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THE SIWA ISSUE OF 1942

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Il Collezionista is an excellent philatelic Magazine published at Torino under the management of Mr. Giulio Bolaffi, and has distinguished contributors such as Dr. Alberto Diena.

Last May number contained a most interesting article concerning Egypt, written by Professor Giuseppe Ravegnani, literary critic and philatelic editor of the Magazine Epoca.

Our readers know that the Albani-Zeitouni Catalogue of Egypt stamps, published in 1948 mentioned in fine some Egypt stamps of the 1937 issue, overprinted «Oasi di Siwa, Occupazione Militare Italiana» by the Italian Army with the Afrika Corps under the orders of the Field Marshal Erwin Rommel.

This set was composed of the 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 10, 13, 15, 20 millimes over- printed with thick ink; further on, the Zeheri Catalogue, compiled by Mr. I. Chaftar described this set and as the Albani-Zeitouni said, he also said that any knowledge was lacking concerning the official character of this issue.

Since then, nothing had been published about the matter, but the question was of interest for the Italian philatelists as well as for the Egyptian philately, and so Italian philatelists seriously looked after it and investigated about the official character of the overprint and the result is presented to us in this May number of Il Collezionista.

Signor Giuseppe Ravegnani after quoting the Albani-Zeitouni Catalogue and an article published in Rivista Filatelica d'Italia in 1948, he is publishing the enquiry letters he received on the subject from General I. di Nisio, Comm. Giovanni di Mattia and Mr. Domenico Fossati.

The latter says that he was a pilot on a tank of the «Ariete» Division who occupied the Siwa Oasis; he learned at the time from the Commanding Officer of the tank, a Lieutenant from Bologna and a spirited philatelist, that one of his brother in arms, one of the first to enter the Post Office of the Oasis, over- printed some sheets of Egypt stamps' and destroyed the seal. We must therefore deduct from this important declaration that the issue who was born under these circumstances can only be considered as of private origin. Comm. Giovanni di Mattia, who is a lawyer, says he was officer Commissioner of the Division who occupied the Oasis, under the orders of General di Nisio, from August to November 1942, and excludes that any Egyptian stamps were overprinted by the Italian armed forces, and denies any official character to the overprinted stamps and he also adds :

- 1) The armed forces who entered Egypt were under the supreme command of Field Marshal Rommel : it would have been quite inaccurate to qualify the occupation of Siwa as expressing purely Italian Sovereignty; German Forces being also present there.
- 2) The Italian Division « Ariete» had her own Post Office (Sector X nucleus XIII) sitting at Marsa Matrouh. Military correspondence was frank but extra stamps were necessary if posting over by Air Mail.
- 3) The total population did not need stamps because there was no postal service between the villages of the Oasis, or because the Oasis was severed from the mother land.

The last evidence brought by Il Collezionista is a letter from General Ismaele di Nisio, officer commanding the occupation troops at Siwa. This General says «he had full authority over the population and particularly on the Egyptian Officials who dwelt on the spot : the Maamour, the Postal Agent, and the Doctor; he says he never authorized any overprinted issue, and the Post Office of Siwa had no opportunity of corresponding being cut of its own national territory, and the only Post Office working was the « Posta Militare 58» of the Division and it did not accept Egyptian stamps for use.

These are serious reasons based on facts and the disclosures of Signor Fossati give a clear light on the circumstances under which this issue was born; but what follows is still more substantial. In the book War without hate where the recollections of Field Marshal Rommel are presented by Liddel Hart (French edition, Vol. 11, page 41) the Marshal writes «On the 21st September 1942 I flew to the Oasis of Siwa for inspecting the Italo-German Forces, accompanied by General Ganse and Colonel Bayerlein. The Arab population gave us a tremendous reception. We gave presents to the tribal chiefs and took a great lot of photos of natives with their many-coloured burnous. I was presented with an envelope franked with all the stamps of the Oasis with the cancellation of the day».

Some philatelists took advantage of this account of the German hero to certify the Siwa issue, as a valid one; General di Nisio confirms that the Egyptian postal Agent of Siwa had also presented him with a similar envelope, and its photo is published in the article.

This envelope is franked with stamps of 1937 Farouk issue from 1 to 30 milliemes also a Fouad stamp of 40 milliemes and 2 fiscal stamps, without any overprint, but with the Siwa cancellation of 20th July 1942. The envelope bears the following address in Arabic.

His Excellency Lewa (Major General) di Nisio, Commanding Italian Forces at Siwa. General di Nisio concludes by saying (very logically) that, if the overprinted stamps existed at the time, and had regular issue, then Rommel's envelope as well as his own one ought to have been franked with the overprinted stamps.

The author of the article is happy that his investigations were fruitful and prevents philatelists against this issue, which he qualifies as the work of a dishonest speculator.

Before concluding the question I should like to bring a small personal contribution, I believe the only one up to date from the Egyptian philatelic side.



Block o 4 of millieme, (Mazloun Collection)

- 1) I own a complete set and some odd values of this issue. These stamps were sold to me by an Italian Officer who was entrusted with the repatriation of Italian prisoners of war from Egypt, and who passed three times by Alexandria as far as I can ascertain; I must say for the sake of truth that this Officer could not supply me any information about the official character of these stamps, and he parted with them, in my favour, at my own risk and with my full agreement.
- 2) My colleague, the late George Khayat told me that after the recapture of Tobrouk, he was in this harbour with the British Army as war correspondent of the newspaper El Ahram and he bought some stamps from an Italian whom he buried beneath a tree before leaving the town, as the German Army was again advancing towards Tobrouk.
- 3) The Egyptian Postal Agent, later on, was interrogated by the authorities and he never confirmed the official character of this issue. I ignore if the Maamour or the Doctor were asked.
- 4) As far as I know, there exists no used stamps, and I never saw any of them. All these facts prove something sound, that the official character of these stamps is lacking and I think like Signor Ravegnani that it is an issue, due to a fiery philatelist who could not resist the temptation of speculating by taking advantage of peculiar dramatic circumstances.

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