

FROM CAMP CAESAR  
TO  
CLEOPATRA'S POOL



**BIBLIOTHECA ALEXANDRINA**

**FROM CAMP CAESAR TO CLEOPATRA'S POOL**

A SWISS CHILDHOOD IN ALEXANDRIA  
1934–1950

ESTHER ZIMMERLI HARDMAN

With an introduction by Carole Escoffey

Edited by

Mohamed Awad and Sahar Hamouda

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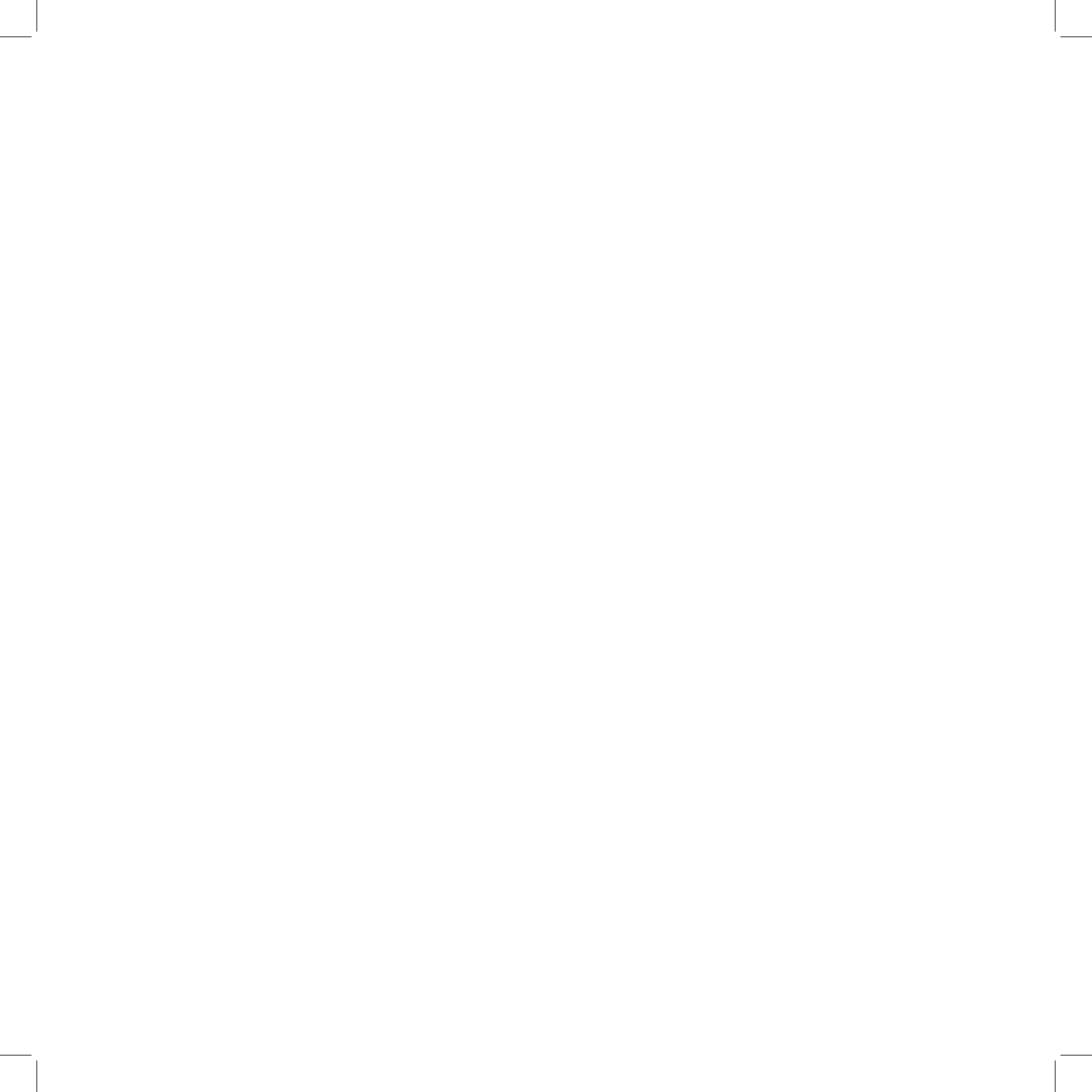
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## **EDITORS' PREFACE**

Esther Zimmerli Hardman's memoirs retrace her childhood in Alexandria during the first half of the twentieth century. Through her eyes, we capture a vivid image of the daily life of a young Swiss girl and her family, members of a vibrant Swiss community in the cosmopolitan Alexandria of the epoch — a community about which not much is known. However, as she paints this picture of a happy, carefree childhood, the author, through fleeting remarks, also reveals the general attitude to the local population, which many foreigners had, and which the Editors think should be documented as part of the social history of Alexandria, although they do not share such sentiments. Decades later, when she returns to the city of her childhood, the changes which have taken place make the city almost unrecognizable, her own sensation loss and nostalgia accentuating her feelings of estrangement.

The original German version of Esther Zimmerli Hardman's memoirs was published in 1999 in Switzerland, under the title *Kleopatra, Kranzler und Kolibris* and included the passages depicting the author's life in Berlin, Jamaica, and Northern Ireland. These were then published in French in 2002. An Arabic translation of the parts relating to Egypt was published in Cairo in 1998. So, the decision was finally taken to make these memoirs available to the broader English-reading public as part of the Alex-Med Monograph Series, thereby providing another small piece in the complex tapestry of the life of an ever-changing city, and highlighting a recent, if almost forgotten chapter, of Alexandria's long destiny.



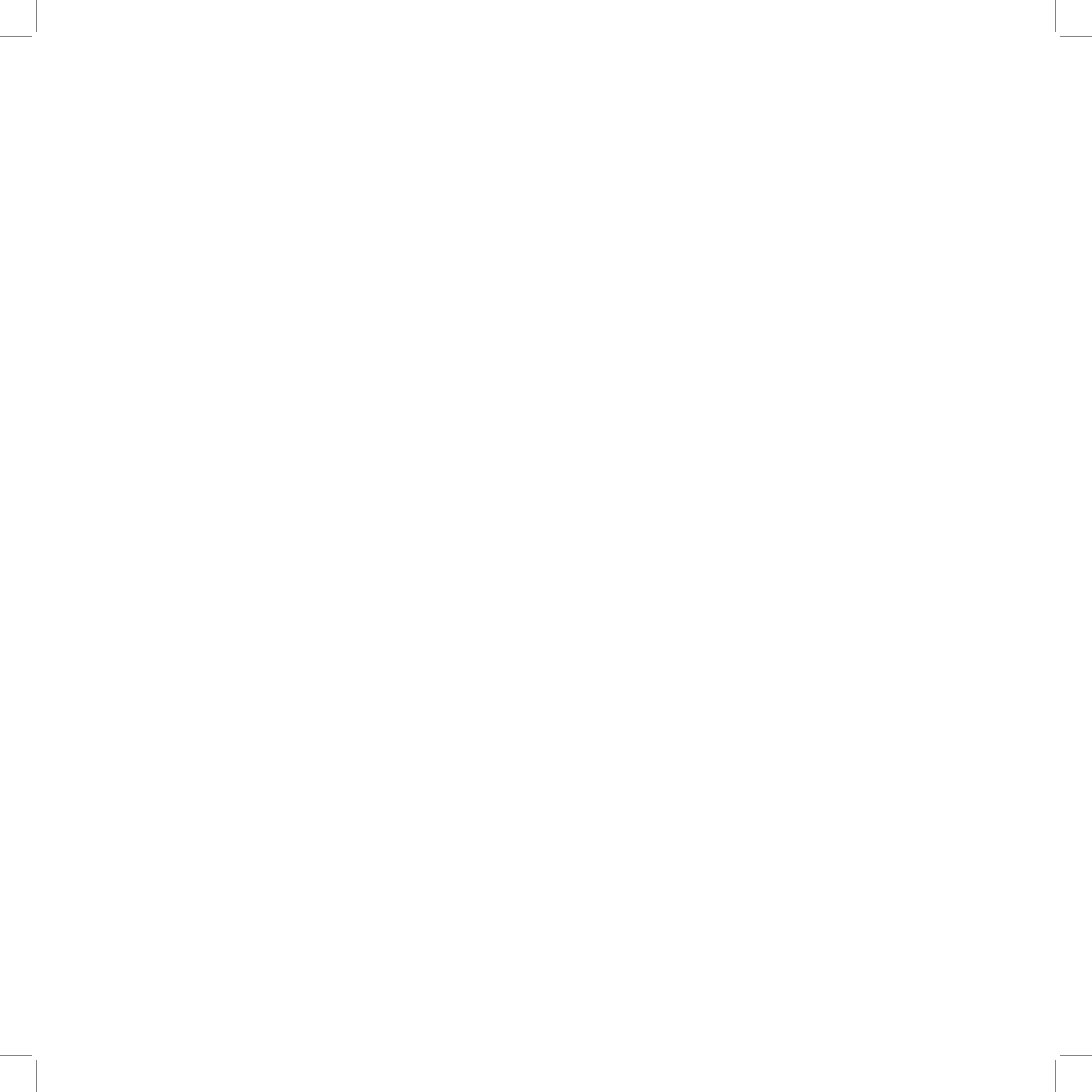


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INTRODUCTION  
THE SWISS COMMUNITY IN EGYPT  
A COSMOPOLITAN SETTING



## THE EARLY DAYS

The Swiss presence in Egypt, like that of other Europeans, has been strongly influenced by historical events over the years. In the early 1800s a number of Europeans came in the wake of Bonaparte's expedition of 1798–1801, amongst them several Swiss nationals. Although Bonaparte's Egyptian campaign was first and foremost a military one, the *Description de l'Égypte*, the monumental collaborative work of the one hundred and fifty or so scholars, artists and scientists who accompanied him, was to have far-reaching consequences of a different nature, contributing to the growing European fascination for Egypt and the Orient. It was this fascination especially, which motivated a number of early Swiss travelers to come.

When Bonaparte's army invaded Egypt in 1798, it was part of the Ottoman Empire. The Sublime Porte promptly reacted to the invasion by sending troops to defend its province. Amongst them was a young Albanian officer, Mohamed Ali (1769–1849), at the head of an Albanian contingent sent to expel the French. By 1805, this young officer had succeeded in seizing power and was Viceroy of Egypt. Considered today to be the founder of modern Egypt, Mohamed Ali undertook a vast program of modernization and industrialization. Hoping to attract foreign expertise and entrepreneurs, he established many privileges for foreigners such as tax exemptions and reduced customs, as well as the system of Capitulations giving foreigners consular protection. Gradually, many Europeans, including Swiss nationals, began to arrive in this land of new opportunity. The viceroy also introduced long-staple cotton as a cash crop to be sold to European textile manufacturers. This was of particular significance as far as Swiss commercial companies and merchants were concerned, since many of them came specifically for the cotton trade. One such individual was the Swiss John Ninet (1815–1895)<sup>1</sup>, who in 1840 was appointed

director of Mohamed Ali's vast cotton plantations. The first Swiss business enterprises to set up in Egypt probably came as early as 1830–1840<sup>2</sup>.

The first known account by a Swiss traveler to Egypt is that of a certain Hans Jacob Ammann (1586–1658) from Zurich, who at the age of twenty-two left his native country to travel for ten years to the Balkans, Constantinople, Palestine and Syria, finally arriving in Egypt in 1613. In his account he describes Cairo as “a very industrious city, with many foreigners and envoys from France, England and Venice, as well as beautiful gardens.” Of Alexandria however, Ammann writes the same year, “It is surrounded by thick city walls strengthened by towers, however these are partly in ruins like most of the town itself of which barely one third is inhabited”<sup>3</sup>.

Two centuries later, the renowned Swiss explorer and Orientalist, John Ludwig Burckhardt (1784–1817), would also travel to Egypt. Having first studied Arabic in England at Cambridge University, in 1809 Burckhardt began his extensive travels which would take him to Lebanon, Syria, then in 1812 he discovered the forgotten city of Petra, then to Arabia, Nubia and finally Egypt. During his travels he quickly became fluent in Arabic, disguising himself as a Muslim and calling himself Sheikh Ibrahim Ibn Abdallah. Enduring many hardships on his voyages, in a letter dated 16 April 1816 Burckhardt writes, “The outbreak of plague which occurred during my brief stay in Alexandria has now reached Cairo, and all the Europeans have already locked themselves up in their houses. As I cannot bear to be shut in and do not wish to remain in the vicinity of this disease, I have decided to stay with the desert Bedouin until the epidemic is over. I shall leave for Sinai tomorrow.”<sup>4</sup> Returning to Cairo later that year, he remained there in poor health until his death in December 1817. Burckhardt was buried in a Muslim cemetery outside the city gates of Bab el Nasr<sup>5</sup>, his tomb bearing the inscription “Ibrahim El-Mahdi, son of Abdallah, Burckhardt, native of Lausanne”<sup>6</sup>. During his travels Burckhardt would

send his journals, notes and copious letters back to England and he bequeathed his vast collection of over 800 volumes of Oriental manuscripts to the library of the University of Cambridge<sup>7</sup>.

However Burckhardt was by no means the only Swiss national of that period to be fascinated by Egypt. In 1842, the Swiss painter and engraver Karl Girardet (1813–1871), who was court painter to King Louis-Philippe of France, spent five months in Egypt at the king's expense, visiting Alexandria, Cairo, and reaching as far south as Minieh<sup>8</sup>. During his travels he executed several Orientalist paintings as well as numerous sketches. Some of these were to be the inspiration for the works he was later commissioned to paint for the Palace of Versailles, such as the famous *Bataille d'Héliopolis* (1843). His sketches of Alexandria in 1842, include *L'Hôpital des Grecs* and *La Porte de Rosette*. He also exhibited at the annual Paris Salon scenes from Alexandria such as *Les laboureurs égyptiens près du lac Maréotis* (1847) and *L'Ancien couvent des Franciscains à Alexandrie* (1850).

It is in the Swiss linguist and explorer, Werner Munzinger (1832–1875) however, that we find the European fascination for the Orient combined with an active role in the politics of the day. Inspired in his youth by tales of the East and travelers' narratives, Munzinger went to Paris to study Oriental languages<sup>9</sup>. He left for Egypt in 1852 and over the next few years followed a variety of pursuits in the region including trade, exploration and journalism. In time, his knowledge of the people and the region were to be highly esteemed by the Europeans: in 1864 he was appointed Vice-Consul of France in Massawa, and then made British Consul in Aden the following year. Soon Munzinger was also to play a prominent administrative role in Egyptian affairs. In 1872 he was made pasha, appointed Egyptian Governor General of Eastern Sudan, and he commanded the Egyptian troops during the invasion of northern Abyssinia in 1875.

As the nineteenth century progressed, other Swiss intellectuals added their names to the growing number of Orientalist scholars who came to Egypt. The Egyptologists, Edouard-Henry Naville (1844–1926) from Geneva, and Gustave Jéquier (1868–1946) from Neuchâtel, both undertook important archeological excavations over many years. The Swiss Hellenic scholar, Jules Nicole (1842–1921), an avid collector of Greek Egyptian papyri, traveled to Egypt several times adding to his important papyrus collection which he bequeathed to the library of the University of Geneva. And whereas the Swiss Egyptologist and Orientalist Jean-Jacques Hess (1866–1949) is renowned for his study of Bedouins, the Genevan Max van Berchem (1863–1921), who collected numerous Arabic inscriptions from all over the Islamic world, is today considered the founding scholar of Arabic epigraphy<sup>10</sup>. From 1887–1890, Berchem explored Cairo’s old quarters in search of inscriptions and taking numerous photographs.

In time, however, the individual scholars and explorers from Switzerland gave way to fellow compatriots who came to Egypt for very different reasons. As Mohamed Ali’s extensive program of modernization and industrialization progressed, the number of Swiss arrivals gradually increased, drawn by new opportunities for trade and commerce. Swiss companies often preferred to recruit their employees from the homeland, and as these brought their families with them, veritable Swiss communities began to form in both Cairo and Alexandria.

## THE SWISS COMMUNITY IN ALEXANDRIA

One important aspect of Mohamed Ali’s vast program of modernization was the development of Alexandria. Seeing the city’s potential strategic importance, he improved the commercial port and built an arsenal. In 1817 he began the digging of the new



Mahmoudieh Canal to the south of the city, thus ensuring its water supply and replacing the old canal which had fallen into decay. Later in 1856, under British influence, the Cairo-Alexandria railway was built, further improving communication. A construction boom began which would change the city's appearance and attract growing numbers of foreigners from Europe and the Mediterranean. In fact, the rapid development of this Mediterranean city now meant that, in complete contrast to the description by the early Swiss traveler, Hans Jacob Ammann, cited above, foreigners were now flocking to Alexandria at a greater rate than to Cairo. The privileges they enjoyed facilitated trade, generating more wealth, and in time, the different foreign communities began to organize themselves, founding their own clubs and institutions.

One such was the Swiss community of Alexandria. In 1856, a dozen or so Swiss veterans of the Crimean War, jocularly referred to as "*les criminels*", would regularly meet in a café of the rue de l'Église Copte in Alexandria. Two years later, on 26 December 1858, a group of thirty-two Swiss nationals met at the Palais Abro on the place des Consuls and founded the Cercle Suisse d'Alexandrie<sup>11</sup> which they named Helvetia. Amongst those thirty-two founding members, are listed the names of P. Reinhart and J. and P. Planta, who were to play a prominent role not only in Alexandria's Swiss community but also in the cotton trade. It is interesting to note here, that the Swiss community of Cairo, however, did not found its own society until 1866.

In 1891, the year of the six-hundredth anniversary of the birth of the Swiss Confederation, it was the Swiss community of Alexandria which organized the massive celebrations, inviting its sister community up from Cairo. After months of preparations by no less than seven different committees, the celebrations took place on Switzerland's National Day, 1 August, in Nouzha Gardens, Alexandria. In addition to the Swiss Communities of Alexandria and Cairo, the over 1,200 guests included the vice-president of the Alexandria Municipality, foreign consuls, members of the foreign nobility and



1891

Célébration du 6<sup>ème</sup> Centenaire  
de la fondation.

