marriage to Euphemie Muradjian. Those who survived infancy were educated by French Carmelite priests and nuns in Baghdad. His eldest son Alexander Sandor (1826-1896) was taken by his father to Venice and London to study art and eventually returned as a prolific painter with a special style of his own. Among a number of significant art works that he produced are a large painting done in 1858 of the Virgin Mary which hung above the altar in the Armenian Church in Baghdad and two other paintings displayed in the Dolmabahçe Palace in Istanbul, the largest in the Hall of the Ambassadors and the other in the harem. The location of these paintings hints that a certain amicable connection may have existed at the time between the Svoboda family and the Ottoman Sultan.

Antone's youngest son, Henry Charles Pierre (1847-1901) became a chief officer working for the British India Steam Navigation Company (known as the Lynch Brothers Company). He made a fortunate marriage in 1873 with Menusha (Marie) Chanteduc (d. 1922) the daughter of a wealthy Frenchman from Aleppo living in Baghdad in the vicinity of the Svoboda house. Henry's father objected at first to the marriage because of a strange incident in the past. According to the story, as recounted by Evelyne Boukoff, a Svoboda descendent, a man hired to

clean the Svoboda's septic tank discovered three jars in the tank. Antone told him to throw them back because they contained genies but later he and his secretary returned to the tank and brought out nine jars containing gold and silver coins. Antone kept two and gave the rest to his secretary for safe-keeping. When the tank-cleaner recounted the story of his encounter with genies in a local café, he was overheard by the servant of a neighbor of the Svobodas, the above-mentioned, M. Chanteduc. The servant relayed the story to Chanteduc, who reported the find to the Ottoman authorities. They dug up three more jars and confiscated the two held by Antone. This caused bad blood between the families until Henry's marriage established better relations. The marriage added enormous wealth to the Svoboda family, represented by acres of cultivated land with fruit and date trees in addition to a country house overlooking the Diala River in the village of Hwedir near Baquba town.

The middle son, Joseph Mathias (1840-1908) lived for a number of years with his brother Alexander in India and particularly in Bombay returning to Baghdad in 1857. In 1863, he started work with the Lynch Brothers Company as an officer on board the company's steamers making regular trips up and down the Tigris carrying cargo and passengers to different ports below Baghdad. At this time, Joseph Svoboda also started writing the diaries that he kept until his death in 1908. In these diaries he documents all the trips he made on the Lynch steamers, writing down names of official passengers and others with details of cargo and noteworthy events for every trip. In addition, he recorded many details of his life and that of his family and friends in Baghdad. The more than 40 years of diaries, constitute not only an invaluable source for the history of the Svoboda family (including this brief account) but are a precious resource for life and trade in Ottoman Baghdad and Iraq during the last half of the 19th century.

Living in the Christian quarter of Baghdad, the Svoboda family maintained social relations and ties with a number of neighboring Christian families. Among these was the Marine family. The two families exchanged visits and invitations and celebrated various special occasions together. Joseph Svoboda had a particularly close relationship with Eliza Jebra Marine and her family. Preferring to live in Baghdad, Eliza Marine (Sayegh) (1830-1910) had settled in the Christian quarter with her children and servants while her husband Fathallah Sayegh, assisted by their elder son Jebury, remained at Amara where he had established a business dealing in trade and construction. Eliza's brother Antone and her son Michael worked at the British Residency in Basrah and her brother Yousif worked at various jobs in Basrah and Amara. They lived in Amara but sometimes stayed with their sister when visiting or residing in Baghdad. Sometimes her aunts Sedy and Farida also came and spent time at her house.

Joseph Svoboda maintained good relations with Eliza Marine's brothers and husband. He regularly called on them when he made trips down river to Amara and Basrah, where the steamers would halt for a number of days taking on and discharging cargo and passengers, or when the steamers were held up by quarantines established because of the plague or cholera which was wide-spread in the region. They also assisted one another in business matters involving trade and real estate. At one time, the husband and brothers assisted Joseph in looking for a garden that he intended to purchase on the riverbank at Basrah and, another time, he even took the side of Eliza Marine's husband in a dispute with Fatuhi Kasperkhan, his sister Eliza's husband, about some of Fathallah Sayegh's property, a garden on the outskirts of Baghdad that was managed by Kasperkhan.

