
ELISE BERGER'S LIFE MEMORIES. PRESENTATION OF THE
ITALIAN EDITION OF AN UNPUBLISHED DIARY ON ALWIN
BERGER'S LIFE

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ABSTRACT

Analysis of “Lebenserinnerungen” (Life’s Memories), unpublished manuscript of Elise Berger, and presentation of the edition translated in Italian after more than eighty years.

KEY WORDS

Alwin Berger, Elise Berger, Life’s memories

INTRODUCTION

The publication of the volume (Berger, 2016) presented here is the result of a close collaboration between botanists and interpreters and the Alwin Berger Archiv in Möschlitz. This presentation is divided in two parts: the first part has been written by Mauro Mariotti (MM), the botanist, and the second part, which consists of a description of the characters mentioned in the book and an analysis of the original text, has been written by Gabriele Campodonico (GC), the translator. However, another botanist, Pier Giorgio Campodonico, GC's father, to whom this Italian edition is dedicated, has to be mentioned. He was among the promoters of the editorial initiative, has lived a great part of his life in the Hanbury Botanical Gardens, but unfortunately left us suddenly a few days before the publication.

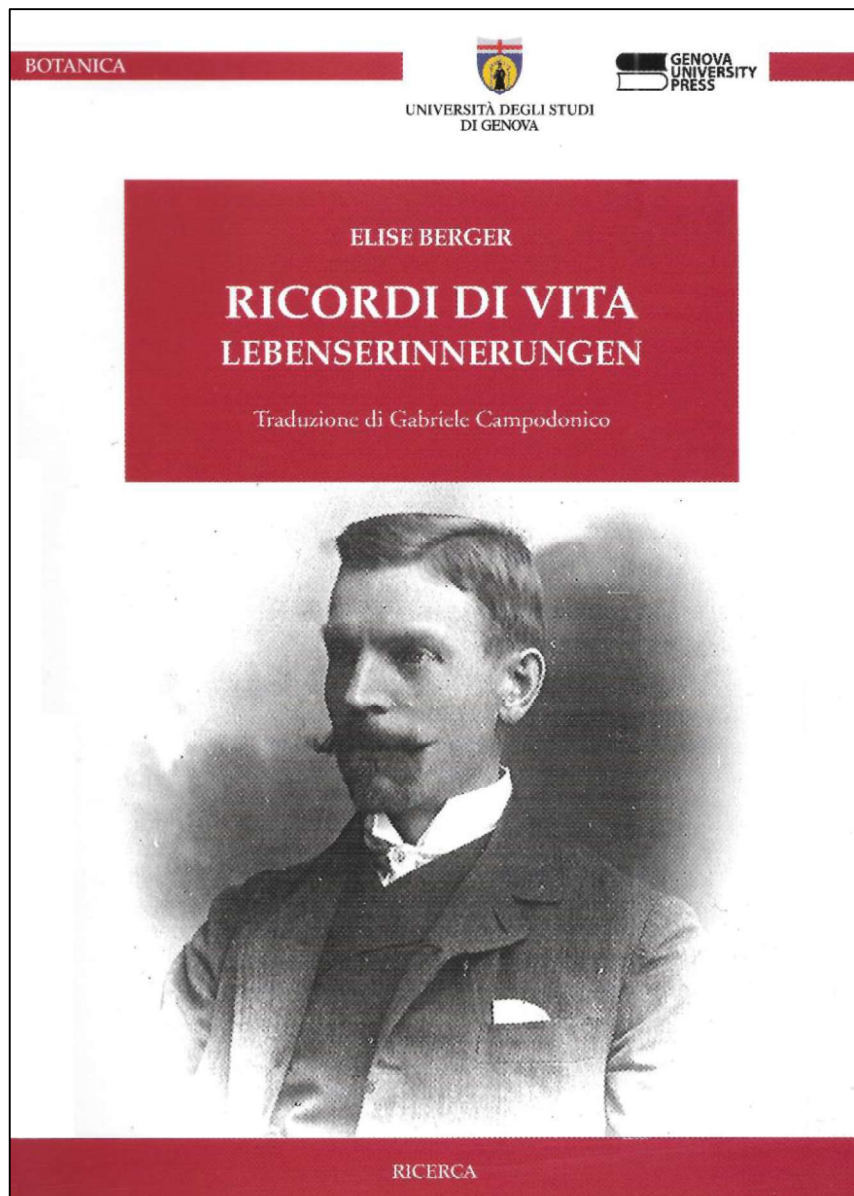


Fig. 1. Cover of the Book of the Italian-Germanic Edition of Memories by Elise Berger (2016).

Elise Keller, born in Heidelberg in 1869, became parentless when she was only 7 years old. Lord Southgate adopted and raised her with a typical English education. After having spent some time in Cairo, she moved to the Riviera, where she met and married Alwin Berger, the botanist and the curator of the Hanbury Gardens in Ventimiglia. After having taken her husband's name Berger, she lived with her husband for over 25 years until his death in 1931. Her only work, *Lebenserinnerungen* (Life Memories), was completed in 1933, when anti-Semitism became a state doctrine in Germany. Elise died in 1944 as a victim of the Holocaust in the death camp of Theresienstadt.

Lebenserinnerungen is the diary of a woman and, at the same time, the biography of a scientist who has lived during a troubled time, marked by the outbreak of the First World War and the subsequent economic and political upheavals of Germany. It is also much more: a revived story of a great botanical garden and a novel where it is possible to meet both noble and popular characters and to compare diametrically opposed cultures and ways of living.

This book (Fig. 1) is the third of the “Botany” series of the publishing house Genova University Press (GUP) and it is devoted to Alwin Berger’s biography. Through the words that his wife has left to their children, this book aims at highlighting aspects of the family life, the work and the deeds of a scientist known to botanists throughout the world.