DE LA CONFÉDÉRATION HELVÉTIQUE

fête champêtre le Samedi 1<sup>er</sup> Août 1891  
au Jardin Neoussa à 4 h<sup>es</sup> après-midi

Carte d'Entrée.

Monsieur Louis Dufour

M et famille

N<sup>o</sup> 304

Pour le Comité

Le Président *J. Wetstein*

Le Secrétaire *M. Brey*

Cette carte est rigoureusement personnelle.

An invitation to the celebrations on the occasion of the 600th Anniversary of the foundation of the Swiss Confederation, held in Nouzha Gardens, Alexandria in 1891

officers from the khedivial household. The entertainment, which lasted all day, comprised shooting contests, gymnastic displays, children's and adults' games, dancing for both children and adults, the distribution of prizes, *tableaux vivants*, music played by the band of the royal yacht *Mahroussa* by permission of the khedive himself, fireworks and, last but not least, a vast banquet.

The Cercle Suisse d'Alexandrie remained active throughout the year, providing a variety of entertainment for its members. One especially popular occasion was the annual *bal masqué*, which included prizes awarded for the best costumes. As the numbers grew, events were also held for the children of the community. Other events included picnics in Nouzha Gardens, Mandara Farms, Mariout or elsewhere. Excursions were also organized, sometimes further afield: in 1908 for example, a cruise was organized on board a *dahabieh* up the Nile as far as Zagazig. This *dahabieh* not only flew the Swiss flag at its helm, but also that of each of the twenty-two Swiss cantons, and the participants were invited to a reception by the then governor of Sharkieh province, Hassan Hassib Pasha.

In the early days, one of the main problems of the Cercle Suisse was to find permanent premises. In 1865, it acquired the premises of the *Société Cosmopolite*, the *wekala*<sup>12</sup> El Hami Pasha located next to the Couvent des Soeurs de Charité, for the sum of three hundred gold napoleons<sup>13</sup>. They furnished a billiards room, and various activities were organized such as singing, music, card tables, shooting competitions and excursions. The *wekala* El Hami Pasha premises did not last however, and the society rented a number of premises over the years, until at long last it found a suitable plot of land known as the *terrain Goussio* located on the rue Ambroise Ralli, today Port Said Street, in Chatby-les-Bains district. Finally, on 18 March 1916, the Swiss Society purchased this plot measuring over 2,200 meters square, for the sum of 2003 Egyptian pounds<sup>14</sup>. Records state<sup>15</sup> that all those involved in the project were Swiss from the architect, G. Jauslin, and the contractor, Lepori, down to the suppliers of the various building materials and that

A picnic in  
Antoniadis  
Gardens in  
1904



A *bal masqué* for  
the children of the  
Swiss Community of  
Alexandria in the early  
1900s







A cruise up the Nile to Zagazig in 1908 organized by the Swiss Company, Planta. The *dahabieh* is flying both the Swiss national flag and that of each of the Swiss cantons.

even the wood in the windows of the skittles room was from Swiss forests. The newly built Swiss Club, complete with library, a large reception hall, skittles and tennis courts was ready by July 1917. By 1919 the Cercle Suisse d'Alexandrie had 230 members of which 50 were children<sup>16</sup>.

In time however, and as the community grew in wealth and numbers, other Swiss institutions were founded in the city. One of these was the Club Nautique Suisse, or Swiss Boat Club of Alexandria. In 1911, a small group of Swiss people bought a boathouse in the port from the Club Italia and inaugurated the first Club Nautique Suisse there. Over the next twelve months, two canoes, five skiffs of various sizes, one larger boat and a cutter, the *Mutz*, were purchased<sup>17</sup>. Various events were organized including regattas, as well as swimming competitions and water polo. Then in 1914, as war broke out in Europe, many of the club's most active members were called up due to the general mobilization of the Swiss Army. In 1916, the military authorities closed all access to the port of Alexandria, except to individuals with a special permit which was difficult to obtain. As a result, the boats were transferred to a boathouse belonging to the factory of the Egyptian Salt and Soda Company in Moharrem Bey district. However, little use was made of them on the Mahmoudieh Canal. After the war, activity picked up somewhat, but it was not until 1934 that the Swiss community was finally able to purchase the old boathouse of the Club Nautique Hellénique, located near the walls of Ras El Tin Palace. After refurbishment, the new Club Nautique Suisse was inaugurated on 14 June 1936.

If the Swiss community's enthusiasm for water sports is perhaps unexpected from members of a landlocked nation, there was one national sport however which never ceased to be popular. From their early days in Egypt, the descendants of William Tell, in both Alexandria and Cairo, would hold shooting tournaments in various locations in the desert. It was not until relatively late however, in 1944, that the Section Suisse de Tir d'Alexandrie was finally inaugurated in Mamoura, to the east of Alexandria. This



From 1917 onwards, the Swiss Community of Alexandria held most of its activities at the club. This photograph is of the *grand bal masqué* of 1936.



A scene from a play by the German Swiss scholar Otto von Greyerz, performed by the Swiss community of Alexandria at their club in 1936. On the far right is the author's father, Dr. Erich Zimmerli.



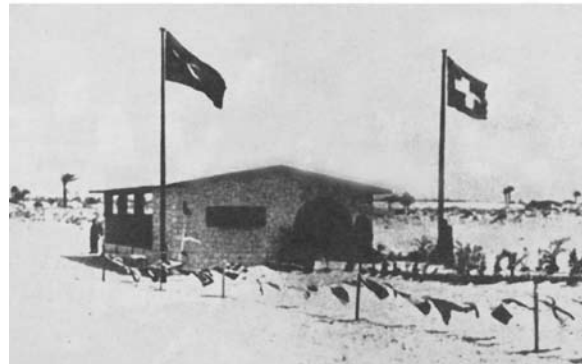
was largely due to the active participation and generosity of King Farouk himself. His Majesty conceded a plot of land in Mamoura for a ten-year period to the newly-founded Club de Tir. The *Journal Suisse d'Égypte et du Proche-Orient*<sup>18</sup> recounts how, early on 10 April 1944, King Farouk arrived in his field marshal's uniform, accompanied by the Governor of Alexandria, the Director of the Municipality, officers of the Royal Guard and numerous other dignitaries of high rank, in addition to members of the British Rifle Club of Alexandria. During the inauguration ceremony, the king was nominated *Grand Maître Tireur*, and it was he who opened the shooting contests, which continued for six hours. Amongst the numerous participants, there was even a number of Swiss ladies who "obtained very honorable final results"<sup>19</sup>. On that auspicious occasion, over one hundred prizes were awarded, including gold and silver Swiss watches.



The Swiss Boat Club  
on the occasion of its  
25<sup>th</sup> anniversary and  
the inauguration of its  
new boathouse near  
Ras El Tin in June  
1936



King Farouk on the occasion of his inauguration of the new Swiss Shooting Range in Mamoura in 1944 (Originally published in the *Journal Suisse d'Égypte et du Proche-Orient*)



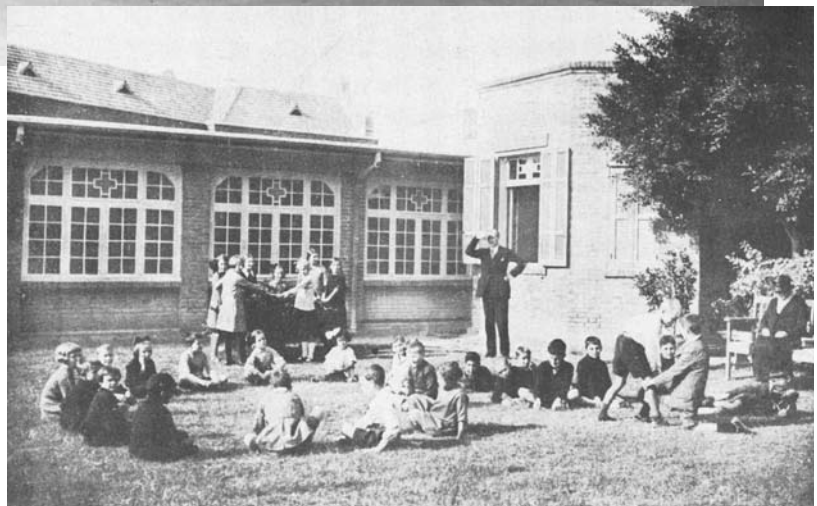
The Swiss Shooting Range in Mamoura to the east of Alexandria

## EDUCATION

With the increasing number of Swiss families in Alexandria, the need was soon felt for a school which would cater for the specific needs of their children. A key Swiss figure here was Auguste Jacot who arrived from Switzerland in 1872 to teach at the German school in Alexandria<sup>20</sup>. Shortly after his arrival, however, when this German school closed down due to lack of funds, Jacot started a project of his own to replace it by a Swiss school. Although successful, this school also met with difficulties, the most notable being during the 1882 Orabi uprising when the building was completely destroyed. Then, the following year a cholera epidemic meant that large numbers of the Swiss community left Egypt, along with many other foreigners. This school did reopen, however, and continued until 1912. Finally in 1920, Mrs. Alfred Reinhart, whose husband was at that time the president of the Société Suisse d'Alexandrie, donated a plot of land she owned adjacent to the Swiss Club in Chatby<sup>21</sup>. Two other eminent members of the Swiss community, Mr. Christian-Lorenz Allemann and his son, Fritz Allemann, undertook at their own expense, to build the school which would include an apartment for the teacher. During negotiations with the Swiss Society, it was decided to add a meeting-room especially for the ladies of the Swiss community, and that the garden would be accessible to all Swiss families, regardless of whether they had children in the school or not. And so it was that on 12 November 1921, the new purpose-built École Suisse d'Alexandrie opened with 31 pupils all of Swiss nationality. It is significant to note here also, that the Swiss School in Cairo was not founded until later, in 1929.



The École Suisse d'Alexandrie, shortly after its inauguration in 1921



View of the courtyard of the École Suisse d'Alexandrie

## THE SWISS GUARD

The presence of Swiss nationals in the police or armed forces in Egypt goes back to the early days. A number of Swiss soldiers took part in Bonaparte's expedition of 1798. One of these, a young officer by the name of Louis Thurmann, whose memoirs were published posthumously, wrote detailed accounts of Bonaparte's arrival in Alexandria and the Battle of Aboukir in which he took part.

It was towards the end of the nineteenth century, however, that the turn of events brought larger numbers of Swiss guards to Alexandria. In the wake of the destruction and fire during the Orabi revolt of 1882 in Alexandria when the British bombarded the city, the Egyptian government decided to recruit a number of Austrians, Italians and Swiss to create a special police corps, the European Guard. This corps' barracks were set up in Ras El Tin<sup>22</sup>. Then in 1884, as these became overcrowded, the Swiss guards were transferred to separate barracks in Moharrem Bey district. By the end of that year, the European Guard had one thousand men, the Swiss alone numbering four hundred. With swelling numbers, the Swiss became a separate contingent referred to as the Swiss Guard. However, in time it was decided to reduce their numbers, and as apparently the Egyptian government at that time did not always hold its side of the bargain, many guards who had not been paid sought the first opportunity to return home. Of those who remained, some were eventually employed in the state police or the army, whilst others took part in the fighting in the Sudan. One, a certain Major Quartier from Neuchâtel, even became the Head of Secret Police in Cairo<sup>23</sup>.

Decades later during the Second World War, the Swiss, along with other groups of foreign nationals in Alexandria, were once again organized into defense units, this time in the face of the Italian and German air raids. Records show that in 1942, the Swiss air wardens of Alexandria numbered fifty-seven men, organized into five units in



The Swiss air wardens of Alexandria in 1942. Their task was to protect the city against air raids, along with the air wardens of other nationalities.

different parts of the city. In March of that year, all the air wardens took part in a parade in Alexandria Stadium in front of the city's military governor and were congratulated on their turnout.

## DIPLOMATIC TIES

The presence of significant numbers of a foreign community normally gave rise to diplomatic representation. At that time, consular protection in Egypt was generally assured by the system of Capitulations, a form of bilateral treaty undertaken between countries of the Ottoman Empire such as Egypt, and individual European powers. These Capitulations also conceded various political and commercial privileges to Europeans. Then in 1876, the Mixed Tribunals were established, which functioned as international courts of justice, providing that no foreign citizen or Egyptian-born foreign national be subject to the jurisdiction of Egyptian courts. As nationalist feeling in Egypt increased however, resistance to the system of Capitulations grew and it was finally abolished in Egypt in May 1937, by a convention signed by the capitulatory powers in the Swiss town of Montreux.

During the period of Capitulations however, the situation of the Swiss in Egypt was somewhat different from that of most other European communities present. As early as 1864, the Cercle Suisse d'Alexandrie envisaged the establishment of a Swiss consulate in Alexandria, but it was many years before this project was realized. Gaston Zananiri explains, "Since Switzerland did not have a diplomatic mission in Turkey, it could not establish consulates in the Ottoman Empire"<sup>24</sup>. Likewise, the Swiss could not normally benefit from representation at the Mixed Tribunals. However two prominent Swiss judges



were to play a significant role in these tribunals. The first of these, Raoul Houriet, spent many years in Egypt from 1910–1937. He became President of the Mixed Tribunal in Cairo, and in later years was transferred to the Court of Appeal in Alexandria. Likewise, his compatriot, Francis Peter, became Vice-President of the Mixed Tribunals in 1921, then also president, until the abolition of the Capitulations in 1937, when he became advisor to the Mixed Court of Appeal in Alexandria<sup>25</sup>.

In view of the lack of official diplomatic representation and protection, however, the Swiss community in Alexandria maintained especially close ties with the French community and its consul. In a letter dated 13 July 1880 addressed to the members of the Cercle Suisse, the society's secretary informed them that they were invited to the French Consulate to celebrate France's National Day. He points out, "the Swiss, as French protected citizens, are invited to the 14 July celebrations [...] It is desirable that the Swiss community show its sympathy for the French Republic on its National Day. This is an opportunity to show its recognition of the protection it receives under the French flag, and which it has always received in the Orient"<sup>26</sup>. In time, the Swiss would also receive protection from German and American consulates. When German protection ceased during the First World War however, Italy and Great Britain took over the role, in addition to the continued French protection.

Finally, it was in 1935 that a Swiss Consulate was established in an apartment on rue Sultan Hussein in Alexandria, shortly before the abolition of the system of Capitulations in Egypt in 1937. Years later, when Mr. and Mrs. Alfred Reinhart left Egypt, along with so many of their compatriots and other foreigners, during the period of nationalizations after the revolution, they donated their villa and garden in Saba Pasha district to the remaining Swiss community of Alexandria to serve as consulate, which it has remained to this day.



The first Swiss Consulate of Alexandria shortly after it was inaugurated on 1 August 1935 in rue Sultan Hussein.



Mr. and Mrs. Alfred Reinhart with their granddaughter in the garden of their villa in Saba Pasha district, which they later donated to the Swiss community of Alexandria to serve as consulate. Both were highly prominent members of this community: Mr. Reinhart was its president for a number of years, whereas his wife was co-founder of the École Suisse d'Alexandrie for which she donated the land.

## THE SWISS CONTRIBUTION TO TRADE, INDUSTRY AND OTHER PROFESSIONS

Although the social life of the foreign communities of cosmopolitan Alexandria, including the Swiss, revolved to a large degree around their clubs, schools, associations and other institutions, something must be said about what brought so many of them to the city in the first place: the new trade opportunities which developed under Mohamed Ali's reign and which continued to flourish until the revolution of 1952. As already noted, Swiss individuals and companies played a prominent role in the cotton trade from the very early days. Gaston Zananiri observes that "in Alexandria, the first Swiss companies for cotton export settled as early as 1853"<sup>27</sup>. This period saw the arrival of the Planta, Reinhart, Kupper and Bless families. Several of these had already been in the cotton trade and production for some time. The Reinhart Company, for example, founded by the Reinhart family in 1788 in Winterthur, Switzerland, began importing and exporting cotton yarn, as well as cloth, at a time when the mechanization of the textile industry was still developing in Switzerland<sup>28</sup>. By 1848, it was importing both Egyptian and American cotton. Reinhart & Cie was founded in Alexandria in 1907, but was later nationalized in 1963. Similarly, J. Planta & Cie, founded in 1853, was established in Alexandria in 1897. In addition to companies, there were individuals who played a significant role. In the early 1900s, Linus Gasche also arrived from Switzerland to play a crucial role in the Filature Nationale d'Égypte, the cotton-spinning mills founded in Alexandria by a group of German entrepreneurs, notably Lindemann. When the Germans were obliged to leave during the First World War, Gasche took over the running of the company.



A Swiss spinning mill of Egyptian cotton, 1929

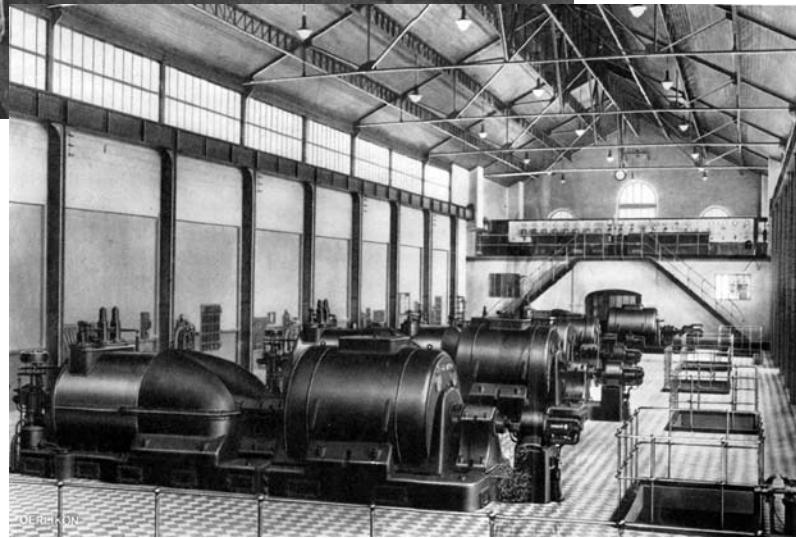
The economic importance of cotton in the relationship between the two countries at that time, can also be ascertained from the figures. In 1928, for example, the total imports from Egypt to Switzerland were estimated at 60.4 million francs, out of which cotton was valued at 57 million francs. According to figures quoted by the Egyptian Ministry of Finance in 1928, Switzerland was the seventh importer of Egyptian products, directly after the major powers: Great Britain, France, the United States, Italy, Germany and Russia<sup>29</sup>. Swiss exports to Egypt over the same period included a wide range of articles, notably foodstuffs such as chocolate, condensed milk and cheese, textiles, articles from the metallurgical and mechanical industries such as watches, jewelry, electrical appliances, hydraulic and combustion engines and pumps; chemical products including medicine and dyes<sup>30</sup>. Economic ties between the two countries were also cemented at the highest level. During his official visit to Switzerland in 1929, King Fouad I accompanied by President Haab of Switzerland, visited a number of factories. These included the Sulzer factory which exported Diesel engines and pumps to Egypt, and Oerlikon which produced generators and turbines including engines destined for Suez, steam turbines for factories in Cairo, and which had supplied the turbo-generators for Alexandria's central power station.

