

AAHA = Amicale Alexandrie Hier et Aujourd'hui

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The World We Never Knew...



Fig. 1. Ruins of a plaster mural on an abandoned shouna in the district of Minet El Bassal, photo taken in 2013

(All illustrations are courtesy of May El Tabbakh, 2014)

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The contemporary Alexandrian generation, to which I proudly belong, has grown weary in the recent times from the urban mess all over the place. Often we get to hear from the older generations how beautiful it once was living in and visiting Alexandria. For most of its sensuous beautiful buildings, pleasant gardens and even its peaceful sands are now being rapidly replaced by lifeless hideous concrete blocks with which it is difficult to harmonise or grow any lieu, *really*! Many are gone and many more are still arriving. There's nothing familiar about modern life in Alexandria anymore. Just another suffering rural city; faceless, nameless, emotionless compact masses...

As a child, for I was born and raised in Alexandria, destiny would take me every day on a route from Laurens in Ramleh to Attarine where I was student at the German school. School performances would be held on the stage of the nearby Don Bosco and sport classes would take place at the grounds of the Greek complex in Chatby. In the afternoons it was time to take the tram to Alexandria Sporting Club. During the long summer holidays we would pack up and head towards Montazah, Agami or Ikingi Mariut. I would always gaze out of the window admiring my moving surrounding for every inch of it felt like home; from the heart of the old city and up to the continuously developing extensions further east, south and west.

Failing to connect with the modern context I found my feet carrying me back to the familiar childhood route through the Gate of the Sun and into the heart of the old city. This time I had developed a different eye, one that sought belonging and familiarity, no longer that eye innocently enjoying the sequence of the moving scenes.

The homey setting that lays ahead of me is indeed diverse; however harmony mysteriously prevails throughout the surviving layers of history.

I observe the elegant and slender Art Deco apartment buildings overlooking the Shallalat Gardens (Figures 2, 3 & 7) with their fine geometrical and floral patterns. The building shown in Figures 2&3 carries a sign on its front façade indicating that it was designed by El Sembellawein born French architect Max EDREI in 1930. Same spirit catches my attention while passing in front of Villa Gorra (Figure 4) overlooking the Stadium, by architect Ferdinand J. DEBBANE, 1925. The wrought iron work of the fence railings and the external lighting fixtures are priceless. At El Batala Street (former Rue des Ptolémées) I find a diversity of harmonised architectural styles; from modern language of the 30s and 40s to a rather earlier French Beaux Arts, such as the villa shown in (Figure 8) by Alexandria born French architect Victor ERLANGER. More of this earlier French influence is visible from the beautiful round corbels (Figure 9). I ask around what the building is called and I am told it is called the Toriel building by French architect Gaston AGHION. Several buildings in the neighbourhood carry his name! But the round corbels appear again right before the intersection between Fouad and Safeyya Zaghloul Streets (Figure 15); this time the architect is unknown! Before I get to Safeyya Zaghloul Street I lay my eyes on this fairy tale glass and lead window enclosure (Figure 14); broken glass panes all over, damaged and ruined; I wonder who lived here! I come to the doors of Goethe Institute (Figure 10). What beautiful sea shells cornice decorations and what beautiful façades brickwork! I entre seeking information and I am told the building has originally been Villa Rolo to an EDREI and DEBBANE design in 1926.

Moving on, the Italian face of the old city starts revealing itself. (Figures 5, 12, 19 & 20) are of chic residential apartment buildings affiliated to Mansoura born Italian architect G. A. LORIA, massive, however very grand. The landlady of the building in Figures 19 & 20 informs me that her family, KELADA ANTOUN, has commissioned the Italian architect in the 20s to design the building which still belongs to them. The Neo-Renaissance ensemble of the UNION NATIONAL BANK of EGYPT (Figure 11) triggered my excitement just to find out it has formerly been the Palace of SOURSOCK Pasha! Had I not know architect M. Liberman designed the Tchacos building (Figure 24) I would have immediately thought it was another of LORIA's designs. Next to the Spanish Consulate building I observe a heavy Neo-Classic spirited building with a white

washed Roman arched doorway headed by a leaf as the keystone (Figure 6). The building is now subject to the Ministry of Health. Underneath the arch there is a metal signage that carries the name FILIPPO PINI 1880 and a coat of arms depicting a kind of tree which I can't figure out what it is! Another Italian I suppose! Was this the architect or the landlord!? I stand frozen in front of the elegant structure ahead of me (Figure 13). It is called, I learn the PARASKEVAS building! Further down into the craftsmen workshop area of Attarine I discover the DEGIARDE – BROTHERS building (Figure 22) close to one of the area's many mechanical garages, like Garage D'Orient (Figure 16) or Garage Tchacos. Even the original building of the German School itself (Figure 23), I am told by the dear Sisters has previously been an Italian constructed hotel called “*Au Reveil du Lion*” dating back to the late 19th century! There is no way I could have missed a quick visit to the Italian complex of the Don Bosco (Figure 26).