Joseph Svoboda's diaries dating back to the early 1860's and beyond give accounts of several calls made on Eliza Marine upon his returns from river trips. He usually indicated his hostess by her initials (*EM*) or simply used ellipsis (…) when

referring to her in recording the many visits that he made to her house, often several at different times in a single day. The frequency of his visits, in addition to other indications, reflects that their houses lay close together and within sight of each other. Sometimes Joseph's visits would last for hours, during which they would sit, talk, and take meals together or play backgammon. When calling during the day in summer, they would usually sit in the *serdab*, the coolest place in every Baghdad house on hot summer days. In the long summer evenings, they would sometimes sit in the terrace or on the roof and enjoy the fine cool nights with a refreshing breeze until the late rising of the moon. They would take *tiffin* together or enjoy some refreshing lemonade with grapes, a watermelon that had cooled for some time in the well, or, perhaps, a cup of violet flower tea when Joseph felt unwell and feverish with an irritated chest and throat. However, at times he would call and find her out, gone to the bath as customary among residents of Baghdad or even calling upon her aunts and acquaintances. Sometimes, they would go out together to gardens in Baghdad, bringing with them her young son Rufa'il. One day he even took her to see the new steamer launched by the Lynch Brothers Company. He also seems to have looked after some of Eliza Marine's necessities, making purchases for her such as traveling bedsteads and cotton velvet from Baghdad and, when he traveled, he brought back for her a number of items such as tobacco, ghee, and rose water from Basrah.

While away on extended business trips up and down the river or aboard the Lynch steamers, Joseph included Eliza Marine in the regular correspondence he kept up with his family and others. He would send his letters by any available means: with the steamers that passed each other coming and going along the river, with Arabs living on the outskirts of Baghdad, and at times, when nearing his hometown, just before entering the city he would disembark and hand over the letters to an Arab water carrier who would hurriedly gallop on the back of his

donkey along the riverbank to deliver them. Together with her replies, Eliza would sometimes send him a box of pancakes or *ka'ak* for his long journeys. At times, when sending each other telegrams, Eliza would sign hers with the alias "Shawl".

On May 12th 1877, news came of Fathallah Sayegh's death at Amara. He had been complaining of coughing and pain in his chest for some time. Several months earlier, particularly on November 29th 1876, his eldest son Jebury had written to his mother informing her that his father was seriously ill and intended to come up from Amara to Baghdad. On a trip downriver at the time, Joseph Svoboda did not believe at first the news of his death to be true. He had gone to see Fathallah only few days before embarking on his return to Baghdad and heard directly from him that he was feeling better. Arriving in Baghdad and calling on Eliza, he found them putting seats and chairs all around in the courtyard for the customary condolences reception and he knew at once that her husband had truly passed away. The reception lasted for three days. Men were received down in the courtyard while the women's reception held on the floor above, in the *iwan* and verandah. Eliza had black mourning clothes made for her and the children too wore black *izars*. A ceremony was held at the Armenian Church in Baghdad. Many Christians attended, among them the Svoboda family, and prayers were recited for Fathallah Sayegh's soul.

During the days of the condolence receptions, it was difficult for Joseph to call on Eliza and find a moment with her alone, even though both of them shared a mutual desire to talk during these emotional days shadowed by grief and sorrow. At times he summoned her young son Rufa'il to meet him outside and handed him a message to her asking for a meeting after all the visitors had left. At another time, when they found a brief moment to exchange few words, Eliza took Joseph's handkerchief. The next day when a party of visitors was on its way to the terrace Joseph Svoboda stole a moment to receive Eliza's handkerchief and one of her

stockings as a token. This poignant event sorely grieved Eliza, who felt ill and took to her bed in a near faint. Joseph could hardly bear to see her in this state.

