

AAHA = Amicale Alexandrie Hier et Aujourd'hui

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Alexandria

A place that I remember



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*There are places I remember all my life
 Though some have changed,
 Some forever, not for better
 Some have gone, and some remain
 All these places have their moments
 With lovers and friends I still can recall
 Some are dead and some are living
 In my life I've loved them all ...
 But of all these friends and lovers
 There is no one compared to you
 And these memories lose their meaning
 When I think of love as something new
 So I know I'll never lose affection
 For people and things that went before
 I know I'll often stop and think about them
 In my life I loved you more*

Not my words, but John Lennon's that I recently heard and which stirred my dormant feelings for my birthplace, cosmopolitan Alexandria. It struck a chord of a bygone life, lost forever except for the memories of the likes of me – the diasporad (excuse my liberties with the language) Alexandrines that the vagaries of history had forced into exile or chose to seek their destinies elsewhere, just like their forefathers before them who had settled in Egypt for similar reasons. My generation was the last one to grow up in this harmonious pluralistic environment that was Alexandria. Where the clear blue sky met the deep blue sea. Where the sunshine brightened the city and reached deep into our soul. The different races and creeds knew no discord, the dialect was multilingual, religious differences were limited to the house of prayer one attended.

It is sad that mine is the last generation that experienced this unique joyful mode of life, and with our demise, our Utopia and the diminishing lineage of Alexandrines (as we all thought of ourselves as) will be consigned to history. All that will be left will be stories, old photos and black ink on white paper. So I dedicate this to the begotten of our loins, their children and their children's children. They may see the sights and enjoy the sand and sea, but will never feel the inner glow of the Iskenderia that was ours, or ever be Alexandrines like us. Change is inevitable, depending on how you look at it, for better or for worse. Alexandria has not been immune. It has been reborn and has flourished.

George Moustaki in just three minutes of song (Alexandrie) takes you back over to the 'old' Alexandria, and for a little while, even though only through music, the Mediterranean sun brightens the soul and warms the heart.

The American Civil war had curtailed cotton exports to Europe, and the alternative source India, was neither geared to the sudden demand nor to the shipping logistics. The opening of the harbour of Alexandria to non-Islamic shipping, and the far superior quality of Egyptian cotton combined to make Egypt the wealthy saviour of Europe. The subsequent opening of the Suez Canal and its vital contribution to the economy, was instrumental to a cultural ascendancy that the country had not seen since an asp had bitten a royal breast.

My early childhood took off in the post World War II period. Though the magnificence of 'the playground of the kings' was now waning after two world wars and an intermediate depression, it was still a land of plenty. The Nile Valley, replenished with fertile silt by the annual floods saw to that.

I was an only child growing up with my parents and maternal grandparents, issue of a lineage of Greek immigrants, like so many others that had sought their fortune in this land of opportunity. My grandmother's family was one of the many that was expelled from Constantinople. My father, whose grandfather was a successful trader from the Levant, willed me equal portions of Syro-Lebanese and Slovakian.

I entered the world of the comfortable but not particularly well off. The collapse of my maternal grandfather's business during the depression, and my paternal grandfather's addiction to the tables of the Casino de Monte Carlo saw to that. So like the rest of my contemporaries, I was growing up amongst the seed of the commercial expatriates, the escapees of genocide, of wars and oppression, of poverty and famine.

Alexandria was a hotchpotch of races, traditions, religions and languages. Being multilingual was the norm rather than the exception. All co-existing together in harmony in the ancient fishing village of Rakota that Alexander the Great had transformed and bestowed his name to. We were the 'Alexandrines'.

Like all societies, the divides were there, mainly class and financial. There was the nobility and the ennobled, the Pashas and Beys. There were the Effendis (a Turkish inheritance), the local middle class, marked by the tarboush (fez) and an elongated nail on the little finger – a sign of non-manual labour. There were the khawagas, or Europeans, a respectful or disrespectful title, depending on the context; the 'Shawam', the Levantines, and then there was the proletariat. From this class came the manpower that built, maintained and served the city and the Fatmas and the Mabroukas, the housemaids that cleaned, cooked, and laundered for a pittance.