The Swiss in Egypt were also active in other fields than trade and industry. One of these was hotel management. In 1949, a Swiss journalist who visited Egypt wrote, "Wherever one goes, one meets compatriots. They are held in high esteem and hold very important positions in commerce and industry. [...] There is hardly a hotel where one cannot find a Swiss member of staff. The Shepherds Hotel in Cairo, the Mena House at the foot of the pyramids, the Metropolitan in the center of Cairo, the Winter Palace in Luxor and the Cataract Hotel in Aswan, are all under Swiss management"<sup>31</sup>. In Alexandria, the Beau Rivage Hotel was owned and run by a Swiss, L. Bolens. Indeed, it was often at the Beau Rivage that the Cercle Suisse would hold its important receptions, at least until its own club house was built.



King Fouad and President Haab in Berne on the occasion of the king's official visit to Switzerland in 1929

The generators of the central power plant of Alexandria, which were manufactured by the Swiss company Oerlikon visited by King Fouad in 1929



A number of Swiss people were also to play a significant role in health and welfare in Egypt. As Gaston Zananiri observes, “The Swiss were especially active in social welfare. In addition to the numerous societies founded or managed by them, it is largely due to them that we owe the founding of the Croissant-Rouge de la Jeunesse in Alexandria during the war, the first institution of its kind in Egypt...”<sup>32</sup> Likewise, it was a Swiss doctor, J. Schiess, who was the founder and director of the Government Hospital of Alexandria, in addition to being the Vice-President of the Alexandrian Municipality. (It was the same Dr. Schiess who was unexpectedly discovered buried in the grounds of the Arts Faculty during renovations in the 1990s and was then reburied in the Latin cemetery in Chatby). The Anglo-Swiss Hospital in Alexandria, which later became the Narimane Hospital, had both British and Swiss doctors, but treated patients of all nationalities. Like a number of other institutions and enterprises in Alexandria, the Anglo-Swiss Hospital had been founded by Germans: it was originally a Deaconess Hospital, but when the Germans were obliged to leave the city during the First World War, it was taken over by the British and the Swiss.

The list continues, but already the companies and individuals cited here who were part of the vibrant Swiss community of Alexandria, contributing to both the social life and to trade and prosperity, show how this relatively small foreign community played an important role which has left its mark in several ways. The author of the memoirs published here, Esther Zimmerli, herself grew up in the final decades of the heyday of this community until, like so many others, she left on the eve of the revolution of 1952. Her father, Dr. Erich Zimmerli, like other Swiss nationals mentioned above, was asked to come to Egypt on account of his particular skills and expertise. A pioneer in pulmonary medicine at that time, he played a vital role, firstly in the early 1930s running the King Fouad Sanatorium in Cairo along the Swiss model, then in Alexandria in both the Anglo-Swiss Hospital and his private practice. Esther Zimmerli paints a picture of what it was



like to be a child during that era, in a family and a community which, whilst strongly maintaining its own culture and customs, also happily adapted to the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the city and its various communities.

Today the Swiss Association of Alexandria numbers little more than thirty members. Very few remain from the period prior to the 1952 revolution, when the nationalizations followed by the sequestrations of the 1960s, obliged many foreign nationals including the Swiss, to leave the country. In the early 1990s, the Swiss Association of Alexandria, unable to find the funds needed to repair the Swiss Club and School in Chatby, were obliged to put them up for sale. Bought by local property developers, they were pulled down to be replaced by apartment blocks. The association continues to celebrate the Swiss National Day each year in the grounds of the consulate, with friends of all nationalities, many of its present members being in fact married to Egyptians.

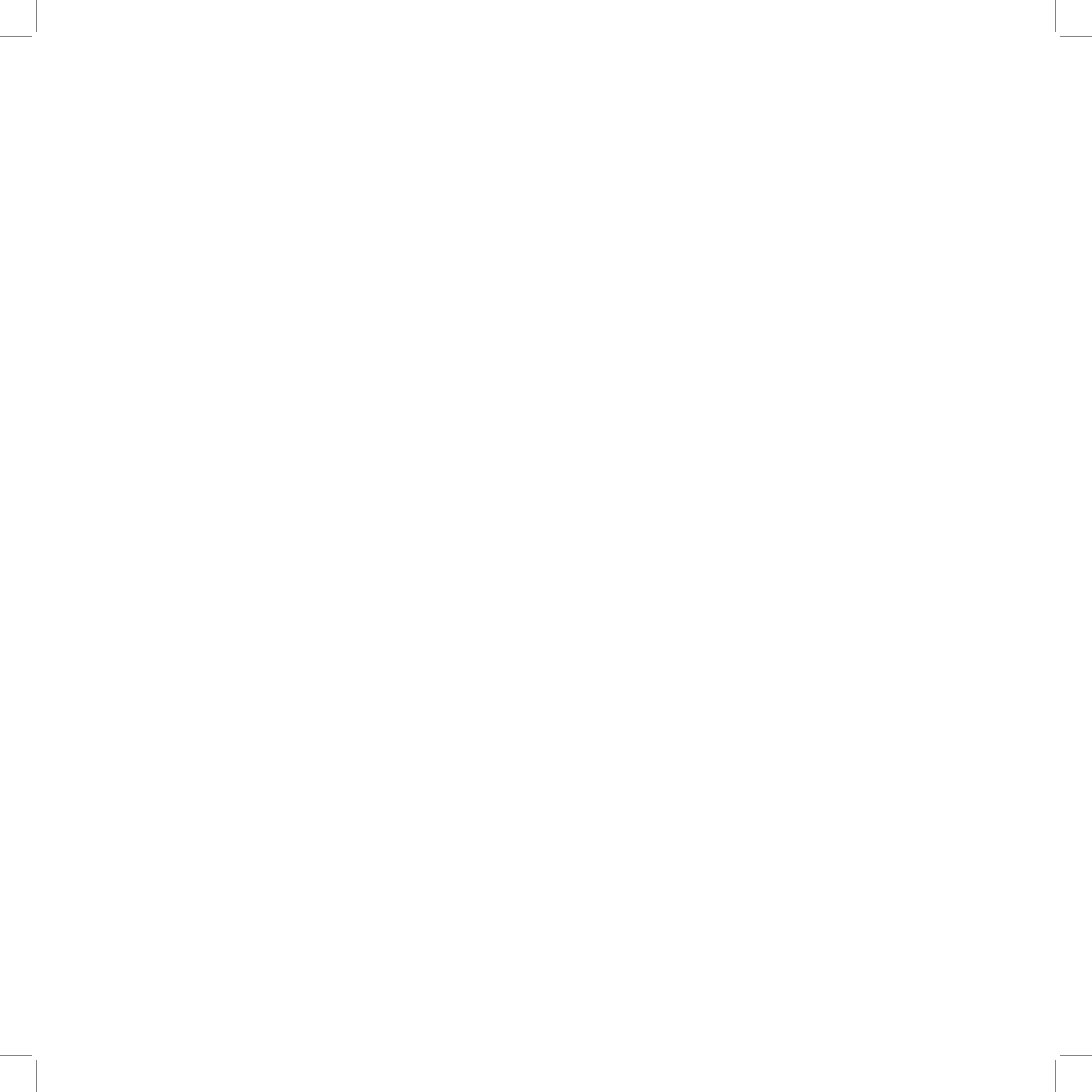
Carole Escoffey

July 2008

## NOTES

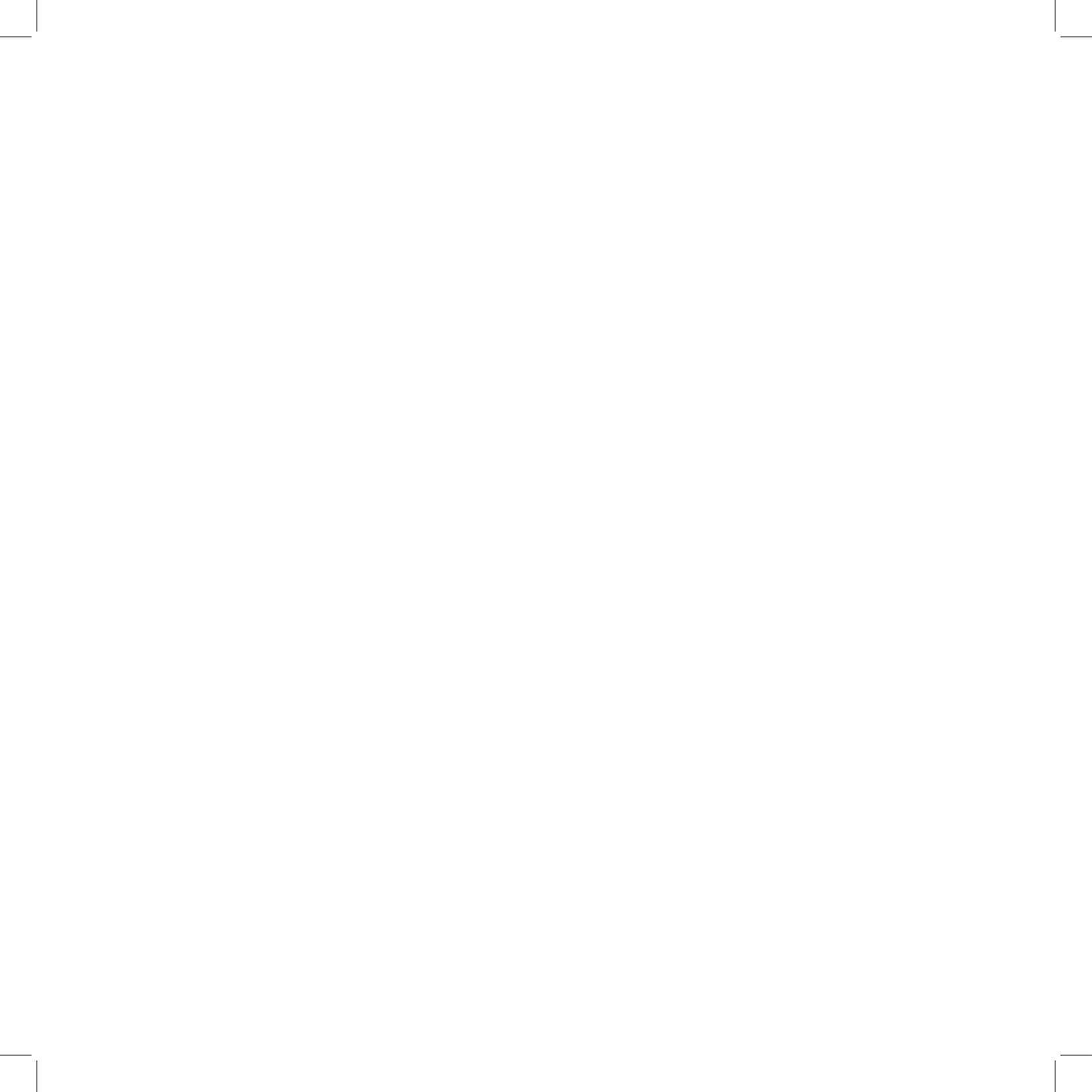
1. Étienne Combe, “*John Ninet*”. In the *Bulletin Hebdomadaire de la Colonie Suisse d’Alexandrie, Egypte*. Alexandria: 19 May 1926.
2. Étienne Combe, «*Les Suisses en Egypte*». In the *Bulletin Hebdomadaire de la Colonie Suisse d’Alexandrie, Egypte*. Alexandria: 9 December 1925.
3. Cited in Étienne Combe, “*Hans Jacob Ammann (1586–1658)*”. In the *Bulletin Hebdomadaire de la Colonie Suisse d’Alexandrie, Egypte*. Alexandria: 17 and 24 March 1926.
4. *Ibid.* 3 February 1926.
5. Étienne Combe, “*Jean-Louis Burckhardt*”. In the *Bulletin Hebdomadaire de la Colonie Suisse d’Alexandrie, Egypte*. Alexandria: 27 January 1926.
6. *Ibid.* 27 January 1926.
7. His works published by the African Association after his death include: *Travels in Nubia* (1819), *Travels in Syria and the Holy Land* (1922), *Travels in Arabia* (1829), *Arabic Proverbs, or the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (1830), and *Notes on the Bedouins and Wahabys* (1831).
8. Étienne Combe, «*Un Peintre Orientaliste Neuchâtelois : Karl Girardet, 1842*». In the *Bulletin Hebdomadaire de la Colonie Suisse d’Alexandrie, Egypte*. Alexandria 30 December 1925.
9. Étienne Combe, “*Werner Munzinger (1832–1875)*”. In the *Bulletin Hebdomadaire de la Colonie Suisse d’Alexandrie, Egypte*. Alexandria: 17 February 1926.
10. “Max van Berchem”. Fondation Max van Berchem. 22 June 2006.<<http://www.maxvanberchem.org/en/max.cfm>>.
11. Gaston Zanariri, “*Suisse-Égypte*”. In *La Visite des Journalistes suisses en Égypte*. Published by the *Journal Suisse d’Égypte et du Proche-Orient*. Alexandria: February-March 1949, p.64.
12. A *wekala* is a building which is used for commercial purposes on the ground floor, but for accommodation on the top floors; by extension the term is also sometimes used for a market with warehouses.
13. Henri Lamon, *La Société Suisse d’Alexandrie et ses émanations*. Alexandria: 1919, p.21.
14. *Ibid.* p.101.
15. *Ibid.* p.111.
16. *Ibid.* p.100.
17. *Ibid.* p.135.
18. Issue dated 19 April 1944, p.3.
19. *Ibid.*

20. J.R. Fiechter, *Bulletin Suisse d'Égypte consacré aux Écoles Suisses d'Égypte à l'occasion du Xème anniversaire de l'École Primaire Suisse d'Alexandrie*. Alexandria: 1931, pp.7–8.
21. *Ibid.* p.14.
22. Étienne Combe, “*La Garde Suisse d'Alexandrie en 1882*”. In the *Bulletin Hebdomadaire de la Colonie Suisse d'Alexandrie, Egypte*. Alexandria: 16 December 1925.
23. Henri Lamon, *La Société Suisse d'Alexandrie et ses émanations*. Alexandria: 1919, p.120, note 1.
24. Gaston Zananiri, *Art. Cit.*
25. *Les Tribunaux Mixtes et la Suisse*. In *Numéro Spécial du 1<sup>er</sup> Aout 1949 du Journal Suisse d'Égypte et du Proche-Orient*. Alexandria: 1949, pp.79–81.
26. Letter by Th. Christoffel, the Secretary of the Société Suisse d'Alexandrie, dated 13 July 1880. Published in Henri Lamon, *La Société Suisse d'Alexandrie et ses émanations*. Alexandria: 1919, p.43.
27. Gaston Zananiri, *Art. Cit.*
28. “Reinhart : A Brief Extract of the Company's History”. 8 July 2006.< <http://www.reinhart.com/>>.
29. Albert Masnata, “*Les relations commerciales entre l'Égypte et la Suisse*”. In *La Suisse : édité à l'occasion du Voyage de sa Majesté le roi d'Égypte Fouad 1<sup>er</sup>*. Geneva: published by the Swiss Community of Egypt, 1929, p.53.
30. *Ibid.* p.54.
31. Dr. Franz Aschinger, «*En Égypte: la colonie suisse*». In *La Visite des Journalistes suisses en Égypte*. Alexandria: published by the *Journal Suisse d'Égypte et du Proche-Orient*, 1949, p.99.
32. Gaston Zananiri, *Art. Cit.*



FROM CAMP CAESAR  
TO  
CLEOPATRA'S POOL

Esther Zimmerli Hardman



## MY PARENTS

It is said that one only begins to live, to really live, at sixty. Let each decide for himself. Be that as it may, at the great age of sixty-four, I feel that I can take stock of my life and see it to have been a very active one, in spite of a number of drawbacks and unpleasant experiences which have punctuated my existence across the four corners of the globe.

The person I have most to thank for my relatively restless existence is my beloved father, Erich Zimmerli, who was born in the summer of 1895, in the family home in Basel. His childhood memories would continually take him back to that beautiful house, with its vast garden on the banks of the River Rhine. Sadly, it was engulfed by the chemical factories of Hoffman-La Roche in the late 1950s. I still possess a yellowed photograph of my father as a child playing croquet with his beloved sister Alice. An even older one, shows him wearing a linen apron on which his aunt had delicately embroidered the rather touching words “Be a good boy at play”. Even when he had reached school age, he continued to spend his holidays in that family house which must have made a pleasant change from the strict atmosphere of his father’s house in Lucerne. He completed his secondary education at the grammar school of Lucerne. It was during that time that, in contrast to his dislike of mathematics, he developed an enthusiasm for modern languages among which he learned both English and Italian which were to serve him in good stead later on, as well as the languages of the classics, Greek and Latin. After passing the high school certificate, the *baccalauréat*, he started medicine in the autumn of 1915 at the University of Basel. However, he was obliged to interrupt his studies to complete four hundred days of military service with the mountain troops in the Gotthard region and in the canton of Tessin. During his medical studies he completed his internship of one semester at St. Mary’s Hospital in London, from which he received his doctor’s

HOTEL „AL HAYAT“ HELOUAN — PATRONISED BY ROYALTY



An artist's impression of the former Al Hayat Hotel in Helwan, which became the King Fouad Sanatorium, with my father's annotations indicating the two wings and the flat where he lived



certificate. My father stayed in student lodgings not far from the British Museum, where he would spend most Sundays happily looking at its countless riches. At that time already, he had developed a fascination for the treasures of ancient Egypt, without imagining that a few years later he would have the opportunity to admire them in their country of origin. During his relatively brief stay in London, he made the acquaintance of Sir Henry Lunn who offered him the post of doctor in charge at the English sanatorium in Montana. In accepting the post, my father understood that he was determining once and for all his field of specialization. So that was how he came to be family physician for four years at that purely English institution in Switzerland, and how he came to appreciate the English way of life. Then, feeling the need for new experience, he took up the post of physician at the sanatorium of Arosa. It was there that he met Dr. Burnand de Leysin, who, to my father's great joy, offered him the opportunity to be his successor as director of the Fouad Sanatorium in Helwan next to Cairo.