Following the funeral and property settlement, Joseph Svoboda continued his regular calls on Eliza Marine. On July 7th 1877 they had a long talk and spoke of their relationship and the possibility of marriage. Eliza related to Joseph that she had complained to the Assyrian Priest *Qass* Makarios and that he recommended to her that they marry quickly and lose no time, saying that it would be the most beneficial thing for them and the best plan. She had also talked the matter over with her daughters who had known about their relationship and were glad of it as were her aunts and a number of acquaintances.

On the following day Joseph Svoboda approached his sister Medula on the subject. However, before he even mentioned the name of his intended, he was exceedingly vexed to hear his sister say that everyone who knew of the relationship had been asking her when the marriage would take place, adding that she disapproved because of the age difference and the number of her grown children. He called on her again the next day and found her attitude toward him drastically altered and the way she talked about her opposition to this marriage greatly grieved and upset him. He departed, resolved never to broach the subject with Medula again.

This was only the beginning of difficult times for the couple. The saga, worthy of a novel, is detailed in Joseph's diaries. Friends reported to Eliza that Joseph's sisters, Eliza (Elizabeth Svoboda) and Medula had spoken publically about their opposition to the relationship and had harsh words to say about her. Eliza's brothers objected to the match arguing that she was too old and wondering why he did not marry a young virgin. They also felt it unbecoming of her to wish to marry at her advanced age. Joseph's pleas that he could love no one else went generally unheeded. His sisters continued to abuse Eliza. He fought with his father who was

adamantly opposed to the marriage and even knocked Joseph down with his cane during an argument about it that saw an enraged Joseph get his gun and threaten to shoot the lot of them. A letter from his sister Caroline's husband Thomas Blockey, remonstrating with Joseph concerning the impending marriage was somehow made public. As a consequence, the dispute finally spread into the tight-knit Christian community and became a matter of general gossip, upon which Joseph resolved to go forward with the marriage without great ceremony and to move out of the family home.

The Roman Catholic Church would not marry the couple outside of the church and without the prior publication of the banns. However, the priest, Father Joseph, the French priest of the Latin Church, suggested that the bishop would recognize the marriage if performed by an Assyrian priest. The Assyrian Bishop agreed and, on October 11, 1877, sent a priest, *Qass* Yousif, to the house where the marriage was performed before a small company including Eliza's brother Antone and Razouk Tessy, the son of her friend and relative Toni, and some neighbors who showed up unexpectedly. The bride exchanged her mourning black for white linen and Joseph gave her a diamond ring which his mother had left to him for his future bride some 12 years earlier. In the days following, many visitors called to congratulate them, including French Catholic, Chaldean, Assyrian, and Armenian priests as well as notable members of the local community both Muslims and Christians.

Some of the rancor surrounding the marriage persisted in the family after the wedding but the couple appears to have been quite happy and the bitterness eventually passed away. Some ten months after the wedding, on July 7, 1878, the author of our journal, Alexander Richard Svoboda was born to Joseph and Eliza Marine Svoboda.

The whole story of Alexander's life must wait on the study of Joseph Svoboda's 60 diaries, a project that is now only in its infancy. In a fragment from 1888-1889 that we have explored, there is some information about Alexander at the age of 10-11 years, which will give an idea of the life of a boy in late 19th century Baghdad.

In November of 1888, it is recorded that Alexander was often ill, especially with the Basrah fever and was attended to by one Dr. Bowman, who treated him with his own special concoction. There continue to be mentions of his illnesses throughout the next year. His youthful bouts of illness seem to have affected Alexander's self-perception, for in the travel journal we will also observe that even at 19 he shows an extraordinary concern for his own health. In January of 1889, Joseph, still traveling with the Lynch Brothers Company steamers, received Alexander's first letter written in Arabic and subsequently took him to the school run by French fathers at the Latin (Roman Catholic) Church where the head teacher was Father Policarp. February saw Alexander still in school from 9 am to 2 each day, attending church regularly and still beset by fevers treated with Dr. Bowman's elixir. At one point, Joseph even took him on a steamer-ride downriver to Basrah for his health. His mother's daughter Medula (his half-sister) was very pregnant and about to give birth. Meanwhile, he wrote to his uncle Alexander (Sandor), the painter who was, at the time, in London.

