

My Life With Camellias

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MA VIE AVEC LES CAMELIAS

MEIN LEBEN MIT KAMELIEN

MI VIDA CON LAS CAMELIAS

MIA VITA CON LE CAMELIE

This story begins with my honeymoon. We married when the World War finished, and I had bought a house in Surrey, England with a five acre (2 Hectare) garden cultivated by an employed professional gardener.

I had never owned or experienced any garden and knew nothing about horticulture. However during our courtship, Gladys had a war-time job with an aircraft firm, which had taken over an estate containing magnificent rhododendrons. She was already a keen gardener, and showed them to me, and I was astonished and fascinated by these splendid flowering plants towering above me.

We ferried a car over the Channel, and drove through France and Italy for our honeymoon. I was again fascinated by a palm tree outside a hotel window, as I had never seen one before in a garden. And I was entranced by a fine flaming display of *Pyrostegia venusta* in Sorrento, which in those days was a quiet, beautiful, and very romantic place.

I knew I could not grow such plants, but the effect was very important, because I was now hooked on horticulture for life. When we returned through Paris, we visited a flower market there, and I made my first purchase of plants for my garden, five camellias. They were very strong plants, having been pruned back in the French style each year for seven years, before being sent to market.

The astonishing fact about these fine Camellias was the price. In England everyone had been growing food, and

such ornamental plants were simply not available. If such a plant had been available it would have commanded a price of something like £30, which was a lot of money in those days. I bought these Camellias for the equivalent of 40 pence each, and it is a mystery how they could have been sold at such a price.

We were driving a roomy estate car and the Camellias were in full view on top of everything else. When we got to Dover we had some problems. The worst was due to the fact that our car had been broken into in Florence, and all our papers were stolen. As I could not prove that I had taken the car out of Britain, the officials would not let me bring it in. Eventually, with the help of the Royal Automobile Club, I solved that problem. But another problem reared its ugly head. In my innocence I knew nothing about Plant Importation Controls, and I was truly dismayed when I learned that the camellias could not enter Britain. I was complaining of my misfortune to the helpful R.A.C. man, and he said he would speak to the Customs Officer. He reported that all would be well, but I should give the Customs man a reward. I was astonished by this, because law-abiding British people would never dream of bribing a Customs Official, and would expect to go to prison if they tried it. I said I could not bring myself to do it, and the R.A.C. man said he would give the money to the official for me. When I asked how much, he said, "Oh, five bob (25 pence) would do!"

This was the foundation of my *Camellia* collection, and they were planted around the house. Only slow progress was made in this direction until I bought a magnificent garden, thirty acres (12 hectares) comprising the ornamental grounds of Titness Park, near Ascot. There were outstanding conifers and other ornamental trees, superb rhododendrons and a collection of *Camellias* which included many imported direct from Japan.

I now had acid soil and woodland, favourable for *camellias*, and my collection grew continuously. The garden was too cold for *reticulatas* and *sasanquas*, so I built a large glasshouse which could be heated in cold weather. The results were excellent, but a new problem had arisen under the Labour Government of Harold Wilson. I had to pay a total of income taxes on a large part of my income at the intolerable rate of 136%. This taught me just how ruthlessly Governments exploit their helpless subjects, and I realized that wherever we live our Government is our only real enemy.

With great regret I gave up our lovely garden and emigrated to Portugal, but I was determined not to lose the plants which I had collected at so great an expenditure of time, effort and money, and I took all important shrubs with me, including my collection of *Camellias*. Those *Camellias* which were too large to move, I grafted.

The stony shale of the wine-farm I had bought in Portugal proved to be useless for my *Camellias* and *Rhododendrons*, and all the plants had to be grown in containers until I could find a suitable property for them. But no proper containers were available in Portugal, and we collected hundreds of make-shift containers, an incredible assortment, from rubbish dumps. One I remember was an antique Victorian style bath which was like a combination of a bath and a high chair. It was usable for a *rhododendron*, and we would intrigue our visitors by taking them to see, "Mrs. Davies Evans in her bath".