And so it was that in December 1929 my father came to Egypt. The sea crossing from Genoa to Port Said took four days. Overnight, he found himself an Egyptian government employee during the reign of King Fouad I. His Majesty would grant him an audience once a year to be kept informed of the sanatorium's good progress. Dr. Burnand had been the first Swiss citizen appointed at the Helwan sanatorium and his initial task had been to convert an old luxury hotel with five hundred beds into a sanatorium based on the Swiss model. My father then began what were to be the three most interesting years of his life, with eight assistants and one hundred and fifty patients. It was by no means an easy task, but in time he established a pleasant and productive level of cooperation with everyone. The number of patients gradually grew from one hundred and fifty to four hundred and fifty. The income from the wealthy patients was sufficient to cover nearly all the expenses of the poor ones.



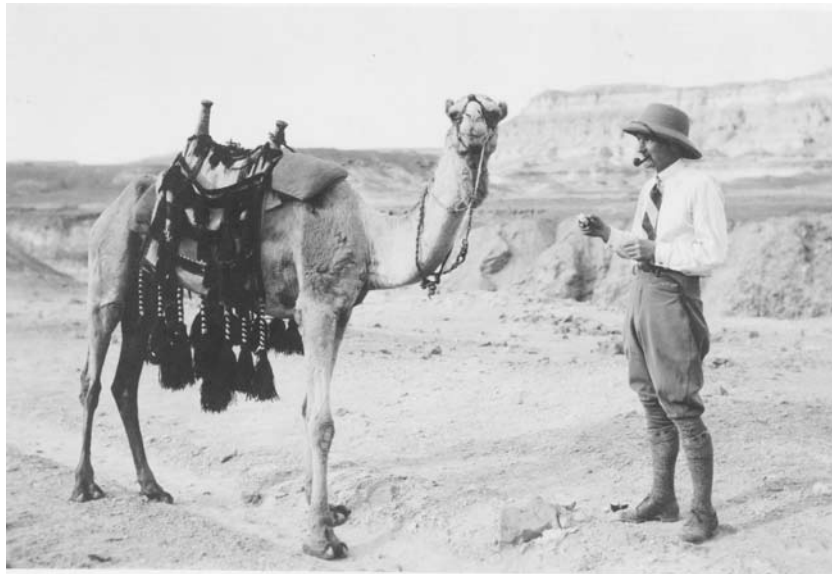
My father sitting at his desk in the sanatorium, with a portrait of King Fouad I behind him

During his term in Helwan, my father was privileged to be designated as the Egyptian government's official delegate at a conference on tuberculosis in Oslo. Coming directly from a country like Switzerland, where the way of life was essentially marked by clarity and precision, my father had to adapt considerably in the Land of the Pharaohs! In one of his letters home to his family, he describes how difficult it was for his Egyptian colleagues to follow a fixed work schedule. Moreover, the concept of hospital hygiene seemed to have been generally quite unheard of. The so-called cleaning of the streets and narrow alleyways surrounding the hospital was left solely to the cats, dogs and other scavengers. The luxury hotel's conversion into a sanatorium had not yet been completed when my father arrived on the scene. Sometimes very sick patients made the long and difficult journey without prior warning, with the result that the sanatorium was obliged to send them back on the next train because there were no beds available.

My father would spend most of his free time studying Arabic. The Arabic which one first learns is classical Arabic, the written language. However, the spoken language is more or less a dialect, what we used to call amongst ourselves "kitchen Arabic". My father was determined from the start to learn "real" Arabic. With the help of a private tutor and a great deal of perseverance, he managed in a relatively short time, to learn the basics of this language which is so difficult for a Westerner. In addition to his grammar book, his course of daily reading comprised an Arabic version of the Coptic Bible. He could thus compare it sentence by sentence with the German or the English Bible. With what was left of his little free time, he would explore the immediate desert surroundings of the sanatorium on the back of a camel. It was at that time that he adopted as a pet a cute little monkey which he named Jacky. But the mischievous creature got up to so many pranks, sometimes with unforeseen consequences, that my father was forced to part with it.

Soon after my father took up his new post, the great Depression of the 1930s began. For economic reasons the Egyptian government decided to place the sanatorium

My father during one of his camel trips in the desert near Helwan



May 1930. The visit of the Minister of Awqaf, H.E. Bassim Bey, to the Fouad Sanatorium. My father, wearing a tarboush, is the sixth from the left.



under the responsibility of a different ministry. One consequence of this was that my father no longer had his direct superior at the old ministry, who was a personal friend and had helped him solve many problems. My father's contract had just expired, and he was aware of the risk he was running of becoming embroiled in Oriental intrigue in the new ministry. Feeling unable to face this situation, when the new minister summoned him to renew his contract, my father handed in his resignation instead. His assistants also left the sanatorium at that time in order to work in Cairo. Not wishing to encroach on their territory, he decided to set up his own practice in Alexandria. This must have been a hard decision to take, since it entailed renouncing a well-paid job just as he was about to get married. During his previous summer vacation in Switzerland, he had met the woman who was one day to become my mother. My father was already thirty-six years old, and with only two weeks left before his return to complete his final months at the sanatorium. My parents had, therefore, only met two or three times, with just a few exchanges of letters before their marriage.

My mother, who was thirteen years younger than my father, was born in a small village near Basel. My maternal grandmother and her six brothers and sisters belonged to an old and highly respectable family from Basel. There my mother spent many a happy and witty Sunday afternoon. After a happy childhood she went to stay for two years in Paris to improve her French and study the culture. From there, she crossed the English Channel in order to follow a language course at Nottingham University for one year, whilst staying with an officer's family. Just like my father, she had a pronounced taste for foreign languages. It was after her return to Switzerland, when visiting friends of her parents, that she met her future husband. Their first meeting must have been decisive, for they quickly decided to get married and announced their engagement just before my father's return to Egypt. And so it was that a few months later, on a cold January day



My mother shortly after her arrival in Egypt

in 1933 that my mother set out for Venice accompanied by her father. After anxious goodbyes, she boarded the ship that was to take her across the Mediterranean.

A few days later, she arrived in Alexandria. My father was overjoyed to catch sight of his young fiancée again. As for her, she could not at first make out her future husband from the midst of the bustling and colorful crowd. After over seven hours' journey by car up the Nile Delta — the famous Granary of Egypt — my future parents arrived in Cairo. There, a few days after their arrival, their union was blessed in the tiny French Protestant Church. They spent their honeymoon in the Mena House at the foot of the pyramids of Giza. That reputed hotel was built on the occasion of the inauguration of the Suez Canal in 1869, to provide luxury accommodation for all the crowned heads, including Empress Eugénie, as well as for the dignitaries from all over Europe attending the auspicious event. The premiere of *Aïda*, the opera commissioned from Giuseppe Verdi for the occasion, did not however take place during the inauguration of the canal as planned, but two years later in 1871, in Cairo.

From their bedroom window in the Mena House, my parents had a magnificent and imposing view on the great pyramid of Cheops. During that time, tourists were still allowed to climb the pyramid. At the top, my parents admired the unforgettable and breathtaking view of the ruins of the ghost city of Memphis, the endless surrounding desert and the clearly marked outline of the cultivated land. After two marvelous weeks, the newlyweds headed back northwards to the great city of Alexandria, where I was to spend my happy childhood.

My parents rented a sunny, although somewhat noisy apartment, in an apartment building not far from the city center. My father set up his surgery on the south side of it with a view overlooking Said I Avenue. On the north side, was a small balcony with a splendid view on the city's most beautiful quayside, stretching over a kilometer along the semi-circular picturesque old harbor.

His income at the time being rather limited, my parents had to content themselves with a modest lifestyle. In the evenings when the wind was down, they would stroll along the Corniche past elegant restaurants and grand hotels, watching the blazing sunset. All the latest models of cars would stream past them, whilst nearby, perched on his donkey, the coachman of an arabeya would relentlessly crack his whip on the poor creature's back. During the winter months when a cold wind howled past them on every street corner and the Corniche would be almost empty, my parents would often go to the cinema, preferably to watch French films. They especially liked those of Marcel Pagnol, particularly the well-known trilogy of Marius, Fanny and César. Many food shops in Alexandria stayed open until very late, so another thing which my mother loved to do was shop in the evenings with her husband. Sometimes they would take the tram to Chatby where the Swiss Club was located. It would organize conferences, dances and put on Swiss films. The Swiss community would also meet up just to recreate an atmosphere of back home.

In their apartment building, my parents made the acquaintance of a charming English couple. The husband, Clement, worked mainly in the cotton trade but was also a correspondent for the London Times which he would keep informed of the fluctuations on the Cotton Exchange. His wife Eve was a talented writer who devoted her spare time to writing. They would spend the summer months at their bungalow by the sea in Agami about ten kilometers to the west of Alexandria. My parents, who were regular guests there for weeks at a time, and would thus spend blissful days in that calm, secluded spot by the deep blue sea.



## A BRIEF HISTORY

Today at the start of a new millennium, the city of Alexandria stretches over twenty kilometers along the Mediterranean coast. It is Egypt's second city, with around five million inhabitants.

As its name indicates, Alexandria was founded by Alexander the Great in the third century BC. Upon his death, Ptolemy took the throne thus founding the Ptolemaic dynasty under which Alexandria became the most important commercial city and the center of the Hellenistic world. During his reign, Ptolemy I founded the most important library of the ancient world, which contained around 900,000 scrolls of papyrus. However, the library was completely destroyed by fire during the Roman invasion. The Pharos, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, was erected during the reign of Ptolemy II. This lighthouse was over one hundred and fifty meters high. It braved the elements until it too was destroyed by an earthquake at the beginning of the fourteenth century. A century later, the imposing fort of Qaitbey was built on the same site, a fort which can be visited to this day. Yet another intriguing member of the Ptolemaic dynasty, who has fascinated the world for two thousand years and inspired numerous writers, including Shakespeare and George Bernard Shaw, is of course Queen Cleopatra, after whom one of the city's quarters is named.

Not much survives of ancient Alexandria today. Amongst the few remains there is Pompey's Pillar, which is twenty-seven meters high and located in the western quarter of the city, in addition to various artifacts of different sizes on display at the Greco-Roman Museum. It is said that at the time of Caesar and Cleopatra's passionate love affair Alexandria had over half a million inhabitants. However at the beginning of the third century, the population was decimated by the Roman persecution of Christians in addition to various epidemics, including the plague.

The Persians conquered Alexandria at the start of the sixth century. A few years later the city was invaded once again, this time by the caliphs<sup>1</sup> who chose to make Cairo the capital of Egypt. From that point onwards, Egypt no longer belonged to the Roman Empire or Christendom. It is only under the reign of Mohamed Ali at the beginning of the nineteenth century that Alexandria, then a city of a few thousand souls, awoke from its slumbers. It was during the reign of this energetic and enterprising ruler of Albanian origin, that the digging of the Mahmoudieh Canal was undertaken, which was to link Alexandria on the coast to the country's interior as well as enable the irrigation of arable land. So one can consider Mohamed Ali to be the founder of modern Alexandria.

Until around 1860, the world cotton trade was dominated by the southern states of the United States of America. However, the devastation of the southern plantations during the American Civil War dealt a fatal blow to this domination, to which were added the effects of the blockade of southern exports to England. It was then that Egypt took a leading role in the production, trade and export of its own long-fiber cotton, for which it is reputed worldwide. A veritable Egyptian cotton boom ensued which opened the port of Alexandria to the world. Mohamed Ali, recognizing the crucial role played by foreigners in the country's prosperity, practiced an open-door policy towards them. Most of these new immigrants came to take part in the cotton trade, but a fair number of them were also refugees fleeing pogroms or simply the dire poverty of their country of origin. Thus, Alexandria expanded considerably due to the cotton boom. Over a dozen new companies were created for cotton export, including three Swiss ones: Reinhart, Kupper and von Planta. As a result, at the end of the nineteenth century and up to the World War One, many Swiss came to try their luck in Alexandria.

## ALEXANDRIA, A CITY OF MANY FACES

It goes without saying that the cotton magnates had considerable influence both on the city's social life and its economy. They built lavish houses with gardens, each more enchanting than the other, which later, would be opened to the public.

Antoniadis Gardens, with their magnificently colored flowerbeds, their fountains decorated with sea lions spurting water, Greek statues and alleyways lined with palm trees, were undoubtedly among the most splendid in the whole of Egypt. This park belonged to a wealthy Greek family which, later on, bequeathed it to the city of Alexandria. On a smaller scale, but more romantic, was the Rose Garden where one could admire the scent and rich abundance of the roses all year round. Finally, there were the Nouzha Gardens near Mahmoudieh Canal, which, with their zoological park and café, were a popular destination for excursions.

In the Chatby quarter, which used to be a burial ground during the Ptolemaic era, the Christian and Jewish cemeteries bear witness to the tolerant and cosmopolitan nature of the city's inhabitants. Still today, it is not unusual to discover tombstones with inscriptions in Hebrew, Italian, French or Greek.

Ever since its foundation, Jews have continually lived in Alexandria. During the first century A.D. they consisted of a good third of the population. They were joined by others, persecuted and expelled from Europe. This continual presence over the centuries meant that whereas a large proportion of Alexandrian Jews were of Egyptian origin, the others came from elsewhere in the Mediterranean or from Northern Europe. The rise to power of the Nazis provoked yet another wave of Jewish immigrants to Alexandria. The city's Jewish community included wealthy merchants, tradesmen and intellectuals, as well as craftsmen and office workers. In addition to the synagogues of

different sizes, the Jewish community possessed schools, and many other institutions such as a hospital, where a number of the patients were treated by my father.

The Greek community however, was the largest. Its members included the most powerful industrialists and wealthy cotton magnates. The grocers were nearly all Greek. The most reputed confectioners and pastry shops such as Athineos and Pastroudis belonged to Greeks. I could continue for pages and pages listing all the various establishments founded and run by Greeks. I shall nevertheless just mention a restaurant still reputed to this day, which specializes in seafood and was founded in the 1920s by a Greek named Zephyrion. Another, the Brazilian Coffee Stores, one of the most popular meeting places in Alexandria, was also founded by Greeks. Not only could one order at the bar the best freshly roasted Turkish coffee in town, but also a delicious iced chocolate drink, which I can still taste to this day. That brings to mind an anecdote my father used to tell me: in those days there was a surplus of Brazilian coffee production, so it was said that the locomotives used to run on coffee beans instead of coal! In addition to their numerous schools, the Greeks had their own hospital, the Cozzika.

Like all the other immigrant communities in Alexandria, the Greeks spoke several languages. It was quite usual to give orders to one's domestic staff in Arabic in the mornings, to address one's hairdresser in Greek, to speak Italian in the shoe shop, then to speak in English in the afternoons over a game of bridge, five o'clock tea or a game of polo, and finally, in the evenings to receive and entertain one's friends in French.

The Italians formed the second largest European community after the Greeks. As is well known, at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, for demographic and economic reasons, many Italians emigrated all over the world, but to other Mediterranean countries especially, including Egypt. Thousands of them settled in Alexandria. In addition to a few wealthy and eminent families who lived in magnificent villas, there were craftsmen, cobblers, tailors and mechanics who rented modest

apartments. Italian tradesmen mingled with the locals, so that soon a number of Italian expressions were incorporated into Arabic. When my father took his old Opel to the garage for repairs, the local mechanic would tell him when the *machina* was ready; when my mother allowed me to accompany her to market, I would often hear the local greengrocers advertising their tasty strawberries with the word *frawla*, or calling French beans *fassulja*.

The mixed population of Alexandria also included many Armenians, who had fled their country persecuted by the Turks at the beginning of the twentieth century, as well as Russians having escaped the Bolshevik Revolution. Until the start of the World War Two, there were many Germans also living in the city. One notable example was Hitler's deputy, Rudolf Hess, who was born in Alexandria in 1894.

The Swiss were amongst the smaller communities. During World War Two, there were just over one thousand Swiss living there. We had our own club, the Cercle Suisse d'Alexandrie, which organized various society events. The Swiss school — l'École Suisse d'Alexandrie — had about sixty pupils, all of them Swiss.

Next to Arabic, French was without a doubt the most widely spoken language after 1880, followed by English during the Second World War. The French schools constituted the largest contingent of foreign language schools. Girls could choose between the Lycée Français on the one hand, or one of the many schools run by Catholic nuns of various orders such as the Soeurs de St. Vincent de Paul, or the Immaculée Conception. I confess that as a young girl, I found the name of the latter — the Immaculate Conception — very perplexing! Girls could also choose to attend the venerable boarding school, Notre Dame de Sion, situated in magnificent old grounds. As for boys, they also had the choice of various schools run by religious orders, the most notable of which were the Collège Saint Marc and the École des frères Sainte Catherine, in addition to the Lycée Français. Parents who were keen that their children should learn the 'English way of life' could opt for Victoria College for Boys, the Scottish School for Girls, or the English Girls' College.

In addition to all the French, English and Greek schools, I could add, amongst others, the École des Soeurs Arméniennes Catholiques de l'Immaculée Conception, the Union Juive pour l'Enseignement, the German School, and the Italian school, Don Bosco. It goes without saying that there were also plenty of Egyptian schools such as the Faroukia Islamia, the Banat el Ashraf<sup>2</sup> and many others.