ALEXANDRINES

Architecture varied reflecting history and the continuous expansion of the city. The central part of the city boasted numerous early 20th century houses. Typically the flats had large rooms with incredibly high ceilings and large balconies. Above the lower utility rooms lay the 'sandara' (sort of internal attic) used for storage. Two staircases generally served the buildings. The main staircase was often marble and had ornate iron railings. The service stairway was smaller, wooden or metal, and wound its way up to via the kitchen doors to the roof. There each flat had its laundry room where the washing was done and hung up to dry. Some of the rooms were used as living quarters for the servant. On the ground floor underneath the staircase, was the 'baouab's' (concierge's) sleeping quarter.



CLEOPATRA late 40's

The link-line of the Alexandrines was the tram. The 'Ramleh' lines operated east west across the eastern half of the elongated city. The blue and red lines run more or less parallel converging about two thirds of the way into the town centre. A different service meandered through the denser and wider western part of the city. This was supported by a fairly well developed (but often overloaded) bus service. Horse-drawn carriages and orange and black taxis did the rest. Numerous tree-lined avenues criss-crossed the city.



SHARAA SULTAN HUSSEIN c. 1969



SLIGHTLY OVERCROWDED BUS

Horse drawn transport was quite common, but not always pleasant for the dray animals, particularly those pulling overloaded carts. Struggling uphill they were urged on with whippings and beatings. In fact the treatment of animals is one of the saddest memories of the place. I vaguely remember being horrified by the unwanted kittens and puppies ending up at the bottom of the sea in weighted burlap sacks. Animal cruelty is one of the things that I could never get to grips with. Unfortunately mistreatment of animals was not uncommon. Neither was it a rare occurrence for young people with air rifles to roam the streets and shoot birds off the trees. The treatment of animals is probably my only sour recollection.

Where Alexandria stood out from any other city or town was its unique character born of its pluralistic cosmopolitan composition. Never before and never again to be replicated. It is this inexplicable 'something' that no other than a native of the city can feel or understand.



MISS DIXON'S PRIMARY SCHOOL 1949



BRITISH BOYS' SCHOOL CUBS c. 1953

I had a British education, first at Miss Dixon's Primary School, followed by the British Boys' School. I have always been grateful to my parents for the choice. Even at that early age I felt that I would have died of embarrassment had I to wear the navy, beige or sky blue (pink for girls) school smocks so popular with most of the other schools serving the Greek, French, Italian, and Armenian communities.

Early morning started with the muezzin's call to prayer. Later came the call of the 'foul' (fava beans) vendor, and the reed baskets were lowered from the balconies and windows on cord to retrieve the foul, falafel, boiled eggs and mekhalel (pickles). Then the church bells would be heard ringing.

During the day the rubbish collector made his round. The 'zabal'. His high-sided donkey drawn cart could usually be smelt long before it was heard. Armed with a huge reed basket he would, house by house, floor by floor collect the garbage left out in large 'safihās' (tin drums). There was also the 'robabakia' the Arabic version of the Italian 'roba vecchia' or old stuff – the peddler who would buy anything from old newspapers (when not used as toilet paper) through empty bottles to any item that could be bartered or resold.



ZABALIN CARTS - SIDI GABER

There was the 'Makwagi' to do the ironing, which was done with heavy, massive burning charcoal filled hot iron manoeuvred through shirts, trousers and sheets with alarming dexterity.

The warming summer weather brought out 'kopso malia to skilo' inherited from the Greek 'cut the dog's hair' – the call of the canine coiffeur. There was the ambulant fruit and vegetable street traders and scores of other hawkers roaming the streets with their push- or ass drawn carts. Lastly one must not forget the defunct skill of the 'nahas' with his portable coal fire, blowers and zinc to plate the copper kettles and pots, or the pitiful cesspit cleaners, with their horse drawn tanks and buckets and spades who manually emptied the pits.



MARKET STREET VENDOURS - ANFOUSHI

Local 'souks' (markets) abounded, where early morning shoppers would vie for the fresh seasonal fruit and vegetables, fish just out of the sea, and a variety of meat cuts. The poultry seller with his cart or stall stacked full of 'affas' (cane cages) filled with turkeys, chicken, pigeons and rabbits ready to be picked, weighed, and slaughtered on site. It was not unusual to see him force feeding the birds with grain. This was done by filling his mouth with corn, grabbing the bird, opening its beak, sticking a large macaroni tube in it and blowing a handful of feed into its gullet. There were three types of bakeries, the 'Frangi' for European bread, the 'Shami' for the white flour pittas, and the healthiest of the lot, the 'Baladi' for the wholemeal pitta.