Lebenserinnerungen has remained a typewritten document in family hands until 1933, when the author sent a copy to her brother-in-law Adolf (the brother of her beloved Alwin) in Möschlitz. Today, the publication of this biography, after the tragic events of World War II and the Holocaust broke off Elise Berger's life, has been possible thanks to the permission and the kind helpfulness of the Alwin Berger Archiv of Möschlitz, curated by Lutz Schmalfuß. This family archive has promoted several initiatives to increase in value its cultural heritage which includes, besides the original memories, some copies which have been discovered

among Alwin Berger's legacies to some of his friends – Prof. Ernst Haeckel in Jena and the Bulgarian Royal Family – and an interesting photographic documentation. In 2017 we are celebrating the 150th anniversary of the foundation of the Hanbury Botanical Gardens of La Mortola near Ventimiglia, whose reputation has continued to spread also thanks to the incessant work and dedication of Alwin Berger, the curator who has been able to combine his botanical skills with the ability to act in full harmony with the same Gardens' patron and owner, Sir Thomas Hanbury, suggesting and multiplying the international relations.

Between the late 19th century and the early 20th century the contribution of people of German culture to the knowledge of both the native and the exotic flora of Italy and, above all, to the creation of the gardens of the Riviera has been extraordinary. In several cases it has been a determining factor in the creation of scientific and cultural centers and in the changes of the landscape and of private and public green spaces, as well as in the increase in value of the Italian cultural heritage. Nevertheless, the gratitude of Italians towards them has been minimal and some Germans have suffered serious difficulties because of the Great War. Even today, both the role of the German culture in Italy and the injustices which have been committed against those who suddenly became "enemies" still haven't been fully recognized. A century has passed since the First World War and many events have been organized to recall historical memory, to celebrate the protagonists, to rediscover, restore and increase the value of cultural sites and monuments. Unfortunately this commemorative aim doesn't always distance itself from a concept of distinction between national identities and isn't always able to promote a sharing that goes beyond these identities and extends to European Culture.