At that time there were so many nationalities and religions in Alexandria living side by side peacefully: Armenians, Maltese, Cypriots who were either Greek Orthodox or Greek Catholic, not forgetting those who came from Aleppo, Beirut or Damascus. Most of the Syrians and Lebanese had Egyptian nationality, but still proudly kept their Catholic faith. Evidently, such an ethnic and cosmopolitan diversity gave the city an especially rich cultural and social life. There were clubs and associations belonging to each and every one of the linguistic and religious communities: starting with the elegant Alexandria Sporting Club, then the Jockey Club of Egypt, and the Yacht Club, in addition to the Greek Sports Club, the Egyptian Greek Orthodox Youth Club, and naturally, the Swiss Club. The English and French Yacht Clubs had many members. Although the Swiss are not a seafaring nation, we too, had our own Yacht Club right up to the early 1950s. And I must also mention that particularly Swiss institution also present in Alexandria, the Shooting Club, to which King Farouk was a regular visitor. Alexandria's cultural life offered many opportunities to artists of international renown. During the winter months one could attend performances by La Scala of Milan, the Ballets des Champs Élysées or the Comédie Française. It would not be an exaggeration to compare Alexandria's cultural and linguistic landscape to a Mediterranean mosaic, or to a brightly colored spice shop in an Oriental bazaar. And this kaleidoscope was the setting where my family lived up to 1950.

## PATIENTS OF EVERY KIND

When my parents settled in Alexandria, its population was in the region of 800,000 inhabitants. Tuberculosis took a heavy toll, and there were as yet no chest specialists. The disease was treated essentially with febrifugal remedies. Moreover, at that time, tuberculosis was considered a shameful disease only spoken of in whispers, to the extent that when my father first settled in Alexandria, he had great difficulty in becoming known as a tuberculosis specialist.

In addition to his surgery and to the operations he carried out at the Anglo-Swiss Hospital, he set up a clinic there for the poor and needy, to which he dedicated most of his mornings. This brought him little financial reward, but a great deal of satisfaction on the human level. It did nevertheless, have the advantage of making him known in the local population, which in turn increased the number of his private patients at his surgery on Said I Avenue. He was also sometimes called upon as a consultant at the Jewish, Greek or Egyptian El Moassat hospital. His working hours were very irregular as the patients rarely confined themselves to surgery hours, because, to be frank, the European notion of time was totally foreign to them.

Gradually, my father's practice grew significantly. His patients were either fellaheen from the surrounding countryside or simple local working-class people, and all were extremely grateful for the help which they could not have expected from their compatriots. One day during the 1940s, he even treated a patient who turned out to be none other than the mother of young King Faisal of Iraq, who was assassinated some years later. On another occasion, a Bedouin woman who was gravely ill came to see him. After examining her, he informed her that only a very costly operation could cure her and enquired whether she could afford to pay. He made her understand that he could charge her a favorable rate, but that the treatment would still be expensive. Upon hearing this,

she looked at him with wide-open eyes and showed him her arm covered in gold bracelets all the way up to the elbow. She replied that he just had to tell her how many bracelets would cover his expenses . . . Since much of the population was totally illiterate, people were very reluctant to entrust their savings to a bank and preferred to convert them into gold or property. It was not unusual for women to wear the greater part of their wealth in the form of necklaces, bracelets, anklets, earrings or nose rings, whilst men would proudly show off their gold teeth.

My father was happy to have such a cosmopolitan practice which enabled him to speak French, English, Italian and Arabic on a daily basis. When he was about forty he started to learn modern Greek. He was thus able to communicate directly with all his patients. Hence, there was more than one Greek-Orthodox priest or two who must have blessed the Holy Father for being able to converse to a Swiss doctor in his mother tongue.

On feast days, my father would often receive gifts in kind from his patients. During the war, my mother was glad of this extra food. Sometimes it was three dozen eggs, or a large churnful of butter made from buffalo milk. The gift which impressed me the most however, was a large live turkey which my father brought home shortly before Christmas. It was kept up on the roof until the time came to slaughter it. Although its wings were slightly clipped, it was tied to a long rope attached at the other end to one of my father's dumbbells. The great domestic fowl seemed quite happy up on our roof and even put on weight right up to the fatal moment when it landed in our frying pan on Christmas Day.



## AND NOW WE ARE THREE

One mild winter, the time came for my mother to prepare the nursery. I was born in the Anglo-Swiss Hospital and baptized by Pasteur Widmer in the Protestant Church of Alexandria. My birth certificate was made out in both French and Arabic, and an announcement of my birth was published in French also in the *Journal Suisse d'Égypte et du Proche-Orient*. Founded in 1925, that was the official newspaper of all the Swiss associations in Egypt, Syria and Palestine. To mark the happy occasion, my maternal grandmother came from Switzerland to share the first weeks of life of her first 'Egyptian' grandchild.

When I was old enough to sit up in my push-chair, my mother would take me each day, dressed in my pale blue coat and wearing white gloves, for an outing along the seafront for a breath of fresh sea air. However, she had great difficulty in dissuading the masses of strollers and passers-by from persistently crowding round and stroking the little blonde doll.

Even after my birth, my mother, although always the perfect housewife, had difficulty in adapting to life in Egypt. The living conditions were so different from what she was used to: the dirt, the child beggars in rags with their eyes infested with flies, and the high temperatures during the summer months reaching 37°C daily, with humidity levels of 98 per cent. In addition there were often problems with the domestic staff. All expatriates had either a manservant called a *suffragi* or a maid. Some of our acquaintances also employed a gardener and even a chauffeur. The most popular domestic staff were the Nubians from Upper Egypt. These were related to the Sudanese and dark-skinned, unlike the Egyptians or Arabs from the Nile Delta, who have lighter skins. These *suffragis* were tall, proud, and usually wore a long white tunic or *djellaba* with a broad red cloth belt and either a white turban or a small red fez, or tarboush. They tended to be cheerful and good-

MUNICIPALITÉ D'ALEXANDRIE

بلدية الاسكندرية

SERVICE SANITAIRE

قسم الصحة

Certificat de Naissance

شهادة ميلاد



EXTRAIT du registre sanitaire du Kism

ملخص من دفتر مواليد صحة قسم كشم  
N° d'enregistrement et date de la naissance ١٩٣٤ ١٩٣٤  
نمرة القيد ١٩٣٧ وتاريخ الميلاد ١٩٣٤  
Nom et sexe du nouveau-né اسم الطفل ونوعه  
Nom et prénom du père اسم ولقب الوالد  
Nom et prénom de la mère اسم ولقب الوالدة  
Profession du père (ou de la mère) مهنة الوالد (أو الوالدة)  
Nationalité الجنسية  
Religion الديانة  
Sage-femme الداية  
Habitation et rue عبة السكن والشارع  
Le 193 ١٩٣٤

Pour copie conforme, à délivrer gratuitement  
Signature de l'employé chargé de l'enregistrement

L. nommé المس  
a été vacciné en date du 193 ١٩٣٣  
تطعم بتاريخ  
et pustules ont réussi en date du 193 ١٩٣٣  
و بأسورات نجحت في  
N° d'enregist' du registre de la vaccination de ١٩٣٣  
نمرة القيد من دفتر المتطعمين الصحي صحة  
Signature ou cachet du Médecin, توقيع أو تم الطيب

Le 193 ١٩٣٣ سنة محرم ١٩٣٤

L'enfant devra être vacciné dans les trois mois de sa naissance. Tout retardé sera puni d'une amende de P. T. 10 à 100 (voir Décrets sur la vaccination en Egypte, 17 Décembre 1899 et 6 Août 1897, et loi No. 9 de 1917).

ينبغي تطعيم الطفل في ظرف ثلاثة شهور من يوم ميلاده ومن يتأخر عن تطعيم الطفل في المدة المينة يعاقب بمرامة من عشرة لمائة غرش ( انظر لائحة ١٧ ديسمبر سنة ١٨٩٠ و ٦ أغسطس سنة ١٨٩٧ تطعيم وأنقانون رقم ٩ لسنة ١٩١٧ )

Dans le cas de déplacement des parents de l'enfant à une autre localité, avant la vaccination, les parents doivent faire la vaccination de l'enfant à la nouvelle résidence, pour éviter d'être mis en contravention; en même temps ils doivent prévenir le médecin du District ou l'Omdah du Village pour que ces derniers en avertissent le Bureau où l'inscription de la naissance a été effectuée.

في حالة انتقال والدي الطفل الى عبة اخرى قبل التطعيم يجب عليها تطعيم الطفل في العبة التي ينتقلان اليها متى ما توفروها تحت طائلة العقاب ويجب انظار طبيب المركز او همدة الناحية بذلك لكي بدنا بمرقتها مكتب العبة في عدها المولد

ورثت عن صديق الازرق

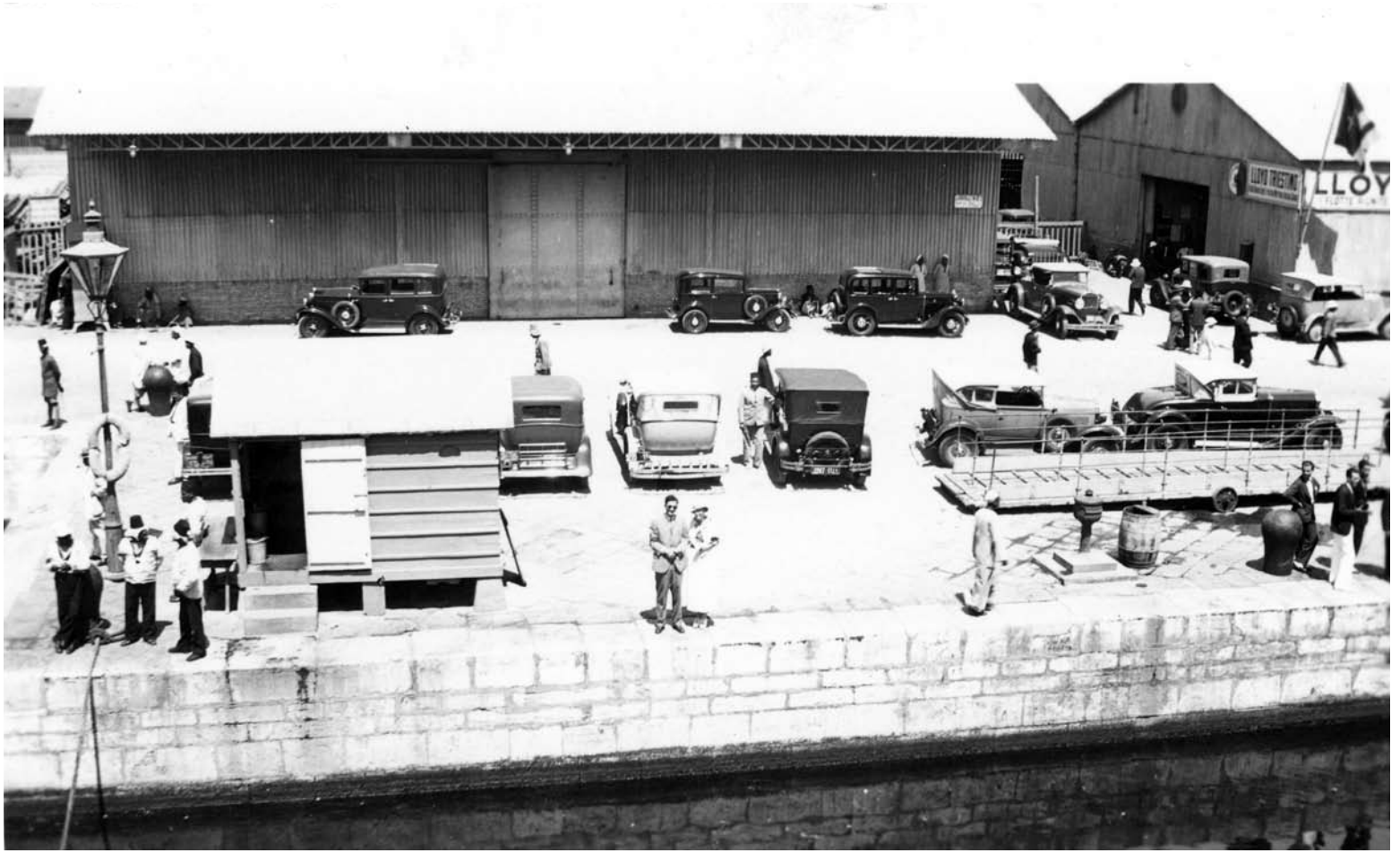
شهادة ميلاد من ١٩٣٤

Annee 1933 - Sm. P. 35 B - 100

My birth certificate issued by the Alexandrian Municipality in both French and Arabic, with my father's annotation added



Sitting on my mother's lap, aged one and a half



My parents standing on the quayside of the harbor in Alexandria, awaiting the arrival of my grandmother aboard the SS *Esperia*, June 1934

natured, their dark faces lit up by a smile. Their cheeks bore deep scars indicating their tribal or ethnic origin, but which did not disfigure them in any way. Most of them were very faithful to their European employers because they were undoubtedly better treated by them than by their own compatriots — rich pashas, who would sometimes work them to the bone. This being said, one occasionally had setbacks with one's domestic staff and had to search hard before finding the ideal person. It is hardly surprising therefore, that at the very beginning of their stay in Alexandria my parents, having tried their luck with Mohamed, then with Hassan, Abdou and Ali, gave up and finally happily settled for a Greek woman who was recommended to them.

One of my first memories dates from 1938 when I was four years old. It was then that I made my first journey to Switzerland alone with my mother. She was expecting her second child and wanted it to be born in Basel this time. However, unable to find a colleague to whom he could entrust his surgery, my father was obliged to stay behind. The proud ship of the Lloyd Triestino shipping company was waiting by the quayside for the passengers to board and to set sail for Trieste. My mother was naturally torn between the joy and anticipation of seeing her family again in Basel, and a heavy heart at having to leave her beloved husband behind. When my parents had said their goodbyes, I clung desperately to my father. I was terrified of the ladder which we had to climb to board the ship, for the steps were mere loose wooden planks, tied together with thick rope. This sort of gangplank swung to and fro with the movement of the waves. The distance between each plank must have been about twenty-five centimeters and I was petrified at the thought of slipping between them and falling into the dirty water splashing below. But my mother comforted me and took me gently by the hand. What relief when I once again felt something firm beneath my feet and no longer saw the steep drop beneath me! Once in my cabin, I undertook a thorough examination of the place and after a hot bath filled with heated seawater, my terror completely disappeared.

These few summer months fled by too quickly, staying alternately in Riehen near Basel at my mother's parents, and in Lucerne with her parents-in-law. On a beautiful day towards the end of summer, my mother gave birth at Basel Maternity Hospital to a long-expected baby brother, Christoph Heinrich Alexander. And finally, the inevitable day came when she felt the time had come to present the newborn to his father, and so the three of us set out, this time, on the journey back to Alexandria.

### AND NOW FOUR OF US IN A NEW HOME

During our absence, my father had begun to search for larger lodgings and had finally found one. For reasons of hygiene also, he felt it was preferable that his surgery should not be in his home. He had finally found an isolated house away from the town center, in Camp César district. There he rented a spacious and sunny five room apartment on the first floor. The owner, Madame Caillat, lived on the ground floor. The house was over twenty years old, and situated in the center of a fairly well kept garden with a green gate. The exterior was a yellow ochre color, with green shutters and a flat roof. It faced a vast wasteland with mounds marking the remains of past civilizations. The frequent sandy winds had gradually buried the ruined abandoned dwellings under piles and piles of sand. With a bit of luck, it was not unusual to find remnants of ancient oil lamps or broken pieces of old pottery. Once my father even found a tiny rusty finger from a life-size bronze statue. To this day, whenever I find myself in front of a building site I have the irresistible urge to search the foundations for hidden treasures.

Unfortunately, this wasteland was also used as a garbage dump. So from our balcony, we could often watch the scavenger birds diving down and then flying off again with a snake wriggling between their claws. Later on, after the end of the Second World

Myself at home, aged about four



My younger brother Christoph

War, those hills and mounds served as a testing ground for cross-country vehicles. A low stone wall separated our part of the garden from the rue Marc Aurèle. The top of the wall was covered with shards of broken glass to prevent intruders of both the two and the four-legged variety. However, this barrier did not stretch the entire length of the garden wall, with the consequence that one Sunday morning, as I was sitting on the balcony looking out at the green gate, I saw a stranger climb over the wall with the greatest of ease. At that precise moment in time, it so happened that our gardener was walking in that very direction, and so he pounced on the intruder, covering him with blows. I was almost moved to pity when I heard the poor devil pleading, tearfully, “Let me go! Please don’t hand me over to the police — I’m just out of jail and I’m starving!” But there was nothing to be done. The police had to be alerted and the sinner rejoined the cell mates he had left but a few hours earlier. Other delinquents, however, were very agile and clever.

My mother was enchanted with this new home which she fitted out with much love and care. The rooms were light and spacious. In the bedrooms, the beds were fitted with huge mosquito nets fixed to the ceilings. These were necessary to keep out the sandflies and other tiny insects with a nasty sting. Likewise, the windows were fitted with wire mesh. Next to the dining room on the side facing the garden, was the sewing and ironing room, opposite which was a comfortable sitting room with Persian carpets, leather sofas and armchairs, not forgetting the small Oriental coffee table, richly decorated with mother-of-pearl marquetry. Next to the French window leading to the balcony, my mother had placed an aquarium which my brother and I had received one Christmas. After a few years, however, the glass had cracked and as it was no longer watertight, we converted it into a terrarium. Instead of cute goldfish gracefully swimming back and forth, we had the thrill of watching two tiny scorpions which we had found in the desert and fed with dead flies. At the end of the apartment was the bathroom with all the modern conveniences of the period. Next to that was a vast kitchen in the center of which was the gas stove and





The house in Rue Marc Aurèle.  
Our flat was on the first floor.