For snacks there were the 'Foul and Falafel' shops or street-corner vendors, with punters milling around to buy their sandwiches.

Who can forget the ice seller? Electric refrigerators were not common then, but the 'talaga' was. The huge icebox was made of wood, with thick sawdust insulated walls that were internally covered by a zinc sheet. In it was stored the metre long blocks of ice that were for sale. A portable mini-version or a larger three wheeled bicycle driven one was available for the hawkers who sold 'azoza' another use of the French gazeuse (carbonated drink) on the beaches and sea-front during summer with the shout 'bebz wa kakola' Pepsi and Coca Cola, along with Sinalco, Lemongo and Spathis.

The home version of the popular 'talaga' had a bottom compartment with a front opening door, where food was kept. The smaller upper compartment top opened to reveal coiled lead piping, connected to an external tap, and from the side or back linked to the water mains. Upon this coil a block of ice wrapped in 'kheisha' (hessian) was placed. This preserved the food and provided cold water on tap.

And of course there were the unintentional street shows – the local quarrels with a farcical aspect, rather than a violent outcome. The vociferous argument, usually involving reference to female relative bodily (private) parts or descendency from the animal kingdom would then take a step towards the grand finale. This would usually be in the form of 'hold me back or I am going to kill him' or alternative 'just let me get at him'. At this stage, the gathered crowd would cease its discussion of who was right or not, and proceed to separate and placate the two protagonists.

The coffee shops abounded, at the time a haven for men, sipping tea and coffee, smoking the shisha (hubbly-bubbly) and as likely as not playing backgammon. In evidence were the brass coffee brewers: a large rectangular platter like container full of sand surrounded by a water receptacle. Like the icebox it was connected with a tap and as likely as not to the mains. The whole contraption was heated by charcoal (later by gas) and the coffee was brewed individually in 'kanakas' on the hot sand.

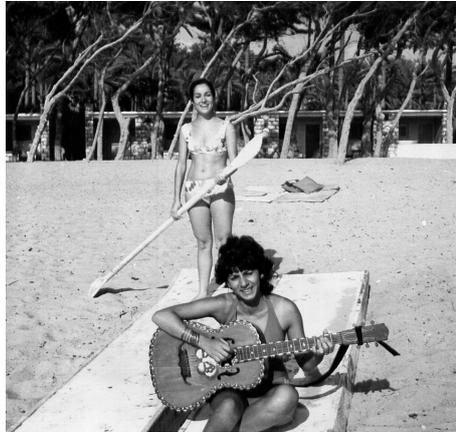
Quite often, my grandfather would take me to the coffee shop at the Sidi Gaber train station. There I would watch the steam trains go by, drinking freshly made real lemonade, while my 'Papous' chatted to his friends, and never translated or explained some of the talking parrot's rather incomprehensible vocabulary. It was years later, when the grey wooden station had vanished and had been replaced with a modern yellow brick building that I realised the fruitiness of the parrot speak. By that time diesel trains were replacing the steam engines, and my train-spotting phase had long since perished.



SIDI GABER BEACH mid 50's

The shoreline was an integral part of Alexandria and our everyday life. There was 13 km of beachfront running the length of the city. Sandy coves lined with cabins, peppered the whole length of the 'Corniche' – from Silsilah (the eastern promontory of the Eastern Harbour) to the walls of the Royal Palace at Montazah. All washed by crystal clear blue water.

The beaches we frequented were mainly the ones within walking distance, as, as often as not, we had to carry the beach umbrella and sun loungers there and back. There we would meet the 'regulars' have our swim, and when the sea was calm (or no flag day – as a red flag indicated unsettled sea conditions, and a black one very rough ones) we were taken for a 'perisoire' ride.



BEACHED PERISOIRES AT MONTAZA 1970

A sort of flat light boat, a bit like an inflated surfboard that was propelled by a long pole with paddles at each end. These could be rented by the hour from the lifeguard. If we behaved, we were treated to a caramelised nut and wafer pastry - 'halawiyat el nabi'. The hawkers selling them carried the nut pastries in a glass container. Or, a 'simit' (sesame bread ring) dipped in 'doa' (a cumin – salt mixture) or 'zaatar' (a dry thyme – sesame mixture); the 'simit' were threaded on little poles protruding vertically from a large circular wicker basket.

Cafes (called Casinos) were common the length of the Cornishe for the more demure and the courting couples.