In March he was still in Basrah and on his return entered Baghdad riding on a donkey. By April it was spring and the time for outdoor activities. He went out with a servant to ride a donkey in the Manimgar Garden and with his father to ride on the river in one of the round boats called *goffa*. On another occasion, the whole family–Joseph, Eliza, her daughter Tukyeh, and Alexander–took a goffa to the Farhat Garden where his aunt Medula and Grezeski, her husband, were camping. Alexander then returned from the gardens on a donkey.

In May, Alexander wrote a letter to his cousin Cecile (Uncle Alexander's little daughter). A family group consisting of Alexander, his cousin Artin, Tukyeh, Rufa'il, Eliza, and Joseph made an excursion by goffa to an island across from al-Khirr to spend the day. The men shot doves; they roasted a fish, and sat beneath the poplar trees. They walked home along the Kerrada because the donkeys they had arranged for did not show up. Alexander felt unwell and became feverish because of the heat. Sometime later, Eliza made plans to go with Alexander, Tukyeh, and Rufa'il to the Shifteh Garden in Baquba, which was owned by the Marine family. Accompanied by Rufa'il and Tukeyh's uncle, Fatuhi Kasperkhan and the garden agent they all traveled to the garden. Joseph received a telegram signed Sayegh aboard ship telling him that they were enjoying themselves in Baquba, but they suffered from mosquitoes and sun flies and on their return Alexander grew feverish from the heat.

During this period, Joseph took many photographs of his family, preparing the film and developing the pictures himself. Later in his life, Alexander would expand his father's hobby into a business of his own taking photographs all over the Middle East and selling them as picture postcards.

In June Alexander suffered from an inflamed liver (possibly childhood hepatitis) and was kept out of school. He was attended by Dr. Woods, a Bavarian, but his mother rejected the medicine prescribed by the doctor and used instead a compound mixed with wine that was recommended by Mr. Grezeski. Alexander was out of school for more than twenty days following his return from Shifteh.

In July, Joseph, one day, when preparing to sail downriver, sent to Alexander's school to have his son come to the ship to breakfast with him. The head teacher, Father Policarp refused permission for him to go. Joseph sent for him again and they made his servant wait at the school. Then he sent a third messenger but they again delayed the servants and finally sent them and Alexander to the boat

at 11:30. When they finally showed up, Joseph was enraged and sent for his son's books and communicated to the school that he would not be sending him there again. In the end he sent a servant to explain to Father Policarp that it was his wish that his son come and take breakfast with him every morning an hour before noon on the days he was scheduled to make a trip downriver. Father Policarp finally consented to this and Alexander was returned to the school.

In late July and August, the hot weather seems to have bred sickness throughout Iraq. Many Christians died because of the heat and fever. Cholera was spreading north, with Jews and Christians fleeing Basrah in large numbers. A quarantine station was established on the Tigris across from Kut but the disease reached Baghdad regardless. Alexander spent the Holiday of the Virgin Mary on the steamer with his father. On the 20th of August, his aunt Caroline, Joseph's sister and the wife of Thomas Blockey, died of cholera. Finally Alexander and his mother fled Baghdad as people in the Christian neighborhood shouted and wept in fear and sorrow. They made their way to the Nawab garden below Gherara where they planned to stay until the danger passed. Meanwhile, the Blockey's daughter Jessy, a five year-old, died of cholera just a few days after her mother on August 22.

Such was the life of a boy in the Christian community of Baghdad in the last years of the 1880s. In the travel journal, we will pick up his life some 8 years later and see what kind of a young man this boy became. His grandfather Antone died about a month short of a year after the dramatic wedding of his mother and father. His father lived until 1908 and continued to keep his diaries. His mother died in 1910.