The Hanbury Botanical Gardens, like other gardens on the Italian Riviera, are classified among the "English Gardens" in Italy, but for an expert it is difficult to separate their peculiarity from the Germanic influence which botanists, landscape architects and

nurserymen such as Alwin Berger, Otto Penzig, Ludwig Winter, Kurt Dinter, Gustav Cronemeyer, Fritz Mader, Eduard Strasburger, Charles Gottlieb Huber, all of them protagonists of this book, have poured into the Italian Riviera and the Côte d'Azur.

CHARACTERS OF THE BOOK AND ANALYSIS OF THE TEXT

There are four main characters: Elise Berger, who is at the same time the story's author and narrator, her husband Alwin, her son Fritz and her daughter Iris Verna.

This book consists of five main parts:

1. a short presentation of the book by MM, Editor of the "Botany" series of the publishing house Genova University Press;
2. a short presentation of Elise Berger's work and in particular of its origins, its contents and the few information about the author's life, based on the contents of the internet page <https://www.stolpersteine-cannstatt.de/biografien/elise-berger-gelaehmt-nach-theresienstadt>;
3. Elise Berger's original text along with its Italian translation;
4. an appendix written by Elise Berger along with its Italian translation. This appendix contains:
 - a. a summary of Alwin Berger's career;
 - b. a list of some plants which have been named after Alwin Berger's family members;
 - c. a short poem about a storax vial to which both Thomas and Daniel Hanbury were bound;
 - d. the speeches in Italian which have been held during the inauguration of a bronze bust which represented Thomas Hanbury;
 - e. two other speeches which have been held during the celebration of Prof. Schweinfurth's 76th birthday and the launch of Alwin Berger's book "Die Entwicklungslinien

der Kakteen" (The cactuses' development lines), respectively;

f. the Italian translation's notes;

5. an iconographic appendix with some illustrations of the figures, the places, some plants and objects which are mentioned in the book.

The book has many notes for two reasons:

1. the text mentions a lot of personalities and facts with which the Italian average reader is little familiar;
2. the translator (GC) has preferred to leave some parts in the original language (mostly in English), in order that the book could be used as a starting point for any possible research. Anyway their translation can be found in this section.

Let's pass to a text analysis which can be considered more similar to the ones which students usually do when they attend school:

- Time: the story takes place at a definite period of time, i.e. between 1871 and 1931, which are Alwin Berger's birth year and death year respectively.
- Main places in which the story has taken place:
 - Germany, which is Alwin Berger's birth country and in which he has often worked;
 - La Mortola, the place in which he has not only worked but also lived the most;
 - the United States of America, where first Alwin Berger, then his wife and his children have had to move because of the political crisis which has been brought about by the German Revolution and the subsequent economical crisis which has arose during the establishment of the Weimar Republic.
- The narrator's role is played by Elise Berger; however, when her husband finds himself far away from his family, he in turn becomes a narrator too.

- Seeing that both Elise Berger and her husband Alwin play the role of narrator, we can speak of variable internal focalization, i.e. the story is narrated from the point of view of more than one character (in this case two).
- Furthermore, Elise Berger's narrating style shows other peculiarities:
 - presence of flashbacks and interior monologues;
 - seeing that Elise Berger was German-speaking, the text has been written mainly in German, but there are also some passages in English. Maybe she wanted to highlight even more "my English education and ideas and my predilection for everything English";
 - sometimes Elise Berger's narrating style becomes epistolary, e.g. when Alwin Berger has found himself far away from his family for work purposes he has sent many letters to his wife and his children in which he has described all the things he has seen and everything that has happened to him. In fact Elise Berger has included in her story the letters which her husband has sent her.

Elise Berger has written her "Life memories" for 3 main reasons:

1. to leave her children a portrait of their father Alwin Berger;
2. to praise her husband's work and credits;
3. to highlight the role played by the war, the great history in general and the deep bond with La Mortola both in his life and in his family's one.

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