I enjoyed all inter-denominational feasts and festivals that were celebrated. Not only because of the holidays, but the pomp that was attached. The Bairam at the end of Ramadan saw the children emerging in bright new clothes, bright pinks and blues and greens. The better off boys in their new suits, while the less fortunate came out in their sparkling new pyjamas; the girls wearing their colourful dresses. The colours were as bright as the colours of the festive sugar dolls on sale. That was the time when all the traditional sweets became readily available – the time of the sweet and syrupy 'kounafa' and 'ataief'. The 'Eid el Adha' or 'Kourban Bayram' – the major feast, celebrating Abraham's sacrifice was as popular with the sheep as Christmas and Thanksgiving is with turkeys nowadays.

Easter was my favourite, as I got to celebrate both Catholic and Orthodox feasts. I loved the colourful processions and chanting, but most of all the Saturday morning 'Loukoumades' (deep fried dumplings steeped in honey).

Christmas was special ... we built our own massive nativity scene from scratch from coke rocks and packing paper, plaster and glue. For reasons known only to my father, Jesus got to be born in a cave rather than a barn. I guess it was because he wasn't very good at woodwork. New Year Eve was traditionally a family gathering. The highlight was the arrival of Aghios Vassilis (Why Greek tradition has Saint Basil replacing Father Christmas and visiting on New Year's Eve is still a mystery). I was seven when I was deemed old enough to attend the late night festivities. I remember being very dubious of Aghios Vassilis as he made his appearance on the stroke of midnight. While all the other children cowered in awe, hoping to remember the poems they had to recite; I went 'that's not Father Christmas, that is someone in disguise'. The sentence was never completely uttered as a hand covered my mouth and I was summarily whisked to the back of the room and told to be quiet.

The traditional New Year's Day outing was an afternoon at the Nouzha Zoo with my father. We would go by taxi, and return by 'arrabia hantour'. The animals fascinated me, and the highlight was a pony ride. Beside it were the Antoniadis botanical gardens that I found extremely boring.

I was enthralled that for three years running, the number plates of the taxis that we rode corresponded to the calendar years. On that fourth year however the crucial index number was nowhere to be found. I

burst into tears. It was such a disappointing and tragic start to 1952. To a child of seven it was like the end of his world. In a way, it turned out to be just that.

I did not really understand what was going on in the country that year. It was a turbulent year, something about fires in Cairo, something about a bloodless revolution, the overthrow of the monarchy, and my only sighting of King Farouk as he was on his way to becoming an ex-monarch in exile. That day in late July, I remember a speeding motorcade of red Fords (the royal cars) on the Rue d'Aboukir (soon to be re-named Tarik El Horreya - the Avenue of Freedom).

Personally I was more worried about changing school. It took me some time to adapt to a full scholastic day and the environment of a large boys' school, and particularly to school dinners.

Kingdom or Republic made no difference. Other than a change of flag and national anthem, life just went on. I was growing up, making new friends, and doing what boys do, mischievous and otherwise.

Our social life mainly revolved around my mother's maternal side of a fairly large Greek family (her mother was one of six siblings, most with children and grandchildren). The ties with both grand-paternal sides of the family were cordial rather than close, even though my paternal grandfather was also one of six siblings.

Summers were spent on the beaches, though every so often we would go to Ras El Soda. One of my father's colleagues had a large property there that he frequently let us use for a holiday. Further up the road a relative lived, so there were cousins to play with on the widespread sand dunes.

The weekend family outing was to the cinema, the 3 to 6 performance. We would buy our tickets on which the seat numbers were marked with a thick wax crayon. My favourite theatre was the Cinema Metro with its plush red velvet seats, though we were really spoiled for choice with over six plush cinemas showing foreign releases. It would be much later that I would come to appreciate the art deco construction of the Rialto and Royal cinemas.

After the performance, we would sometimes stop at Alakefak for a Stella beer and mezze, but more often in summer drop by the Elite Cafeteria for an ice cream. Their mango and lemon sorbets are still to be equalled. Alternatively, it was for a pastry at one of the numerous patisseries, Athineos, Delice or Trianon. All had seen the light of day in the early part of the 20th century and were very art deco in style. The choice of pastries was tremendous, inspired from all over the world.

I started frequenting the Châpelle Notre Dames des Champs as soon as it opened in Smouha, or 'Chez Père Pierre' at it was better known. There, children gathered weekly, and new acquaintances and friendships were forged.