The Rue Marc Aurèle, later  
renamed Ahmed Kamha Bey  
Street. The whole family is about  
to go for a drive in our Opel.

a small Primus cooker on a marble slab. Opposite that was the wooden kitchen cabinet which consisted of a small chest and a cupboard the sides of which were lined with thin sheets of metal. During the scorching summer months, the iceman would deliver a long block of ice each day, placing it in the chest at the top of the cabinet. We would then store the food in the compartment just below it to keep it fresh, and the water from the melted ice would gather in a basin at the bottom of the cabinet. In those days, that was the only type of ice box available. It was only after the war, that we became the happy owners of a genuine electric refrigerator. During the cool season, we would use the coffin-shaped cupboard which my father had installed in front of the kitchen window for storing food.

The house had a cellar which we actually only used during wartime, as a shelter. On the upper storey leading to the flat roof were the servant's room and the laundry. That's where the laundress, Amina, would sit cross-legged on the floor in front of her huge washing-copper. She would heat the water on a stove for the laundry which was prepared with LUX soap flakes and household soap. In summer, my mother sometimes used Amina's help for cosmetic purposes: she would ask her to smear her legs with a kind of sticky paste made from caramelized sugar and lemon juice. This sticky paste was applied to the skin whilst hot and then left to cool down and dry thus trapping all undesirable hair<sup>3</sup>. Then all that had to be done, was to delicately remove this solidified layer to achieve the desired result. This whole operation was extremely unpleasant but effective, for my mother wanted to show off her beautifully smooth legs on the beach. We children, would have much rather preferred to devour the paste up — unused! This somewhat painful form of hair removal is common practice among Egyptian women, especially before getting married, and then not only on their legs.

In addition to Amina who came once a week to do the laundry, a young Armenian seamstress, Maria Manoukian, would come once a month for a day or two. I remember her quite clearly. She was a calm and somewhat shy person, hard of hearing, and would

make us the most beautiful dresses. She had learnt her trade from years spent at a convent school. I always felt rather sorry for her on account of her very sad expression. When she had finished, her very stern-looking elder brother would come to take her straight home. What had become of her carefree youth, I wondered.

Once a year, a man would come especially for the upkeep of our cotton mattresses. He brought with him an instrument resembling a harp, which had a single very taut cord. He would settle himself up on our flat roof, undo our mattresses, pulling out all the cotton fibers which over time had formed large compact lumps. With the help of the cord of his instrument, he would separate the lumps one by one until the cotton fibers regained their original consistency. He would then fill the mattresses once again with the separated cotton.

## MY FIRST SCHOOL DAYS

When I was five years old and my brother still a baby, I was sent to the Swiss school kindergarten. My father would drive me there in the morning, and at midday we would all be transported back home. The school, which was situated next to the Swiss club, was much too far from my home for me to walk the distance. The *École Suisse d'Alexandrie*, as it was officially called, was a private institution financed by a Swiss cotton magnate.

The teachers and the sixty odd pupils were all Swiss. The only exception was Monsieur Khoury, an Egyptian state employee, whose very difficult task it was to teach us Arabic from third grade elementary. All the core subjects — reading, writing, arithmetic, history and geography — were taught in French. German, which was the first foreign language, was taught from second grade elementary when we were seven. For that subject,

the class was divided into two: one section for the Swiss German children, and another for our French-speaking Swiss classmates. In playschool we spoke only French with the teacher. Every morning, we would start by singing the French version of the Swiss national anthem. We would enthusiastically sing at the top of our young voices, without really grasping the meaning of the different verses. Thus it was that for a long time I did not understand what *une baignoire*, a bathtub, was doing in the national anthem! Each time I would sing “*sous ta baignoire*” instead of “*sous ta bannière*”: “under your banner”! During break time we would speak French or Swiss German. At home, my brother and I would speak Swiss German dialect with our parents, but French amongst ourselves, and Arabic with the servant. It was not until later on that we learnt English. A city of many cultures and many languages, Alexandria was the ideal place to learn several languages from a young age. At the age of eight, Peter, one of my classmates, could communicate with his Greek neighbors in the same apartment building in their mother tongue. Not knowing a single word of Greek, his parents were full of admiration!

During the school break time, we would play marbles and all those games which schoolchildren have played throughout the ages. There was one amusement however, which differed from the norm: we used to swap silkworms. We would keep these whitish colored silkworms in old cardboard boxes. They were about the length of a finger and fed exclusively off fresh mulberry leaves which they devoured in huge quantities. After about one month, they would wrap themselves up in a silk cocoon of a white, pinkish or light yellow color, the size of a peanut shell, from which the butterflies would finally emerge.

During the bombing of Alexandria by the Axis powers, especially in the summer of 1942, we invented a hitherto unheard-of game during the school break: we would compete to see who had brought the largest piece of shrapnel found in their back garden. As carefree children, we remained quite oblivious to the horrors and misery caused by war.



The entire École Suisse d'Alexandrie in 1942. I am sitting on the far right of the front row.

## THE WAR YEARS

Even before the Italian air raids of 1941, the authorities had taken some passive defense measures. The general blackout was mandatory, and car headlights were painted blue, allowing only a narrow cruciform white beam of light. During the night sky, anti-aircraft defense searchlights beamed back and forth. Night after night, rows of vehicles resembling steamrollers would stream through the city. Their mission was to create clouds of smoke around the port of Alexandria in order to camouflage the Royal Navy ships anchored there. Another defense measure was the use of Zeppelin-shaped balloons, attached to the ground by thick ropes. Their role was to make the task of enemy pilots flying at low altitude more difficult. Then there was the sudden appearance of masses of sandbags piled high in front of the entrances of apartment buildings, shops and hospitals. Military installations, including the British Army barracks located on a hill which had already been the site of a Roman army camp centuries earlier, were surrounded by barbed wire.

The continued increase in the number of Allied contingents changed the city's atmosphere and appearance to some degree. Thus for example, it became more and more difficult to find a horse-drawn carriage down town, or even a place in the shade in one of the numerous café terraces where the language of the armed forces — British, Australian and New Zealand English — were now predominant. It was not unusual for those men to spend all their pay down to the very last piaster before returning to the front.

For the taxi drivers it was a veritable golden age. The same went for the innumerable young shoeblacks: for as soon as a soldier wanting his shoes polished appeared on the scene, a whole pack of *bouyagis* would pounce on him! It was generally the oldest and the strongest of them who ended up getting the job. Whilst his shoes were being polished, the Englishman would read his newspaper and hence not notice that, when finished, the

young rascal would tie the laces of both shoes together! Then, whilst the soldier was waiting for the change back from the one pound note he had just handed the shoeblack, the latter would make off at full speed for the corner of the nearest block of houses. The young swindler would be laughing up his sleeve, whilst his victim would be left sheepishly untying his shoes . . .

The situation took a critical turn during the summer of 1942 when the Afrikakorps of Field Marshal Rommel started to approach Alexandria at a terrifying speed. Luckily, this advance was stopped at the last moment by the decisive Battle of El Alamein, a hundred kilometers to the west of Alexandria. The victory of the Allied forces under the generals Montgomery and Alexander obliged the forces of the Axis powers to depart from Egypt for good.

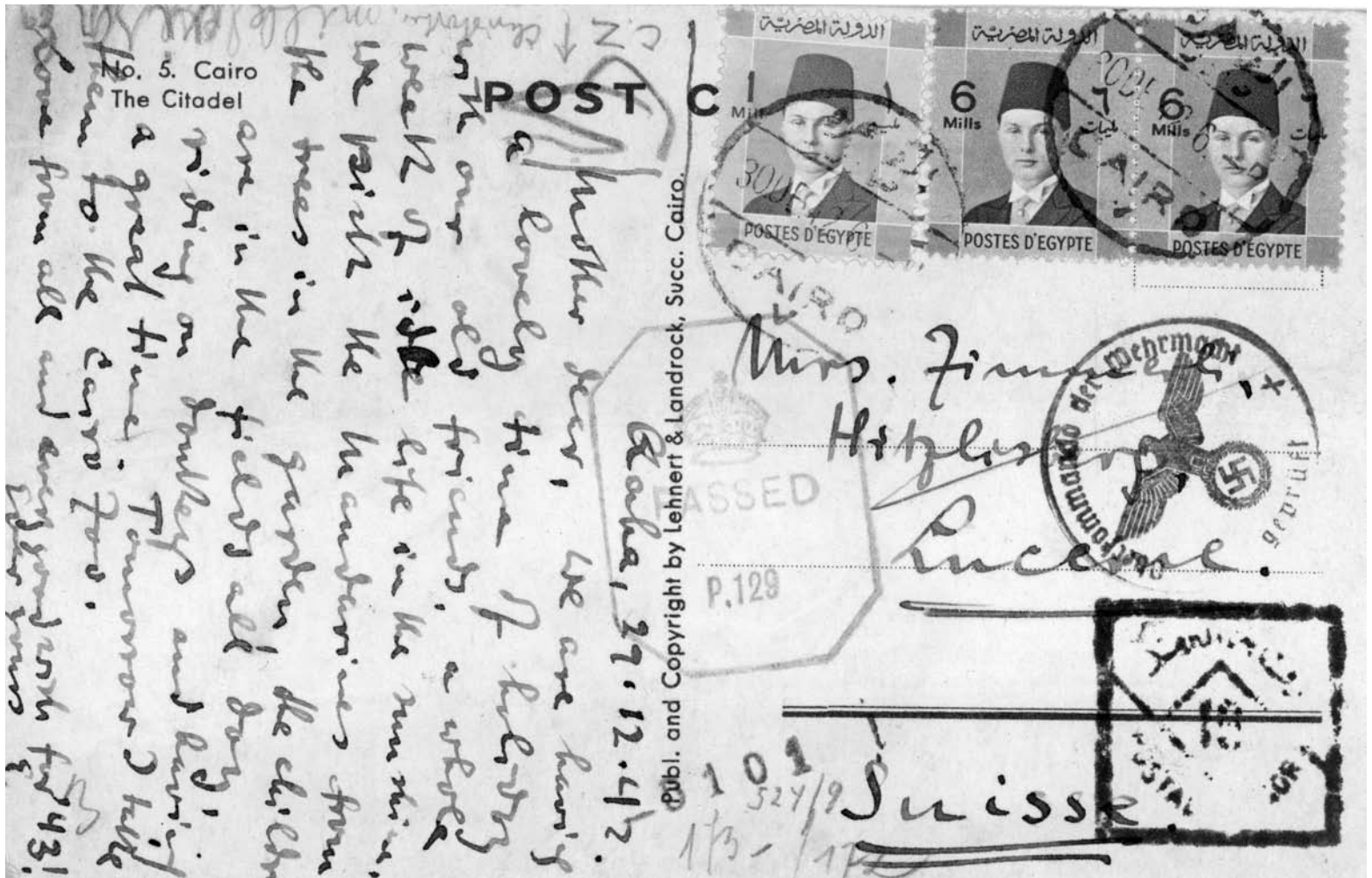
During that entire period we would spend the nights down in the cellar. Each night we would fill the bathtub to the brim just in case by misfortune, the town's water supply, which was controlled by the British, should be destroyed by the enemy. Should this have happened, we would have found ourselves in a most difficult situation — for to be without any water during July or August in Egypt would indeed have been a minor disaster!

One day whilst we were at school, enemy planes attacked forcing us to head for the air raid shelters. Our lessons were interrupted and we had an extra break time down in the cellar! As children, we naturally found this quite exciting. To this day I can still see in my mind's eye, the little white clouds of smoke left by the exploding shells of anti-aircraft fire. The enemy planes stopped flying over by day due to their losses. So apart from the heavy night bombing, daily life went on normally as in peace time. Some foodstuffs such as tea and sugar were rationed, but that did not affect most people because the problem could be easily overcome with the help of baksheesh and the right contacts. One thing however, did become really scarce for a while: potatoes! I became aware of this when we were suddenly made to eat sweet potatoes instead on a daily basis.

My parents continued to write to my grandparents in Switzerland, but all their letters and cards were censored. Many letters went astray between Egypt and Switzerland, others took months or even years to arrive. In the summer of 1945, my father received one such letter from Basel in which he was astonished by his sister's pessimistic tone. She wrote, "By the time you receive this letter, I hope the situation of the Allies will have improved." My father, very surprised by the content — since the Germans had capitulated three months earlier — examined the letter again and was astounded to see that it was dated 31 May 1940! By what miracle had the letter finally arrived, five years late? I still have before me a number of old postcards. Two of them, without a date, are written in German by my mother to her parents, and next to the Alexandrian postmark there is a purple stamp with the inscription "Postal Censor" and some Arabic lettering. Another postcard, this time sent by my father from Cairo to his mother in Lucerne, is dated 29 December 1942, and bears a stamp with a crown and the word "Passed P.129", next to which is the red stamp of the German Wehrmacht with the eagle and swastika, and the word "*Geprüft*", in addition to a square postmark with Arabic lettering.

In 1943, the International Committee of the Red Cross asked my father whether, from time to time and for several days at a time, he would be willing along with another Swiss doctor, to visit the prison camps held by the Allies. My father willingly accepted this request which would enable him to see other parts of Africa and the Middle East without it taking up too much of his time. These missions took him west to Morocco and Algeria, east to Palestine, and southwards to Sudan and Eritrea. From a medical point of view he learnt a great deal. He and his colleague were confronted with a whole range of dreadful war injuries, with all kinds of mutilations which they had never come across before. One of the most tragic cases my father mentioned was that of a German who would never again practice his profession of painter and decorator, and who could not even put an end to his days, having lost his sight and both arms in an explosion.





This postcard dated 29.12.1942 was sent by my father to his mother in Lucerne during our holidays in Qaha. The numerous stamps include the one of the German Wehrmacht with the eagle and swastika, and another one of the censor.

The trip to Asmara, the Eritrean capital, was especially interesting. Exceptionally, my father had an afternoon free and was able to rent a car and go on an excursion to the nearby mountains. Having reached the top of a mountain pass, he stepped out of the car to stretch his legs. He had barely been walking for ten minutes when a piercing sound made him jump. He turned around and found himself almost face to face with a grimacing, growling baboon and its young, not five meters away! His blood froze. He hid behind a bush and to his great relief the baboons went away.

### THIEVES BOTH GREAT AND SMALL

The gap between the ruling class of pashas and the common people was huge. The great landowners had created their vast wealth mostly at the expense of their subjects and of their farm workers, the fellaheen. Until about the 1920s, these fellaheen were often treated as serfs. The conditions of the urban proletariat were hardly better. Corruption ruled right up to the higher echelons of society, so it was hardly surprising that so many people tried to improve their miserable lot by dishonest means.

This was especially the case during the war years when so many things were unavailable because they could no longer be imported from Europe. Thus anything that was not firmly tied down, was likely to be stolen. One day, as my father was about to fill the car with petrol, he was shocked to find that not only the lid of the petrol tank was missing, but that the hub caps of the four wheels had also disappeared.

We used to air the bed linen on the window sill. One fine morning our servant, Mohamed, was astonished to find that the bedding had all gone! Someone had climbed over the garden wall and, with the help of a long pole with a hook at the end of it, had

made off with our sheets! My parents often had guests in the evenings. Each Wednesday an old friend of theirs would come to visit, parking his Ford just outside our front door. One evening, as he was returning to his car to go home, he had the shock of discovering that it had disappeared! Weeks later he found it again by chance, sitting on blocks of bricks and with all four wheels missing.

In fact, there seemed to be nothing that could not be stolen. This gave rise to the most incredible situations. One hot summer day, my father went to collect the suit which he had had made to measure from the tailor's. Carrying it on his arm, he went back to the car which he had parked on the right-hand side of the road. He opened the right-hand door as well as all the windows, and placed the suit on the back seat. Then, he quickly walked round the car and climbed into the driver's seat. However, just before driving off he checked to see whether the suit was carefully laid out. He turned round and could not believe his eyes. The magnificent suit had vanished into thin air! Someone must have been watching my father in front of the tailor's workshop, and just at the moment when he slipped round the car, the unusually agile thief must have grabbed the suit through the open car window.

## SUNDAYS

Every other Sunday we would pay a visit to Monsieur Jacot, whom my brother and I affectionately called "grandpapa", since our own grandparents were so far away in Switzerland. Grandpapa Jacot lived in a magnificent villa in Ramleh, the residential quarter preferred by wealthy Europeans and well-off Alexandrians. The villa had two stories and was surrounded by a huge garden. Next to the garden gate was a shady royal poinciana tree, also called a flamboyant on account of its bright red flowers. A little

further along was an enormous banyan or Indian fig tree with masses of branches. An extraordinary feature of this tree was its vertical roots which grew from the end of its branches down into the ground. Banyans resemble mangroves, except that they do not grow in water. For us children, this banyan with its mesh of roots was ideal for playing hide-and-seek. Behind the tree was a little pergola with pink and lilac sweet peas growing on it. From that spot, we had a wonderful view of the well-kept flowerbeds in the center of the lawn where brightly colored and pale zinnias and gerbera grew. One of the two gardeners was continually watering, for modern sprinklers were practically unknown in those days. At the bottom of the garden where lizards would scuttle across the paths, there was a tennis court surrounded by oleander trees with white, pink and dark red, sweet scented flowers. One day my father found a huge green caterpillar there, feasting on one of the dark green leaves. He delicately picked it up with the branch it was on and brought it home. Soon afterwards, the caterpillar turned into a plain brown chrysalis. When the time came, the brown shell fell off, and there emerged a colorful sphinx butterfly stretching out its still damp wings of green, pink, white and brown. Behind the tennis courts, next to the fig trees, was an artificial desert landscape with cactuses. The garden was so large that every Easter Sunday we had to ask whether the Easter bunny had hidden the eggs at the front or the back of the garden. One Easter Sunday, whilst my brother and I were hunting all over the garden for the painted eggs, we found an emerald-green chameleon on one of the bushes. The creature could move each eye independently at an angle of 180°, and looked at us in the most peculiar way. We proudly took it to show our parents and grandpapa. Since we could not take it back home, we placed it on a low dark-colored branch, and in an instant it turned from bright green to dark grey. This wonderful garden was a kind of earthly paradise for us children.