Meanwhile I was seeking a suitable garden for my plants, and eventually I discovered the *Quinta de Curvos*. In more prosperous times it had been the finest and most famous private garden in Portugal, but this truly spectacular garden had been neglected for thirty years after its creator died. Also in very bad

condition was the residence, with hand-carved granite towers in fancy shapes, looking like a Walt Disney creation.

The interior was equally lavish, and included a ballroom with a beautiful sprung floor, and decoration and furniture in the style of Louis XIV. Although I had bought the property at a public auction conducted by the Government, I had to struggle for years to obtain possession of it. I battled for possession against a master criminal named "Falcão" (The Hawk), who was able to manipulate court officials and judges, and against resentful xenophobic local peasants who used more direct methods such as poisoning my drinking water or cutting the pipes, and when I tried to defend my water, they kidnapped me for a few hours until I was freed by the police. The full story of my struggle will never be told because I do not think it would be believed. My thirteen legal cases included an action in which the Government, probably bamboozled or bribed by Falcão, contested my ownership of the property which it had publicly sold to me, and another case was a completely fabricated charge that I had assaulted an old woman of 80 and a girl of 21. The unsophisticated peasants of Northern Portugal are brutal, and so the courts deal very severely with a man convicted of assaulting a woman. The idea was to drive me away, leaving them to illegally exploit the ample water, very precious in Portugal, and the vineyards and orchards of *Quinta* as they had done for 30 years. But I won this case as I did a dozen others, and I continued to restore and develop the famous old garden.

The restoration was a Herculean task. One area was an impenetrable mass of brambles 20 feet high, which we did not clear for several years, because we assumed that there was nothing in that area. But when we did clear it we discovered a beautiful antique-tiled summer-house with toilet, and a round pond which had a fountain fed by gravity pressure from the mountain. When we restored the connections the fountain shot up into the sky so high that it could be seen over a mile (2 Kilometres) away. There were also several grottos, the largest being modelled on that created by mad King Ludwig of Bavaria. It contained stalagmites and stalactites, and colonies of two species of bats.

In the grounds were huge Camellia trees which were as large as any that could be found anywhere in the world. This is a clear indication of how perfect were the conditions for Camellias in this garden, because they were only about 70 years old, and moreover they had never been watered in the dry summers for 30 years, and they were stripped of flowering branches each year for sale in the market. Even palm fronds were mercilessly stripped for religious processions, and my refusal to allow this desecration of the garden to continue baffled the peasants, whose only interest in plants was the money or food they could obtain from them.

I had been assiduously collecting Camellias from every country where Camellias are grown, and this even involved me in the tragedy of communist Vietnam, where I went hopefully, to collect some of the fragrant, and purple, and yellow camellias known to exist there. The regimentation was unbelievable, for example although I carried various horticultural credentials, I was not allowed into any botanic garden, and was carefully supervised every day until 8:30 p.m. Instead of collecting Camellias as I had hoped, I was never allowed even to see one. However the curfew was not until 11:00 p.m., and although it was forbidden for me to speak to Vietnamese people, I used this interval to slip away and make contact with the victims of the regime. The stories they related were heart-rending, and when we left that unhappy country we felt an ineffable sadness. This collecting of camellias was very rewarding, because in the excellent soil imported by the creator of the Quinta, and the warmer climate of Portugal, I could grow all types and species of camellias. Because of these very favourable conditions I thought that my collection could be the best in Europe, and I decided to enter my flowers for the International Exposition in Vigo, Spain. I had accompanied my friend Alfredo Moreira da Silva, of Oporto, the leading nurseryman in Portugal and Spain, to the previous exposition and he had won the Gold Camellia with his exhibit. This coveted award was wrought in gold by Spanish craftsmen and presented by Carmen de Polo Franco, wife of the Spanish President.