Alexandria was an absolutely fantastic place to grow up in, with such a wonderful communal life.

The post-war suffering of Europe was miles away.

A couple of years later it was announced that some Colonel Nasser had taken over as president and with him came not the wind, but the tempest of change. Anti-colonialism, nationalism and Arabism had become an issue. The country's relations with the west had deteriorated. The Suez Canal was nationalised. Its 'tamsir' (Egyptification) caused international disconcert. The adults started showing signs of discomfort with the situation.

We were playing in the garden at Père Pierre's that last day of October 1956 when the bombs exploded. The RAF was strafing the airport, which was located a few miles away. Some shrapnel fell around us. We hurriedly collected the debris as mementos. Little did we realise then that so many lives were about to fall into shards.

The schools had been shut during the Suez Crisis for weeks on end. The British Boys' School reopened as the Ennasr Boys' School, Victoria College as Victory College, and the Lycée Français as Lycée La Libertée. New staff members had replaced most of the familiar faces. Empty desks reminded us of the classmates that had not returned. Military Training was added to the curriculum. For a couple of hours a week we had to don our pseudo-military khaki uniforms and learn to defend the motherland.

It was the great evacuation. British and French nationals and foreign nationals of the Jewish persuasion were expelled, limited to taking with them what they could carry. Generations that had lived in Alexandria were summarily uprooted and exiled, a large number had to spend long months in refugee camps before emigrating to the New World. At the time I was dumbfounded and confused, I could not understand why my friends were not there anymore, and why there was so much general unease within the ethnic communities. The exodus had started.

I was now old enough to be a boy scout. So I joined the Scouts Wadi El Nil based at 'Père Pierre's'. It proved an invaluable experience, all the more so as I made lifelong friends.



SWEN SCOUT CAMPING ABUKIR c. 1959

As teenagers, we were becoming more independent. We started commuting to school. No more school buses picking us up and dropping us off. We now went to the cinema and the beach on our own. For a while, fishing for 'ritsa' (sea urchins) was the prime pass-time. An also very painful one if care with the spiny creatures was not taken. The worst agony came not from stepping on one, but extracting the spines from the soles of the feet. The catch was then summarily cut in half and eaten raw with a few drops of lemon juice.



RACKET GAME

Popular at the beach was the game of 'rackets', played with wooden bats and tennis balls. While on the street and wasteland, the 'korra shourab' reigned supreme. This popular version of soccer was played with a ball made out of a balloon and covered in old socks tightly sown together, kicked about by a bunch of barefoot urchins.

We made and flew our own kites. We would roam the fields of Smouha collecting the wild growing canes for the hexagonal skeleton that would be covered by colourful paper stuck in fancy patterns. A long tail would be attached, and as often as not portion of an ear of corn would be added as further ballast. The kites would be flown from the high roof of a friend's house overlooking the railway track and the fields of Smouha. It was also a time when cycling became popular with our age group. We would venture to the outskirts of the city, circumnavigating Lake Mariottis that formed the southern boundary of Alexandria.

Cinemas though were still the principal entertainment. We gathered at the 'Mohatat el Raml' (the downtown tram terminal) and as a group would go and watch a film. Then it was a sandwich at Laurantos or Mohamed Ahmed. More often than not we would have a Cloclo (a chocolate covered ice cream cone) while waiting for the tram to head home.

Summer was the time of the fruit juices. They were freshly pressed and readily available. Juiced mango pulp was the favourite, while guavas and bananas that were blended with milk came a close second. However for a quick thirst quencher or when finances were dire, there was nothing like a fresh glass of 'assir assab' (sugar cane). Two massive rollers would crush the canes, and the sieved juice would run over a cooling plate and be served there and then. An alternative was the just as popular 'assir kharoub' (carob or St John's bread). The edible pods had to be boiled for hours, then sieved before being cooled and sold.

Rock and Roll, via Bill Haley and then Elvis Presley started making a musical impact. Dalida, an Italian from Cairo made good in Paris, was the pride of Egypt, and filled the local airwaves. Thursday evenings had us tuning into the BBC world service to listen to the Top Ten, and to this new band called the Beatles. It was not always easy to tune into the BBC, or for the matter many of the foreign radio stations.

