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TUNISIA: LAND OF OLIVES, WHEAT AND WINE

Where Italians Throve On Social Security

In this interview a New Zealand woman who spent nine years in Tunisia which has been much in the news of late, describes it as a land of plenty, flowing, if not with milk and honey, at least with wine and olive oil. She describes, not an interminable stretch of sand productive only of sheikhs and cafard-stricken Foreign Legionnaires, but a smiling country to which even social security has found its way.

WITH the signing of the armistice between France and the Axis Powers, and the subsequent action taken by British warships against French naval units at Oran, the French North African colonial territory of Tunisia has sprung overnight into the world's headlines.

To give readers some background to the news from Tunisia, *The Listener* interviewed in Auckland a New Zealand woman who spent nine years in that part of the world. She is Mme. V. B. Chadraba, wife of a Czech whose business took him to Tunisia between 1930 and June of last year.

Contrary to popular belief, said Mme. Chadraba, Tunis is anything but a desert. Describing the general nature of the country in terms of New Zealand scenery, she said that Central Otago, with its fertile valleys and rugged hills provided probably the closest parallel. Certainly, though there is no rain in the summer months, between May and September, Tunisia is no barren expanse of rolling sand.

Wine And Wheat

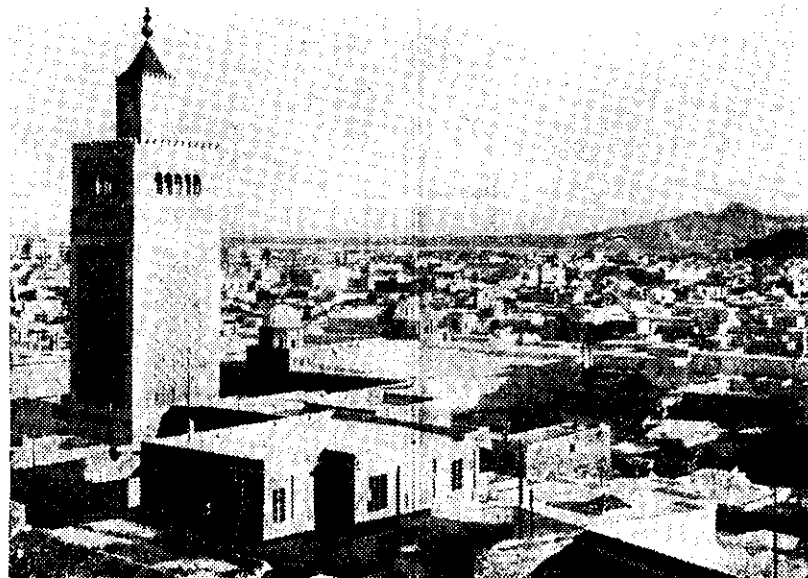
From the coastal strip to the wooded highlands of the interior, which are an extension of the Atlas Mountains, the land is given over to the cultivation of rich crops of wheat, grapes, olives and, of course, dates, and immense deposits of phosphates are also worked. It was just as well, went on Mme. Chadraba, that there was normally no rain in the summer months. Rain then, when the grapes were maturing, was a tragedy for the vignerons.

Long, dry summers naturally had their disadvantages. At one time, she remembered, no rain fell in the area round Tunis, the capital city, for 13 months and water was so scarce that the domestic supply was cut off entirely at mid-day. Then the weather suddenly broke and in two days enough rain fell to provide water for another two years! For Europeans the summer weather was trying, especially with the fiercely hot sirocco wind which scorched the coarse North African grasses to a uniform brown. At such times, those who could went inland to the mountains and the milder temperatures of the rolling forests of cork-oaks.

Hannibal's Old Capital

Spring and autumn were the seasons at which Tunisia looked its best. Then the temperatures were equable and the countryside soft with the green of grass. In normal times, at these seasons, Tunisia was a happy hunting ground for tourists from France and other parts of Europe, who descended on the bazaars of the native quarters to chaffer for hand-woven Arab rugs and fabrics or spent their time viewing the picturesque ruins which remind the visitor of the splendour which was Carthage and the

grandeur which was Rome. The remains of these old civilisations, said Mme. Chadraba, are extensive throughout Tunisia and some are in a remarkable state of preservation. A Roman reservoir which supplied Carthage is still in use at Zaghouan and much of the aqueduct which once carried the water still stands, though its function has long been usurped by a siphon-pipe running underground.



TUNIS: A view of the capital from the Arab quarter, showing the characteristic flat-roofed Arab houses. The mosque is seen on the left

The cisterns, too, at Carthage where modern villas overlook the scattered pediments and columns of Hannibal's proud capital, are the same which were in use in those far-off days.

Cosmopolitan City

Tunis, the capital, is not actually on the sea-coast but is reached by canal from the Mediterranean and it enjoys a climate much like that of Sydney. Most of the main streets are named after countries and their capital cities. There is, for example, the Rue d'Angleterre and the Rue de Londres, the Rue de Rome and the Rue d'Italie, and so on, street-names which are themselves indicative of the cosmopolitan nature of the city. The Italians are the most numerous and the Italian colony is known locally as the "petite Sicile." Outside of the Jewish community, which is also large, the Maltese have almost a monopoly of the butchery business, many of the other shops are run by Jews and the Arab quarter is a town in itself, with its characteristic flat-roofed houses. The French colony is almost exclusively composed of the "fonctionnaires," or civil servants whose homes are mostly in the more exclusive Mont-Fleury quarter overlooking the city.

Into the polyglot mixture, the movements of troops frequently brought other elements. Detachments of the picturesque Spahi cavalry were frequently in the town and regiments of Senegalese infantry marching to or from the "Maginot Line" along the border of Tripoli, while even the Fuzzy-wuzzies from the Sudan were not strangers.

Tolerant Administration

In spite of this mixed population, said Mme. Chadraba, there was little friction between the various nationalities. The Arabs did not like the Jews much and some of the younger Italians, infected with Fascism, did not like the French, but on the whole, thanks to the toler-

ance of the administration, life of Tunisia was peaceful enough. There was equality for all before the law, the Arab enjoyed the same status as the Frenchman and the Italians in Tunisia were much better off than their compatriots in Italy itself.

Actually, she went on, the Italians were in Tunisia before the French occupied the territory, but in her experience most of the Italian colonists had little sympathy with Mussolini's Fascism. The period of sanctions did not arouse much feeling among the Italians and in 1938, just before Munich, there was a practical demonstration of how many of these people felt. At that time a rumour gained strong currency to the effect that Mussolini had been dismissed, that King Victor had abdicated and that Prince Umberto had succeeded to the throne. With this rumour flying from mouth to mouth, large crowds of Italians gathered in the streets cheering and shouting "Vive la France!"

Medals For Mothers

Family benefits along lines similar to those followed by the social security legislation in New Zealand are available to the people of Tunisia, said Mme.

(Continued on next page)