

AT THE MEMORIAL STONE IN ASHMEADOW

The woodland footpath through Ashmeadow passes a memorial stone, on which are inscribed the names of boys who attended Earnseat School and lost their lives in the two world wars. Some are still remembered by "old boys" of the 1930s. One such name is that of A. A. Aladin. His short life and very unusual background might be of interest. To those of us who still remember the young Alexis Alexisovic as an attractive and very talented boy - a school prize-winner in Geometry, Music, and Swimming in 1937 - he was a figure of some mystery and romance. It was rumoured that he came from a Russian princely family; but we never saw a father or mother deliver him to school, or heard him speak about his childhood days. What was Alexis' background story?

A recent internet search led to the name of Aleksei Feodorovich Aladin, born in 1873 to a Russian peasant family in Simbirsk, in Eastern Russia. After attending the same gymnasium as Lenin and Kerensky, he read engineering at Kazan University, but soon became a very active member of the Communist Party. Much has been written in books and articles about A.F. Aladin's involvement, at very high levels, in the troubled times of revolutions and strife between Tsarists and Communists, and among the various Communist factions. Having been imprisoned by the Bolsheviks, eventually in 1920, Aladin was banished from Russia and sought work in other European countries. His marriage to Elizaveta Grigorieva had failed, and he decided to make his way to England, A.F. Aladin joined the Orient Express at Constantinople (now Istanbul) and headed for Calais.

On this journey he met a young English lady - Ellen Constance Nightingale - who was returning home with her younger sister Kathleen. Aladin and Constance Nightingale must have found much in common, because for the next seven years, until his death in 1927, they exchanged very frequent letters. More than 700 of these letters are now preserved in the Library of Manchester University. They reveal a remarkable man, highly intelligent, well-read and fluent in many languages, and always retaining a profound interest in politics and the future of communism. But Aladin was now poor, and had to rely on benefactions from a few British friends, notably Sir David Russell and Miss Nightingale herself. He lived in a small apartment in Hampstead; but his letters to Constance continued to flow.

In 1923, now aged 50, he met Florence Stephens, with whom he fathered a son. His letters now tell of "baby Alec" and his early days in the Hampstead flat. But Florence Stephens seems to have failed as a wife and mother, and soon Miss Nightingale becomes deeply involved in helping the elderly father and infant son to cope with the poverty of their London life. Young Alec is briefly taken into the care of Constance's sister Kathleen at her Southampton house, but this too fails. Eventually Miss Nightingale agrees to become not only Alec's god-mother, but - in her own words - his "surrogate mother". She herself was now a schoolmistress and a devout Quaker. After a variety of teaching experience, including two years during the first world war on the staff of the boy's Quaker school at Bootham in York, she was appointed headmistress of Dr. Williams' School in Dolgelly, Wales.

Aleksei Feodorovich Aladin died in St Thomas' Hospital in London in 1927, only 54 years of age. His son Alec was taken to Dolgelly to live with his surrogate mother. Because of her knowledge of Bootham School, and of what had by then become a regular flow of boys going on to Bootham from the preparatory school, Earnseat, in Arnside, Constance Nightingale would have known of this school. No doubt this was why, in September 1932, young Alec - Alexis Alexisovic Aladin - came to school in Arnside, aged 8.

He went on to Bootham in 1937. Constance Nightingale was appointed Headmistress of the girls' Quaker School in York - The Mount - in 1940 and would no doubt have seen much of her adopted son during his remaining year at Bootham before he went on to study engineering at Pembroke College, Cambridge. His talents continued to shine at Bootham, where he was said to have been very popular with Mount girls and to have distinguished himself at football, cricket and swimming.

Alexis Aladin joined the Royal Air Force in 1943, but was killed in a flying accident in 1944 shortly after his 21st birthday. His name on the Ashmeadow stone commemorates a young life, full of promise, that was so tragically cut short by the disaster of war.

Two photographs are appended:

1. Alexis at Earnseat from the school photograph Summer in 1937.
2. Alexis-third from the left front as a member of the Bootham 1st cricket team in summer 1941. Small boy on the right was the team's scorer, who is also the writer of this note)

J.B.C.