I loaded a van with 36 boxes of flow-

ers and off we went, but I had not reckoned with the incredibly obstructive bureaucracy of Portugal, and an obdurate official would not allow me to take the van out of Portugal. We argued for hours and I appealed in the end to his patriotism. I argued that it would be a triumph for Portugal if I could bring back the Gold Camellia from Spain, and only his refusal could stop this, as I had wonderful flowers which had never been seen before in Spain. This intrigued him and he asked to see the flowers. I showed him a box of spectacular reticulatas, and having never seen anything better than old out-dated japonicas before, he was astonished, and waved me straight through the frontier!

The triennial Vigo Exposition used to be a wonderful affair before the socialists obtained power and ruined it. In addition to the Camellia flowers and other exhibits there was a choir, an orchestra, and a full ballet company. The enthusiasm of the thousands who crowded into the stadium was equal to that of a great sporting event, and when I held up the Gold Camellia for photographs the roar of applause was astonishing, and later children asked me for my autograph, as in other countries they do with the heroes of sport.

We won the Gold Camellias three times in succession in Vigo before the strain of living in Portugal became intolerable and we emigrated to South Africa, a country in which we have been happier than anywhere else.

Once again we faced the problem of transporting my collection of plants, which was of course larger and better than before. It was a major operation lasting for two months. The plants were packed in the morning, my wife Gladys drove them to Oporto and dispatched them by the evening. I was collecting the big boxes of plants the following morning at Durban airport. Friends were surprised that I took my plants and stone ornaments for the Japanese Garden, but left all my furniture behind, including a superb Bluthner grand piano. But I could buy furniture in South Africa, whereas I could not replace the plants or the antique Japanese ornaments.

The South African Plant Inspectors are very strict and I had many problems with them. One day they made me soak

all the plants in Kelthane fungicide. I was plunging the plants in the bath all day long, and when I got home in the evening I found that I was poisoned and I felt very ill.

One group of plants was correctly condemned, because nematode infestation was discovered, a pest commonly known as eelworm. But there was another amusing incident when they announced that a microscopic nematode had been found on a plant. As I thought these plants were healthy I queried this, and they allowed me to see it in the microscope. I happened to know that thousands of species of nematodes do not kill plants, but are useful animals which attack harmful soil organisms, or assist the conversion of dead plant material into compost or humus. I took a chance and said, "But this is a beneficial nematode". The laboratory scientist looked at me in surprise and said, "How did you know?"

Some of the restrictions were most unreasonable, for example not a single conifer was allowed in. Strangest of all was the blank refusal to allow in a most valuable magnificent seedless orange which had originated in Barcelona. The great merit of this first-class orange was the fact that it fruited two months before the other oranges. South Africa is a major exporter of oranges and this introduction would have been of great economic importance to South Africa by extending the season for two months.

The good news was that all my hundreds of different varieties of Camellias were allowed in, I continued to increase

the collection, and generally speaking they have done well here. Weevils are a problem, eating the leaves and flowers, and in the larval stage feeding on the roots.

The root-rot fungus *Phytophthora cinnamomi* kills various plants, including even mature avocado pear trees. Our wet warm summer favours this fungus, but we have lost few Camellias from this dangerous disease. And the incidence of this disease has been reduced by using *Phytophthora*-resistant stocks for grafting. We use "Kanjiro", but most sasanquas and their hybrids are resistant to root-rot. In fact here we find that sasanquas are resistant to nearly every enemy of Camellias, even the weevils never attack them. We use "Kanjiro" because we get almost 100% strike when we set the cuttings, and it has resisted *Phytophthora* even when deliberately inoculated with it.

After establishing my Camellias here, and having been a member since the early days, I became I.C.S. Director for Africa, and later founded and organized the South African Camellia Society.

My life with Camellias has taken me to many strange places around the world, and favoured me with the friendship of innumerable people in far-away places, whom otherwise I would never have met. The climax was reached when I had the honour and pleasure of entertaining the I.C.S. delegates at Fern Valley. I could never have foreseen or even imagined all this when I, as a complete novice, bought those first five Camellias in a flower-market in Paris.