As for the villa itself, there were as many rare and interesting things to see in it as there were in the garden. The marble steps leading to the entrance were lined with pots

of pepper plants the branches of which were loaded with green, yellow and red peppers. Just within the front door were two display cabinets containing numerous Egyptian antiquities and an impressive collection of Greek and Roman objects found in Alexandria, from decorated oil lamps to small Pharaonic scarabs. At the turn of the century when grandpapa Jacot had settled in Alexandria as a young engineer for Brown Boveri & Co., it was still possible to buy such precious antiquities at very affordable prices. However, in addition to his fascination for the antiquities of his new country of residence, he was also a very cultured person in general. He had a Biedermeier style living room, equivalent to the Louis Philippe style in France, and he was also a passionate cellist and would often organize friendly musical evenings which my parents were delighted to attend.

During the hot summer months, on Sundays when we did not go to grandpapa's we would go to the seaside instead. In the colder season when it sometimes rained, if the weather was good we would go on a picnic with friends in the desert by Lake Mariout. Known in ancient times as Lake Mareotis, this vast lagoon with its pinkish waters, separated the city of Alexandria which was situated to the north on limestone hills, from the mainland, thus strengthening its strategic position. Over the centuries, this inland stretch of water below sea level gradually dried up creating large areas of arable land. During the siege of Alexandria in 1801, the British dug channels through the dunes near Aboukir, and within one month, the sea flooded thousands and thousands of acres of fertile land. In around 1820 Mohamed Ali, who had ordered the digging of the Mahmoudieh Canal, made every possible effort to make the land cultivable again at whatever the cost. At the start of the twentieth century, the Egyptian government drained the area once more using a pumping mechanism which maintained the water level at two and a half meters below sea level. It is not surprising, therefore, that during the hot summer months the shallow waters of the lake gradually evaporated, leaving a thick crust of salt in places. Where the lake was deeper and did not evaporate so quickly, a layer of algae would appear in the

brackish water giving it a characteristic pink-orange tinge. A drive along Lake Mariout to the nearby desert was an unforgettable experience, especially early in the year between February and April, when the spring rain made the desert suddenly bloom. The tufts of grass and thorny bushes scattered here and there would turn bright green. Wild daisies, yellow asters and bright red poppies would gleam amidst this new life. Bedouin children in rags, with sad faces stood along the bumpy roadside selling dark red, blue and violet anemones, whilst along the lakeside other children offered a kind of salt “candles” which glistened like a thousand diamonds in the sunshine.

Sometimes we would continue westwards further inland until we reached the ruined desert city of Abou Menâs. There was situated the tomb of Saint Menâs, the patron saint of the Libyan Desert, who was martyred there in A.D. 295. In the fifth and sixth centuries, Abou Menâs was a popular center of pilgrimage. Towards the year 900, the city was destroyed by Bedouins and it was only rediscovered at the beginning of the twentieth century by a German archeologist. At the time of our family outings, I was too young to give those ruins the attention they deserved. I do nevertheless, remember one incident that occurred as I was rambling amongst the ruins. The ground suddenly gave way beneath me and I found myself half buried in a tomb! Right nearby we found some small cubes of colored stone: all that was left of a mosaic.

By May it was already too hot to go exploring the ruins. Moreover, the lovely spring flowers around Lake Mariout were mostly faded by then. The desert showed its true nature: the scorching heat, the mirages and the sand dunes stretching into the horizon. Both young and old had but one desire — to go to the seaside. Along the coast not far from Lake Mariout, was the seaside resort of Agami where only a handful of wealthy Europeans possessed a weekend retreat. The sea was deep turquoise and the beaches almost deserted.



The ruins of Saint Menâs, 2006

In the opposite direction to Agami was the very popular beach resort of Sidi Bishr. In fact it was so popular that it was continually extending eastwards to include more coves along the coastline. As a result new beaches were named Sidi Bishr Nos. 2 and 3. To us children, each of these beaches had its own special character. As we walked along the limestone breakwaters of Sidi Bishr beach No. 1, we would come across the somewhat frightening Devil's Hole<sup>4</sup>. When there was a heavy swell of the sea, enormous spurts of water would gush out of this hole in the cliffs. On days when we went bathing at Sidi Bishr beach No. 2, we would swim out towards a small island about one kilometer away. In the center of this isle, we would climb some steps carved into the rock down into a small pool, where it was said that Cleopatra had bathed before returning up the Nile with Julius Caesar.



### SIDI BISHR BEACH NO. 3

To reach our cabin, we would climb down the dozen or so steps leading from the road to Sidi Bishr beach No. 3 which was a fine sandy beach. Painted yellow and green, the cabins were of different sizes. The three tiers of cabins were arranged along our favorite cove in a huge semi-circle rather like a theater. From there, we had a view facing King Farouk's palace in the distance, located in the heart of a vast palm grove. Most of the people who frequented this beach — Syrians and wealthy Egyptians — would usually sit fully dressed in the front covered part of their cabins, eating pistachios and watching the deep blue sea. The Europeans on the other hand, would mostly stay under their parasols or keep cool in the water. Towards midday when people were getting hungry, we would sit under our red, white and blue striped parasol greedily devouring the sesame rolls with cheese and sweet honey-tasting slices of melon which we had brought along with us. To crown it all, we would finish off with a slice of one of mother's famous chocolate cake. Whilst we ate our picnic we would sometimes watch the servants of the people nibbling pistachios, struggling back and forth with all sorts of hampers full of food and china for their hungry masters. When we felt slightly hungry we could buy something from the numerous passing vendors with their small glass boxes filled with roasted peanuts, pistachios and watermelon seeds. One of those whose appearance I eagerly awaited was the waffle vendor with his crunchy honey-covered wafers<sup>5</sup>.

During the long school holidays from July to late September we would go to the beach almost daily. Even though during that season many rich Cairenes would come to Alexandria seeking the cooler climate, the Sidi Bishr beaches were hardly crowded. One day I noticed a young boy of my age playing rather self-consciously on the beach. I felt slightly sorry for him, for despite the fact that he was surrounded by many people he looked lonely. I learnt afterwards that it was young King Faisal II of Iraq, who was later



My father taking a photograph of my mother and a friend on the beach in Alexandria

to be assassinated. On another occasion, I saw him playing with another boy of his own age. That was Hussein, the future king of Jordan.

We all loved the sea, and I was especially keen on fishing. Already as a quite young child I liked going fishing with other children. Out of an old mosquito net my mother had made me a kind of big fishing net to which my father had fastened a long handle. I generally had more success with this homemade instrument than the other children with their ready-made fishing nets bought from Hannaux department store. In addition to this net, we would also use old jam jars to catch small fish. We would firstly cover the opening of the jar with an old handkerchief, then make a hole in it the size of a finger having first covered the underside with flour. The jar was then filled with sea water and lowered into shallow water. We would then throw a few pieces of bread on it for bait. In no time, a shoal of fish would swarm on the bait. As soon as the bread had vanished, the fish would attack the glass jar. At that moment my young friends and I would intervene. We would throw a handful of sand onto the pot which would scare the fish most of which would scuttle off. However a few of them — no doubt the more reckless ones — would seek protection inside the jar, out of which they could no longer escape.

When I did not go fishing, I would usually go swimming with my friend Evi. If the sea was calm enough, we were allowed to rent a flat bottomed canoe. We would then row out to sea up to the small red buoys which marked the boundary of the area covered by the lifeguards. We could go out beyond of course, but at our own risk.

One hot summer day shortly before the end of the war, as I was strolling along the beach with my younger brother Christoph, we suddenly caught sight of a blue object thrown up on the shore by a wave. We initially thought it must have been a bluish jellyfish, but to make sure Christoph searched a long time for a stick and ended by finding a rusty child's rake with which he picked the blue object out of the water. We were astounded to



My parents with friends in front of their cabin at the beach in Alexandria. My father is holding me in his arms, with my mother next to him.

discover that it was the cap of a Luftwaffe pilot with the eagle and swastika as well as the owner's name still visible. What the pilot's fate had been, we never discovered.

So that was how we spent our Sundays and holidays by the seaside. On our way home in the evening we would stop off in our neighborhood, Camp César, to buy a delicious freshly baked flat bread: a specialty of the Arab baker's. Opposite, at the Greek grocer's Papayannakis' shop, we would buy some *mortadella* and a semi-circular tin of Norwegian soft Primula cheese. Finally, we would also buy a few bottles of the reputed local Stella beer for our guests. To the British soldier fighting in the scorching desert, the mere thought of a cold Stella beer awaiting him in Alexandria was enough to make him continue the of 1942. This overwhelming desire for a cold beer in the heat of battle has been vividly described in *Ice Cold in Alex*<sup>6</sup>.

Before putting our purchases in the car, we would cross the road to stroll among the different stalls. We were always faced with an impossible choice between on the one hand the thirst quenching *batikhas*, watermelons with a red, juicy flesh and black seeds, and on the other, the *shamams*, sweet honey tasting melons with a pale green flesh and yellow seeds. Other delicious fruits on offer included mountains of dark blue figs, sweet seedless grapes, and fresh, shiny dark brown dates, as well as pyramid shaped mounds of gleaming red pomegranates and of pale yellow *gawafas*, the perfumed guavas resembling quince.

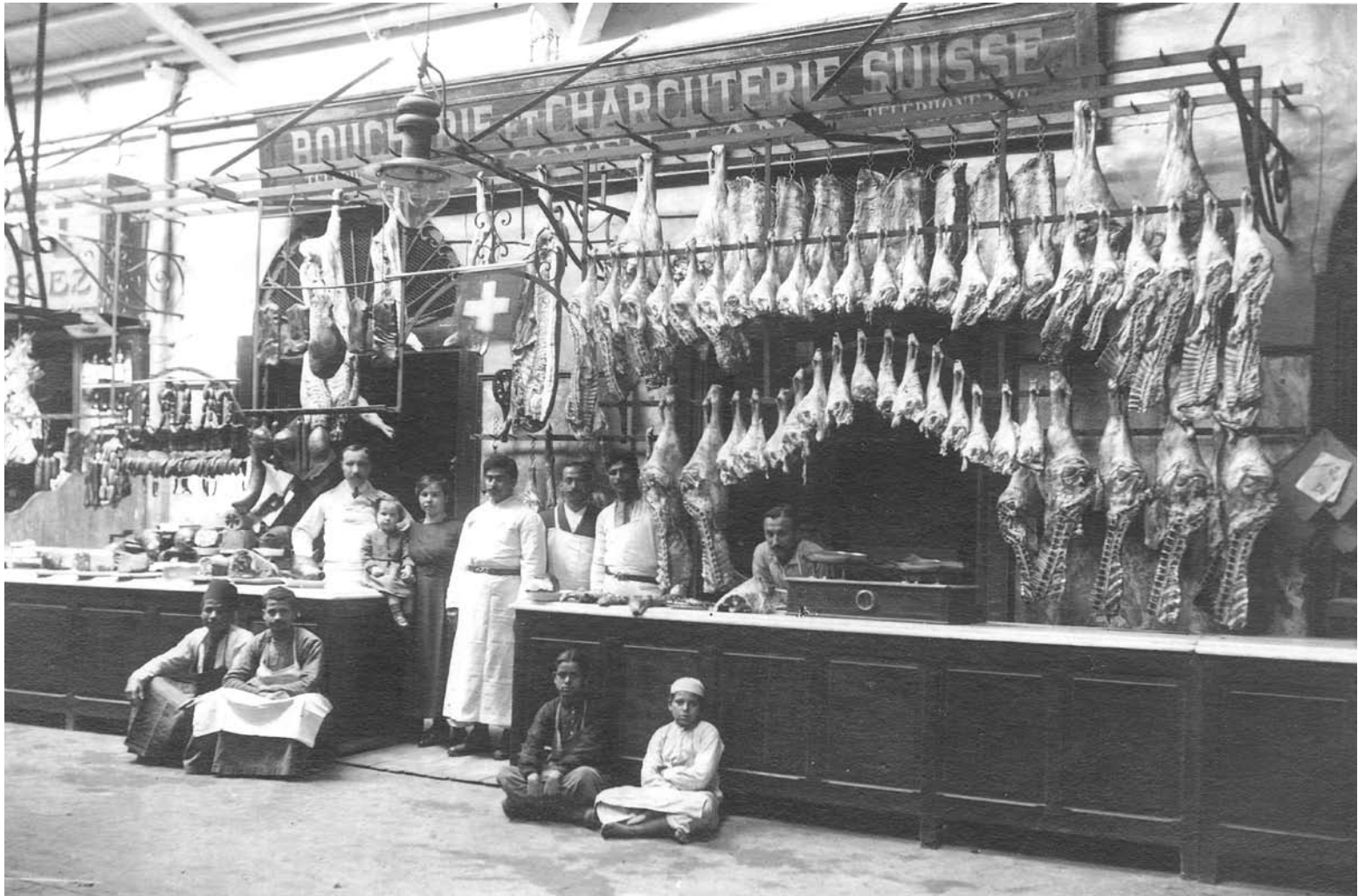
## GOING TO MARKET

On occasions when my mother allowed me to accompany her to Ibrahimieh Market, it felt like a real outing. We usually started with the poultry seller, Moustafa. His shop sign with its crudely painted bright colors could be seen from afar. Inside the small

dark shop, all the chickens and pigeons were piled in cages handmade from palm fiber. The purchase of a chicken was an operation which took up a certain amount of time. After careful searching, if we spotted one slightly larger than the rest Moustafa would take it out of its cage, cut its throat with a sharp knife, and, without further ado would throw it down in the gutter at the front of the shop, still twitching and bleeding. There, mortally wounded, the bird would briefly flap its wings until it became perfectly still. Moustafa would then pick it up and place it on the scales which were covered in a wrapping that had been soaked in water all night long. The bird would weigh about one and a half kilos<sup>7</sup>. When we got home, it still had to be plucked and cooked. After our maid Amina had removed the gizzard, which the poultry seller had previously stuffed with corn, the fowl barely weighed a kilo. The difference in weight was not of course due to the removal of the feathers, but to the soaked covering on the shop scales and the corn with which the bird had been stuffed.

After buying the poultry we would go to the greengrocer's. Old Ibrahim had only one eye, but was always smiling. There we would buy a pound of aubergines or *badingan*, and for the first course some Egyptian artichokes or *kharchouf* to which the whole family was very partial. Nearby was the neighborhood's main butcher. Half beef and lamb carcasses hung near the shop entrance. Each quarter of meat bore a purple stamp<sup>8</sup>. In hot weather these quarters of meat literally disappeared under swarms of flies. Then the butcher's apprentice would intervene with sweeping movements of his fly whisk. Happily, we were able to buy our meat from a Swiss butcher who, for years had been running a very successful business in the center of town.

Not far from the Arab butcher, was a fishmonger with a vast selection of fish of all shapes and sizes, prawns, some of which were still alive, cuttlefish, sea urchins, lobsters and crayfish with huge menacing pincers. Here and there was the odd shark's head lying next to expensive sole. When I once asked my mother why we so rarely ate fish, she told me



An old photograph of the Swiss butcher's shop, Lanz, which was located in the Bazaar Français near to the Rue de l'Ancienne Bourse

it was too dangerous. She had once been warned that fishmongers would smear red ink on the gills of fish which were no longer quite fresh. This was supposed to make them look like a fresh catch, because the gills of freshly caught fish are normally still covered with blood.

One day when I was at the fishmonger's, I caught sight from a distance of Moustafa, who every two or three minutes took a pigeon out of its cage and, having first of all filled his mouth from a bucket full of water, would then force open the unfortunate bird's beak and blow the water into its gizzard. Perhaps he was short of corn on that day!

In the focal center of the market however, was the highly popular Grand Café. The short young waiter would dash in and out from one table to another, skillfully balancing a tray laden with small coffee cups. In one corner a group of elderly gentlemen would be sitting smoking a hookah, whilst following their neighbors' enthusiastic game of backgammon. In another part of the café, some younger men would sit for hours in front of a glass of water and a slightly sweetened Turkish coffee, *qahwa masbout*, absorbed in their thoughts whilst continually fingering their small prayer beads, rather like a rosary.

Ibrahimieh Market was never quiet. There were continual comings and goings amidst the perpetual noise. At every hour, the trumpet melody from the opera *Aida* would ring out from the café, as a signature tune for the Arabic news. The lemon juice seller was equally noisy: instead of castanets, he would bang little brass cups together, carrying a jug made of the same metal in a shoulder strap. He would pour the refreshing beverage from the jug into glasses fixed in the strap. Here and there, the vegetable and fruit sellers would be shouting their produce at the top of their voices in front of gesticulating housewives. The atmosphere was calmer by the corn sellers from whom one could buy corn on the cob grilled on charcoal. From time to time a *gala gala*, or magician, would appear. In no time, he would be surrounded by a crowd of curious onlookers, especially when he made tiny chicks appear out of his mouth, or pigeon eggs disappear behind his ears.



From the café, one could see straight into the shop of the ironing man, or *makwagy*. He had a very peculiar way of completing his task. Instead of dampening the clothes before ironing them, he would fill his mouth with water and then skillfully squirt it onto the item of clothing he was about to iron.

Just above the gutter, a legless beggar would be sitting on a sort of wooden board on casters. He would recite his misfortunes, begging passers-by for alms. On the other side of the street, from where there wafted a delicious aroma of lamb roasted on a spit, some well-fed gentlemen would be discussing partly in French and partly in Italian the latest news in the daily press. From time to time, one would see a whip being cracked on the emaciated back of a mule painfully pulling a cart heavily loaded with watermelons.

On the street corner near the café, was the Syrian pastry shop which sold a wide variety of Oriental delicacies. Mountains of pink and white *loukoums* were piled high on small rectangular glass plates. This Turkish specialty was made essentially from thick gelatine, a lot of sugar, coloring and rose or orange essence. Next to these were some almond pastries drenched in honey. Grilled pistachios soaked in syrup were also plentiful. There were innumerable quantities of colorful boxes made from light wood, and for well-off customers, inlaid boxes filled with candied fruit. Rows of red candied dates were tightly packed against rows of halved apricots stuffed with almonds. But what we children were especially partial to was *qamar el din*. This was made from dried ripe apricots pressed into a thin strip. We would buy this in strips rather like gift wrap. As we nibbled on this, it felt rather like orange colored cardboard. It could also be soaked in water overnight to make a tasty apricot cream the next day.