Though Freedom, Liberty and Victory was frequently quoted in the news, headlines and the interminable presidential speeches lambasting the colonial powers and their wicked western allies, while preaching pan-Arabism and National Socialism. It soon became apparent that freedom of speech and movement was not befitting the popular concepts of the Soviet inspired National Socialism, which did not fully endorse multiculturalism, though freedom of religious belief and practice was tolerated and supported.

The sixties and the Beatles hit us as I was counting my facial hair, while National Arab Socialism, was taking more than inspiration from the soviet 'popular reform' system. It gave birth to the 'kitaa aam' – the public sector. Worthy officers of the revolution had now become the moguls of the nationalised industry, naturally well qualified to head the industrial, agricultural and commercial concerns that had been nationalised (from foreigners) or sequestered (from Egyptians). The cultural fissure expanded into a chasm as 'diety-fication' of the ruler was encouraged. It was not uncommon for such anthems as

Nasser, we all love you
Nasser, we live to tell you
Nasser, we all adore you, Nasser etc.

that praised the revolutionary spirit to be sung by the pupils at the start of each school day.

It was anathema to be vocally or otherwise critical of the system - that was deemed anti-revolutionary and reactionary. Any reported or suspected 'faux pas' would be instantly investigated by the 'mabahez' (the secret police). Rumours abounded of arrests, imprisonments and occasional mistreatments. Nevertheless we never felt threatened or uneasy in our daily routines or walking the streets of Alexandria.

I was soon to be preparing for my finals and higher education at university. It coincided with girls becoming more and more of an attraction.

The social lifestyle enjoyed by many had not been affected by the political upheaval, and to our (male) libidos' delight, the sexual revolution that was transforming Europe was locally translated into bikinis at the seaside and miniskirts at discos. A watered down version of western sixties liberalism was slowly encroaching on the conventional puritanical attitude towards a-sexual relationships that were expected of respectable young ladies.

