

The Island

Victoria Hislop

In many people's minds, the disease of leprosy is associated with biblical times and is now confined to the past. This is far from true, though treatment has reduced the worldwide population of those infected with leprosy to below 200,000. The disease develops relatively slowly, though there is a more aggressive version, and generally results in disfigurement and an unpleasant death. It was wrongly believed to be highly contagious and carried an enormous social stigma which resulted in lepers being cast out of society, often to live in caves.

Early in the twentieth century, the Greek government decided to transfer the lepers on Crete to a small island called Spinalonga. Many had been living in caves, away from villages and towns, but the change of location made relatively little difference to their living conditions until the 1930's.

Victoria Hislop uses Spinalonga as the background to her novel *The Island*. The narrative starts in the near present with Alexis Fielding travelling to Crete with boyfriend Ed. She wished to know more of her mother's past but had never been able to get her to talk about it. Sofia finally agreed to send a letter to a family friend in the village of Plaka asking her to talk to Alexis. Ed had no wish to go to Plaka and was upset by the idea, so Alexis went by herself. She met Fotini, to whom Sofia had written, and over the next few days, she learned the history of her mother's family.

Sofia's grandmother, Maria, was a responsible person who was closely tied to her family. Maria had a sister, Anna, who was flighty and irresponsible; there was something almost biblical about their relationship. Their mother Eleni contracted leprosy and had to go to Spinalonga, which was, at the time, a life sentence. Later, Maria also caught leprosy and was taken across to the island. The descriptions of conditions on Spinalonga and how they changed were based on fact and held considerable interest. Up to the 1930's, the people had made do with near derelict houses long since abandoned by the Turks and inadequate provisions, notably water. The arrival of a large group of professionals from Athens turned things around and, despite the rest of Crete coming under German occupation during the War, a close-knit community

developed on Spinalonga. Soon after the War, effective treatments for leprosy were discovered and the island's inhabitants were able to be repatriated, including Maria.

The story of Anna's rejection of the handsome war hero from Plaka for the son of the local rich landowner and the tragic outcome of her passionate affair with his wayward brother was rather stereotypical. Maria married for love and later adopted Sofia, who was Anna's daughter but whose paternity was doubtful. It was the teenage Sofia's rejection of her adoptive parents that led to overwhelming guilt in later life and unwillingness to talk about her history. Alexis comes to understand her mother and, showing something of her character, leaves the controlling Ed.