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Did Salazar have a love life? – Part 1

António de Oliveira Salazar (1889-1970) occupies a singular position in Portuguese history, and his record is full of contradictions. He was the only 20th century European dictator to be a university teacher as well as an elected politician, but did not believe in democracy.



Photo: LUSA

Although a staunch Catholic, who negotiated a rapprochement with the Holy See in 1940, he refused to restore the property confiscated from the Church during the First Republic in 1910; his attitude towards the Church and its bishops was uncompromising, and he even exiled the bishop of Porto who had criticized him. He was a monarchist and yet he consolidated the power of the Republic. Although he appreciated large crowds of supporters and sometimes appeared before them, he could not enthuse them with passionate speeches, nor was he enthused by them.

Although his regime depended on the support of the armed forces, he never wore any military uniform. He was an intransigent defender of the eight Portuguese overseas provinces, but he never visited any of them, and travelled out of Portugal only twice in his life. The all-powerful political chief, he lived on his low salary, and yet throughout his life managed also to donate to charitable institutions. When he left government, he was as poor as when he entered it.

Although he employed no personal bodyguard, he avoided assassination attempts and *coups d'état* over his 40 years in power, and eventually died peacefully in bed. It is significant that no public rejoicing by his enemies followed the news of his death.

António de Oliveira Salazar was the only son of António de Oliveira and Maria do Resgate Salazar. Although he had four sisters and other relatives, he rarely saw them after he joined the Lisbon government and never celebrated Christmas, Easter or birthdays with them. It has never been explained why his surnames were reversed. In Portugal, it is normal for children to use the mother's surname followed by that of the father and his sisters each used the surname Salazar de Oliveira, while he alone was de Oliveira Salazar.

He kept his distance from his few friends so that his political decisions would not be unduly influenced by them, nor did he ever attend the marriage ceremonies and parties held by the most powerful people in the country.

Perhaps the most puzzling of his character traits was his relationship with women. He liked to portray himself as the monk who sacrificed himself for the benefit of his country, the chaste bachelor who devoted himself day and night to the common good. Yet he was susceptible to the charms of the women in his life.

One of his ministers, Franco Nogueira, who had access to Salazar's private papers after his death, has written that Salazar had a long and varied love-life and that he bedded nearly all the women he was involved with. Many writers regard Nogueira's assertion as an exaggeration, and it is widely discredited.

It is noteworthy that as time passed, Salazar's interest also passed from the relatively poor girls of his birthplace to women of a higher social caste, even to aristocrats. It is certain that, in those days, because old-style manners dictated that in a romantic setting the woman never made the first move, Salazar himself must have played the role of seducer.

Most of his relationships lasted for years and encompassed intellectual dialogue and sometimes political discussion. But their main characteristic was affection, tenderness and an appeal to feminine sensitivity. The relationships we know of were successive, not simultaneous.

One expert commentator suggests that for a man who espoused only one political faith, in matters of love the same man could remain faithful to a succession of women.

During those periods of the gravest danger to Portugal (the Spanish Civil War, the Second World War and the African Wars), Salazar thrust aside personal matters and concentrated only on navigating the ship of state.

The one figure who remained constant and incorruptible in his life was his housekeeper, Maria de Jesus Caetano Freire. She came from a numerous and poor family in the parish of Santa Eufémia in the hinterland of Coimbra.

Born in 1894, Maria was five years younger than Salazar. In 1925, in Coimbra, she was engaged as housekeeper by Salazar and his friend and housemate Manuel Gonçalves Cerejeira, who later became Cardinal Patriarch of Lisbon. She followed Salazar to Lisbon once he had made the permanent move to the capital in 1928. Various historians have agreed that their relationship was that of platonic love, and although gossip was that he had an intimate relationship with her, she died a virgin.

Maria de Jesus possessed a hard, rigid and vindictive character and had a dog-like dedication to Salazar. She organized his domestic life and secretarial work, carried and received messages, and she could apparently communicate to Salazar rumours and opinions which no-one else dared.

Counsellor and lastly the nurse of the solitary Prime Minister, she was jealous of his relationship with any other female, even the two girls whom he adopted. After Salazar's death, Maria de Jesus bought a small apartment in Benfica, and died in 1981 at the age of 86.

In the next article to be published in March, I shall consider the various women who featured in Salazar's romantic life, and provide my answers to three questions. How was it that he managed to keep secret his romantic liaisons? How did a seminary-trained and austere catholic conduct an intense, sensual and free love life? How is it that Salazar, with so many opportunities, never married?

To read part 2 click here.

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