At Safeyya Zaghloul, I stop at GAD to grab a quick *foul* sandwich. Hidden behind GAD I discover a Palace in ruins (Figure 18)! I ask about the building and am told it has been a school and before that it has been the court hall where Alexandria's famous *Rayya* and *Sekeena* have been sentenced to death. But most importantly I am told that before all that it has been the Palace of Count Zogheb, who owned the entire block. I walk around and entre some of the block's buildings to find a shield hung on most of them saying in French “SPARED DURING THE WAR 1939 -1945 THANKS TO THE LORD” (Figure 17). What war? The only wars my generation grew aware of were those of 1956, 1967 and the victorious 1973!!!

What I find next is a palette of less lavish European architecture (Figure 25) and more of a traditional timber one (Figure 21) blended with a growing number of the newly emerging concrete monsters.

My journey ends at the mouth of the Mahmoudiyya Canal, right by the docks of the old port, where I see the old stock of Minet El Bassal (Figure 28) and an entire district of abandoned workshops, shounas, warehouses and other derelict old industrial buildings most of which related to the cotton and seed oil commercial export activities (Figures 1, 27 & 29). A quick review of old maps revealed this industrial zone was run and owned by strange names, such as Stagni, Lozzato, Demetriades, Debbas, Brillet, Lambert & Ralli, Ziblich, Tilche, Zervudachi, Rolo, Goar, Zogheb, Boustros, Galatti, Gibson, Arbib, Griva, Menasce, Flotilla, Salvago, Piha, Lindemann, Soares, Soursock, Sasson, among many others. Who are these people? And who are the others, Edrei, Debbane, Paraskevas, Loria, Liberman, Erlanger, Pini or Aghion?? Most importantly, who is the rest???

In search for home, entrapped between an offensively rejecting reality and a silently retreating one, like most of my Alexandrian generation, over and over I keep going over the world we never knew....

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Fig. 2. Front façade of 81 Sultan Hussein Street (former Istanbul), Max Edrei 1930.



Fig. 3. Skyline of 81 Sultan Hussein Street (former Istanbul), Max Edrei 1930.



Fig. 4. Villa Gorra by F. Debbane, 1925.



Fig. 5. Building at 100 Fouad Street by G.A. Loria Architetto.



Fig. 6. Fouad Street 97, a Neo-Classic doorway marked by Filippo Pini 1880.

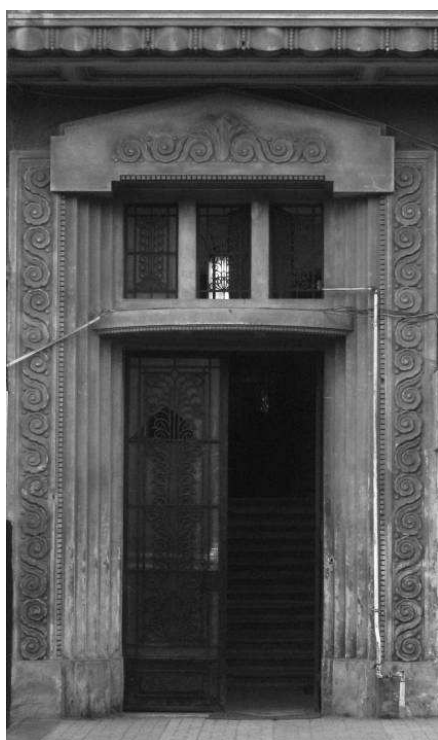


Fig. 7. Entrance to 59 Sultan Hussein Street (former Istanbul Street).



Fig. 8. Main entrance to no. 8 El Batalsa Street by architect Victor Erlanger.



**Fig. 9. Detail of the first floor corbel at no. 84 Fouad Street
by French architect G. Aghion.**



**Fig. 10. Detail of the cornice of Goethe Institute, former Villa Rolo,
by architect Max Edrei and engineer Ferdinand J. Debbane, 1926.**



Fig. 11. Union National Bank of Egypt (former Soursock Palace).



Fig. 12. One of the chic apartment buildings affiliated to Italian architect G. A. Loria.



Fig. 13. Paraskevas building down Fouad Street.



Fig. 14. The fairy tale window enclosure to an unknown Palace.



Fig. 15. Round window corbel before the intersection between Fouad and Safeyya Zaghloul Streets.



Fig. 16. Garage D'Orient in Attarine.



Fig. 17. Shield of grace found in many buildings affiliated to Count Zogheb.



Fig. 18. Palace of Count Zogheb in ruins.



Fig. 19. Kelada Antoun apartment building by Italian architect G.A. Loria.



Fig. 20. Staircase of the Kelada Antoun apartment building by Italian architect G. A. Loria.



Fig. 21. One of the traditional timber structures found in the area of Attarine.



Fig. 22. Degiarde – Brothers building in Salah El Dine Street, Attarine.



Fig. 23. Plaster sculptures on the main façade of the German School in Attarine.



Fig. 24. Tchacos apartment building in Attarine by architect M. Liberman.



Fig. 25. Example of the less lavish European architectures in Attarine.



Fig. 26. The Church of the Italian complex of Don Bosco.

Fig. 27. One of the derelict industrial buildings in the area around Minet El Bassal.



Fig. 28. The old stock of Minet El Bassal.



Fig. 29. The huge and derelect industrial building of the Société Générale de Pressage et de Dépôts around the area of Minet El Bassal.