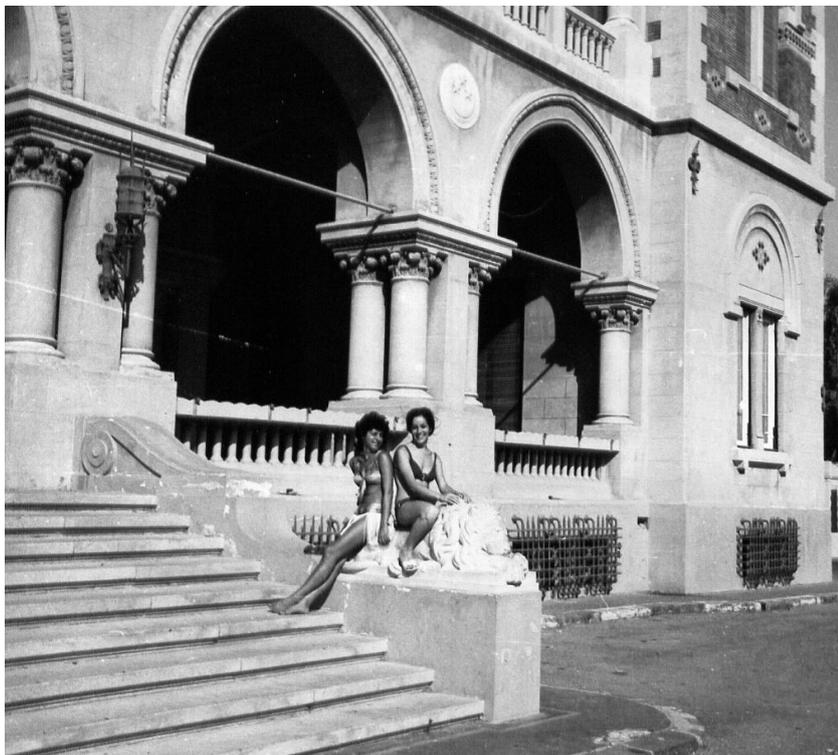


VIEW OF AGAMI BEACH

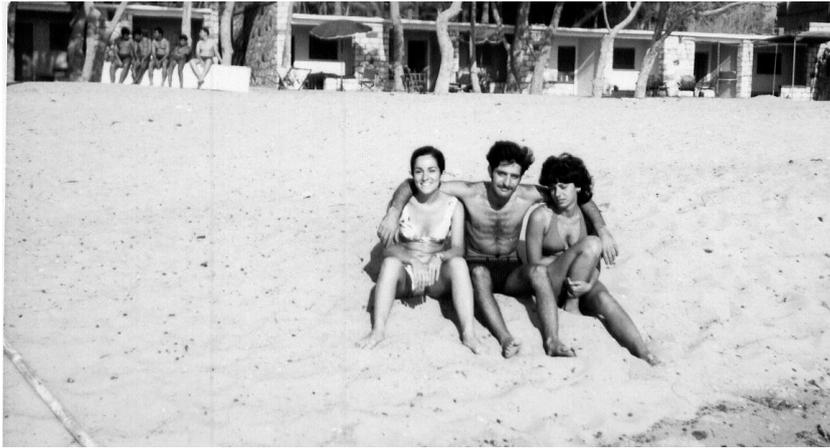


AGAMI 1968

Soon the eroding and decaying local beaches were abandoned for the more peripheral and exclusive sites of San Stefano, Montazah, Maamura, and Agami.



MONTAZAH PALACE 1970



MONTAZA - AIDA BEACH 1970

The Yacht Club and the Greek Nautical Club (Omilos) had re-opened in the Eastern Harbour, and the latter became the centre for the dwindling Greek community to enjoy aquatic sports and to socialise.



PLEASURE SAILING IN THE EASTERN HARBOUR early 60's

The Pam-Pam was the most popular disco for weekend outings for a bit of dancing and a bit of smooching. I'm A Believer and Woolly Bully had us thumping the floorboards and Chubby Checker had us twisting the night away. More popular were the tunes of Those Were The Days, Strangers In The Night, Ma Vie and Katy-Katy, danced to dimmed lights that encouraged the more romantic pursuits.

Local bands were immersing as dance venues became more popular, particularly during summer with open-air events held in at the San Stefano Hotel and Agami. A more sophisticated outing was to the Santa Lucia, one of the top restaurants with a live dance band.

A group of close friends calling themselves 'Les Mousquetaires' (the Musketeers) were gathered, listening to Jacques Brel, Aznavour, Patricia Carli, Mark Aryan, and Bob Azzam singing Moustapha, drinking beer, organising and promoting some of these events. It was free enterprise on a mini-scale. To the background music they were discussing relationships, the current situation, and the future.



LES MOUSQUETAIRES (SAN STEFANO) 1967

The Elite and Asteria cafés, ideally located in the town centre, had become popular westernised haunts for the younger generation. Groups and couples would meet and while the time away over an ice-cream, beer or 'zibib' (local equivalent of arak/ouzo) or the Asteria's popular dish of 'youvetsi': pasta and meat in tomato sauce baked in an earthenware pot.

Still there was Alakefak and a few other 'tavernas' along the sea front where a beer and mezze could be enjoyed on warm summer evenings.

Further afield, at the two extremities of the town were the fresh fish, restaurants of Mex and Abukir.

The Pâtisseries / Salons de Thé, favoured by the older generation, that had been the pride of Alexandria and unequalled for the quality of their gateaux, still served the same pastries, though local peanuts had wholly replaced the now non-existent pistachios, almonds, walnuts and hazelnuts. The only time nuts would make an appearance would be during the month of Ramadan.

The shop shelves were far from overloaded and cues were common to get sugar, flour and oil that were rationed. Sale of meat was restricted to three days a week.

Imports had virtually ceased, and the black market was thriving.

Illegally imported goods, particularly foreign cigarettes, started appearing on the pavements of Sharaa Safia Zaghoul, to instantly disappear at the materialization of the police, and resurface with in seconds of their passing by.

The economy was suffering, the country was alienated by the west, and it was not the Eastern Block that would provide luxury or quality items. Armaments and social dogma, usually in the form of well-publicised slogans however were plentiful, not forgetting the 'diety-fication' of the regime with massive presidential portraits adorning the city.



TAREEK EL HORREYA – BAB SHARKI c.1969

More and more stringent restrictions were introduced. An overbearing bureaucracy combined with corrupt ‘moazafin’ (beaucrats) and the dreaded ‘khitm el nisir’ (the eagle rubber stamp) that had to adorn every document had rendered anything to do with officialdom a terrible nightmare. It was then a question of astute bribery or a proper ‘wasta’ (string pulling) to get things done.

This was the decade of political and creeping popular xenophobia. The ‘Political Correctness Censors’ were on the beat. Literature, music and films were barred for subversive and inappropriate content or black listed (e.g. Frank Sinatra and Elizabeth Taylor, Coca Cola and Marks & Spencer products). It was not uncommon to buy a magazine with a few pages missing or watch a film with whole scenes removed. Less and less cinemas were showing foreign movies. Incoming and outgoing post was also inspected. It was not uncommon to receive a letter resealed with the censor’s tape. Nevertheless the Serge Gainsbourg song ‘Je T’aime Moi Non Plus’ banned over most of Europe for its sexual connotations had had the censor’s seal of approval and was broadcast nationally.

Enjoyment was ephemeral, there was disappointment with the present and uncertainty of the future was on the increase, as the cosmopolitan society was dramatically decreasing as more and more families sought their future across the seas.

For those lucky enough to overcome the hurdles and travel, the legal currency allowance was US\$ 5.00. I was fortunate to get a work-training placement in Basel. The journey took me through Greece and Italy to Switzerland. I was now experiencing and enjoying life in a free and democratic environment.

In the workplace, there was an ex- born and bred Alexandrine, a casualty of the post-1956 war exodus. He was not complimentary of the regime that had ‘left him with nothing but the shirt on his back’. I also met an American, ‘studying’ in Switzerland. He would be doing that for as long as the Vietnam War was on and conscription was enforced. I also met a charming young Swiss lady, who had never seen the sea and was fascinated by the stories of Alexandria, but could not understand the prevailing despotic rule so alien to her upbringing.

As the Esperia docked in Alexandria, my only disembarkation thought was that my next trip would be on a one-way ticket.

A few days later the phone at home rang. My friends were calling me from Switzerland. She spoke French, and was surprised that the operator had asked her what language was to be used. After a few minutes, the American came on the line. He spoke English. Suddenly a voice in Arabic interrupted: Do not change the language. The line went dead. Big Brother was watching and listening.

The 1967 war and following debacle further added to the insecurity, as this time it was the Egyptian Jews that were rounded up and summarily expelled from the country. The dissolution of the wonderful multicultural cosmopolitan Alexandria was complete. Shape up, shut up and assimilate into the uni-cultural society, or alternatively ship out was the order of the day. This Alexandrine did not feel at home any more.

I graduated from university. My fellow graduates with siblings were being immediately drafted into the armed forces. The 12-month draft period was ignored. Some had to wait over five years to be allowed out of uniform. Never had so many wished for flat feet.

Those with a medical degree, and for any medical or other reason excused from military service had to serve the National Health for a couple of years. The remainder had to fend for themselves in a virtually jobless market. Some teaching positions were available for the qualified. Jobs with the small number of foreign companies were few and far between and the competition for these posts was immense. The consulates of the USA, Canada and Australia were overloaded with immigration applications. Scores were seeking foreign work or invitations from abroad that would lead to justification for an exit visa. Many had to adopt subterfuge to leave the country.

It was then that Cupid struck. I met the girl I wanted to and was going to spend the rest of my life with. We both fortunately found employed in the miniscule foreign oil industry; and were still enjoying the superficial delights of Alexandria, now shrouded by a depressive and oppressive atmosphere. Some of us felt like the asses turning the 'sakkias' (water wheels) – walking round blindfolded in a never-ending circle and going nowhere.

31 December 1969 – end of the sixties: The last three remaining childhood friends fêted the New Year for the last time in Alexandria.

It was the end of an era.

The seventies arrived and Nasser died. The nation wept.

I grieved for Alexandria.



28 FEBRUARY 1971

The plane was waiting on the tarmac at Cairo Airport. I checked in my luggage. I walked to the departure gate, and kissed my wife. She would be joining me a few weeks later. A final goodbye wave. In my pocket was the U\$16.00 allowance that the authorities had so graciously allowed me to legally take with me abroad.

I took my seat and buckled my safety belt. A couple of post-funereal tears for 'my' Alexandria run down my cheeks as the plane taxied onto the runway and took off.

I never looked back.

Soon, there will be a gathering of Alexandrines to celebrate a milestone birthday. They will be grey and balding. They will listen to Jacques Brel, Aznavour, Patricia Carli, Mark Aryan, and Bob Azzam singing 'Moustapha' and Moustaki 'Alexandrie' while sipping fine Burgundies and Viogniers in the leafy outskirts of London. They will have come from the USA, Canada, Germany, France, Greece, and Italy and all over England. To the background music they will be discussing relationships, the current situation, and the good old days in Alexandria.