In addition to all the small shops, the poultry seller, the butcher and the fishmonger, there were, naturally, also workshops. In almost every street there was a tinker who would regalanize the rice cooking pots<sup>9</sup>. The hammering of the *samkari*, or plumber, could be heard way off. His services were frequently called upon in view of the poor quality

of the plumbing of toilets in most apartment buildings. There were other small shops along the main street in Ibrahimieh Market. One of those was the confectionery shop of an old Armenian, Mr. Issaverdian. We would frequently pay him a visit on account of his large selection of sweets of all kinds. On his counter there was a long row of bulb-shaped jars, filled with the most delicious sweets of many colors. We were invariably tempted by the lollypops of the well-known confectioner Nadler and by the boxes full of Kit Kat wafers. Besides all the confectionery, Mr. Issaverdian had a wide selection of stationery: brightly colored wooden pen holders, steel pens for different styles of lettering, red, green and blue Waterman ink, in addition to various paper items. This type of small shop would generally also sell sewing and especially embroidery thread in all the colors of the rainbow. As winter was fairly short, wool was much less in demand than colored cotton thread. Embroidery was taught in nearly all the European girls' schools. Levantine and Greek women especially, were renowned for their beautiful table cloths embroidered with cross-stitch and petit point. Many of these women had plenty of free time because it was easy to find an Amina or a Mohamed to do the household chores. It was hardly surprising therefore, that many of them would sit all day long by the window watching the hustle and bustle in the street below. As they sat watching they would eat watermelon seeds, skillfully spitting out the shell according to custom.

In the neighborhood of the market tradesmen from all over the Mediterranean had settled in cheap flats of one or more storied apartment buildings. In addition to the Arabs<sup>10</sup>, there were Jews, Syrians, Greeks, Maltese, Armenians, Italians and a large number of Levantines. It was a veritable Tower of Babel. From one window would come the sound of the Corsican crooner Tino Rossi singing one of his hits, whereas in front of one of the rundown buildings a group of young women would be squabbling and insulting each other in Arabic, Greek and Italian, whilst the old Syrian woman nearby was following each and every word, splitting her sides with laughter.

A frequent sight at market was a donkey cart laden with sugar cane. This sugar cane was intended for consumption and not for making sugar. My mother would often buy me a fat stick of cane that was a full head taller than me. I would then happily take it home and give it to Fatma who would cut it into small pieces for me, not without some difficulty. Chewing the sugar cane really put my jaws to the test! I had to chew for quite a while until I was able to spit the cane's woody fibers out again, whilst some of the sweet sap dribbled down my chin.

During the strawberry season, the street vendors would carry the freshly picked ripe strawberries in large wicker baskets on their heads, walking the streets with a proud demeanor chanting out "*frawla*" as they passed by. One day, my mother observed one of them near the market sitting by the roadside with his basket. With the greatest of care, he picked up each of the biggest strawberries one by one, slipped it quickly into his mouth and placed it delicately back at the top of the strawberry basket, all shining with fresh saliva. Needless to say, we never ate fresh strawberries in our house again!

On occasions when my mother had a long shopping list, she would take my father's old Opel to avoid carrying the heavy bags all the way back from the market. On days when there was time, to my great joy we would take a gentle ride home along the rue Eleusis in a somewhat jolty *arabeya*, or barouche. Other people would bring their servant who would follow them home carrying all the shopping in bags made from plaited hemp. If we only had few purchases however, we would walk. The return journey was always entertaining because the streets were teeming with life. The shrill horn of a passing car would awake with a start the driver of an *arabeya* who had dozed off on his seat, and terrify his old horse. A donkey cart heavily laden with clay jugs would only just avoid colliding with a foolhardy cyclist who skillfully balanced a board covered with sesame pretzels on his head. A bit further along at the street corner, there would be a policeman gesticulating and chasing after a young beggar. Sometimes one would come across a poor

woman sitting on the edge of the pavement, breast-feeding her baby. A half-blind woman would often be sitting in the shade of the old eucalyptus tree, selling eggs and then putting her hard earned takings in a grimy handkerchief. A few meters further along, a poorly dressed man whose face was heavily pockmarked would be sitting on the curb eating with relish a meager meal of *aesh bil fuul*: pitta bread filled with beans. He would call out to passersby “*Et faddal*”: “Be my guest”. Like all Orientals, Egyptian are well known for their generous hospitality.

## SHOPPING DOWN TOWN

Whereas the tradesmen and shopkeepers of Ibrahimieh district would go about their business like in any Oriental bazaar, in the center of town however, commerce was carried out more along European lines.

During school holidays, I loved to accompany my mother down town. The bus stop was barely five minutes away from our house. The blue bus would drive down Aboukir Street and finally turn into Fouad I Street. There, we would usually go to the Confiserie-Glacier Baudrot, where the Greek waiter would serve us a delicious ice cream on the covered terrace. Then we would walk to the Rue Chérif Pacha to the reputed Old England shop. If it were not for the fact that the staff spoke not only English, but also Arabic, French, Italian and sometimes even Greek, we would have thought ourselves in London’s Piccadilly Circus! It sold the finest tweeds and quality woolen cloth for elegant winter tailoring, in addition to English soap and all kinds of Sheffield cutlery. Fine Wedgwood china would be on display in the most prominent position in the shop. Whilst my mother was being shown various rolls of Manchester tweed, I would remain

Alexandrie (Egypt)  
Boulevard Chérif Pacha



transfixed in front of a shelf of children's china bearing a Peter Rabbit motif by Beatrix Potter, much loved by English children.

Slightly further along the same street was Old England's French counterpart, Rivoli, which specialized in gifts. We would also often call in at a shop called Tawa which had a vast selection of quality handmade Oriental goods. The rue Chérif Pacha was renowned for its beautiful shops with their expensive displays. There were two jewelry shops, Horowitz and Zivy Frères. One day my parents entered the latter so that my mother could choose a piece of jewelry. She chose a gold brooch in the form of leaves surrounding a heart shaped precious stone. As she left, the jeweler congratulated her on her choice, "*Mabrouk*", adding in French, "*Pour le petit coeur de votre mari . . .*"

For everyday purchases, there was a choice of several department stores. The Grands Magasins Chalons and Oreco both resembled French department stores, whereas Sednaoui, an older store founded in Cairo in 1878, was situated in the rue Sidi Metwalli. In addition to the Alexandria branch of Sednaoui, a building of several floors, there were five other branches throughout Egypt. We mostly frequented Hannaux, where one could find anything one's heart desired from Dijon *pain d'épice* to my mother's favorite perfume, *Quelques Fleurs*, by Houbigant. Naturally, there were many other specialized shops like the Salon Vert for quality fabrics, and the Maison Française, the oldest shop in Egypt which specialized in knitting wool. Those looking for books could go to the Cité du Livre, or to the Victoria Stationery & Bookstores. There were also some shops of international renown such as Bata shoe shop and Etam which sold stockings and fine lingerie.

After a long shopping expedition it would be time to return home. However, before catching the tram from Ramleh Station, we would quickly buy some delicious *éclairs*, *millefeuilles* or other pastries either from the Greek patisserie *Pastroudis*, or from *Délices*.

Whilst the women were busy shopping, the menfolk would be filling the city's numerous cafés, reading the newspaper. Spoilt for choice, they could either read one of the many Arabic newspapers, or else one of the so-called European newspapers published in Egypt such as the *Egyptian Gazette*, the *Egyptian Mail*, the *Progrès d'Égypte*, or the *Journal d'Égypte*. After the war, a number of other foreign newspapers and magazines appeared. To name but a few, one could read the *Corriere della Sera*, the *London Illustrated News*, the *Picture Post*, the American magazine *Life*, or one of the many women's publications such as *Jardin des Modes*.

Those who wanted to know the latest rates on the Cotton Exchange could read the *Journal d'Alexandrie et la Bourse Égyptienne*. Of course Egyptian industry did not comprise solely of cotton production and textile companies such as the Filature Nationale d'Égypte. There was also the food industry, glassmaking, papermaking, furniture, and the Laurens cigarette factory in Moharrem Bey, in Alexandria.

## KHAIRI AND FATMA

It was not always easy to find honest and trustworthy domestic help. We were nevertheless very satisfied with Khairi, a tall strapping lad with a bronze complexion who came from a little village south of Aswan in Upper Egypt. He was always good-natured and we all liked him. Speaking from experience, my mother often used to say, "The darker the skin, the more reliable the character." One day my brother asked him how many wives he had, to which he proudly replied, "Two, but if God wills it and gives me some more money, I shall get me a third wife next time I go home." According to the Koran each Muslim may take four wives as long as he can financially support them all equally. Khairi was very religious. He would pray five times daily up on the flat roof of

our house, he would fast scrupulously and observe all the other restrictions imposed by the month of Ramadan. We admired his strength of will which enabled him, even in the greatest of heat, to resist the temptation to swallow a little water to quench his thirst or even merely to wet his parched mouth without actually swallowing. The day of fasting began at sunrise and was very long. It was not surprising therefore, that Khairi became more and more irritable at sunset. He would place himself in front of the open window in order not to miss the cannon fire which heralded the end of the daily fast at sunset. At that time of day the streets would empty, and the trams and buses would stop wherever they were to allow the drivers to at least drink a little water and eat something.

One day Khairi was allowed to accompany my father down town, thus enabling him to save the fare. This prompted him to announce gleefully that he would now be able to buy some cigarettes, for he used to smoke like a chimney, even at night time. On another occasion when he had just dropped a plate, he said to my mother quite innocently, “That plate’s days were obviously numbered . . . .” My mother could not but smile with a knowing look.

Unlike my father, my mother learnt Arabic from the servants and the neighborhood shopkeepers. As a result her Arabic left a lot to be desired, but as long as she was more or less able to communicate with these people, she was quite satisfied. Occasionally however, her shortcomings in Arabic provoked amusing results. During the winter, the nights could be very cold. In the bedroom, if one placed a hand on an exterior wall one could feel the wind blowing outside against the house. One evening when my parents had been invited to some friends, my mother asked Khairi to slip a hot water bottle in the bottom of the bed after supper. My mother came home looking forward to a warm bed. To her disappointment, when she got into bed she found the sheets stone cold. She naturally thought that Khairi had forgotten about the hot water bottle. However, it was not to be



found in the bathroom. She searched everywhere until she did indeed find it at the bottom of the bed — but not in the bed, *underneath it!*

Unlike Khairi who was from Upper Egypt, his successor, Fatma, came from Damanhour, a provincial major town in the Nile Delta. She was the fifth of eight children, and when her father died she came to work for us at barely sixteen years of age. She moved into Khairi's old attic and was thrilled to have her own room for the first time in her life. She was slender and paler than Khairi. Unlike our old laundress who always wore black, Fatma liked to wear very bright colors, especially pink, and a plain kerchief edged with glass beads. In the lower classes and in the countryside, young girls wear brightly colored dresses until their marriage. Once married, they wear a black *melaya*, a kind of long cotton shawl or wrap which envelopes them from head to toe. Most women of the wealthier classes however, followed the latest Paris fashions.

Fatma was devoted to us children. When she had the time, she would willingly play with my German celluloid Schildkröte dolls. She had never seen such dolls before. During the spring festival, Sham el Nassim, if her family could afford it her mother would buy her one of those mouth-watering, brightly colored sugared dolls, covered with fringes of gold tissue paper. Fatma would never tire of describing Sham el Nassim. Her family would ride out to the countryside on a donkey cart for a picnic, or else they would stay by the roadside amongst all the festivities. Musicians drummed frantically on their *darabukka*, a funnel shaped clay drum, the end of which was covered with a sheep's bladder. Others played on a simple shrill flute. Snake charmers rarely missed out on the occasion, nor did the monkey tamers who, for a few piasters, would make their monkeys perform. The children, all dressed up in new clothes, would eagerly await their turn on the wooden swings. Now and then, the water carrier, stooping under the weight of his goatskin filled to the brim, would sprinkle some water on the dry ground to prevent the children's play from raising clouds of dust.



Fatma brushing  
my hair

## APPEARANCES CAN BE MISLEADING

The workmen and fellaheen generally wore a *galabeya*: a long flowing cotton robe, somewhat resembling a nightdress. During winter, they wore a similar garment made of wool. State employees, owners of large companies, and generally speaking, the members of the affluent classes wore European dress. However, what made them stand out from the Europeans was their hat, a tarboush made of red felt. Naturally, there were exceptions.

One day my father paid a visit to his Armenian car agent, Mr. Yapoudjian. It was there that he witnessed the following comical incident: a man in a striped, navy blue *galabeya* asked Mr. Yapoudjian to show him the new model of an American car which had arrived a few days earlier. As the agent explained the technical advantages of the new car, his client did not seem interested. Instead, he repeatedly opened the car door, slamming it shut again each time. The agent looked at him questioningly . . . at which the client declared, “When I go into town with all my wives, I want everyone to notice that I’ve bought a car.” Satisfied with the sound of the car door’s slamming, he took out of his crumpled *galabeya* a thick wad of Egyptian pounds and paid for his new car. Then, as he climbed into it, a young man in a dirty, threadbare *galabeya* approached to try to sell him some fragrant jasmine garlands.

During the winter, policemen wore a navy uniform, whereas in summer they wore beige<sup>11</sup>. But the royal horse guards in their sparkling white uniforms with gold buttons were more impressive.

Whereas the Arab café, which was the focal point of Ibrahimieh Market, was almost exclusively frequented by the lower classes, more affluent gentlemen, usually dressed in tailor-made suits and the inevitable tarboush, would meet in Athineos or in the Petit or the Grand Trianon in Saad Zaghloul Street. They would stay there for hours

sitting at a table for one or two persons, sipping strong Turkish coffee served from small brass pots and accompanied by a glass of cold water to quench their thirst, watching all the activity outside in the street. In one hand they would hold a fly whisk with an ivory handle with which they would continually brush away the numerous flies, in the other, a string of amber prayer beads. Sometimes they would read the *Al-Ahram* newspaper, whilst a *bouyaggi* would be polishing their shoes.

### OUR TRIPS TO QAHA AND CAIRO

During the Christmas holidays, we would sometimes be invited by Gamil Bey and his wife to their vast estate in Qaha, north of Cairo. The land had once belonged to his father, who was a pasha, and whom my father had got to know whilst he was director of the sanatorium in Helwan. We children always looked forward to going to Qaha and to the journey across the Nile Delta. It gave us the opportunity to see something of the Egyptian countryside.

Although the main roads were asphalted, we could not go very fast on account of their bumpy surface. We had barely crossed the Mahmoudieh Canal and left behind the calm waters of Lake Mariout, than we saw the first green fields of *barseem*, the clover on which fed that most patient of the beasts of burden, the donkey. Then we would drive past vast fields of beans and wheat. The green, fertile plain of the Nile Delta stretched out into the horizon, with here and there a few miserable clay huts. From time to time, we would drive alongside one of the many irrigation canals on which the peasants depend for their livelihood. They would be lined with fragrant, shady eucalyptus trees. Women clothed all in black and half veiled, would walk by with a proud demeanor, bearing heavy water jars on their heads, and followed by a flock of grubby children.

Young girls dressed in bright colors would be sitting cross-legged on the banks of the canals, laughing at the village boys frolicking in the dirty brown water. Sometimes we would have to stop briefly, obliged to top up the Opel's boiling radiator from the bottle of water we had brought with us. For health reasons we would never have used water from the nearest canal — for in addition to the various eye diseases which affected almost ninety per cent of the population, one of Egypt's greatest scourges was bilharzia, a disease transmitted to man by flukes living in infected waters. The larvae penetrate the body either through the skin or mucous membranes. At other times, we would stop by the roadside simply to stretch our legs. On those occasions, we would look for a quiet spot away from any agglomeration, otherwise we would in no time have become the center of attraction of all the curious village youth.

I remember vividly one such roadside stop when my father pointed out to me a green, blue and orange kingfisher perched on a low casuarina branch, busy pluming its feathers. To this day, I have only ever seen one other such magnificent bird on the Turkish riviera. In our garden also, there was quite a number of birds including the cheeky little hoopoe, as well as sparrows naturally. In the countryside, tall whitewashed dovecotes towered over the low peasants' mud dwellings. For these people, the pigeons cooing in the acacia branches provided a welcome change from their usual dull diet which consisted mostly of bread, brown beans and onions.

Wherever we stopped in the countryside, we would very often hear the creaking of a *saquieh*, a kind of large wooden construction used for irrigating the fields. Blindfolded bulls or water buffalos had to move continuously in a circle. In doing this they set a large wooden wheel in motion. Attached to this wheel by ropes were clay buckets which scooped up the water. Unlike the *saquieh*, the *shadoof* consisting of a pivoted pole with a bucket at one end for raising water and a counterweight at the other, is worked painstakingly by man just like Archimedes' screw. Everywhere we gazed as we drove through the

paddy fields and fields of corn we never saw the slightest trace of mechanization, as all the farm work was carried out by cheap local labor. Before the Second World War, the average annual per capita income for three quarters of the population was three Egyptian pounds. So it was hardly surprising that not only the fellaheen but many of their children, were obliged to work for a miserable pay under the supervision of a menacing overseer wielding a stick.

On our way to Qaha, we passed through two large provincial towns, Damanhour, an important center for cotton storage, and Tanta noted for its administrative buildings, bazaars and mosques. Upon our arrival in Qaha, we were always warmly greeted by our hosts. They would then invite us to a veritable feast consisting of both European and Egyptian specialties. Considering that it was wartime, the quantity and variety of dishes served were amazing. Some of these dishes were very rich and fatty, leaving us feeling uneasy knowing that they would remain untouched and end up being thrown away. For the first course, we were served their famous *molokheya*, a kind of herb soup which was spinach green in color, prepared with garlic and coriander, and which I did not like at all. Next came bowls of *falafel*, or spiced vegetable balls, and small dishes of *kofta*, lamb meatballs flavored with garlic, parsley, pepper and other spices. In the center would be a huge dish piled high with lamb kebabs and roast pigeon. Other dishes contained vine leaves stuffed with rice and mint. We helped ourselves to *tahina*, a sort of cold sesame paste in which we would dip *aesh baladi*, the local flat bread. Dessert would consist of *kunafa*, a kind of vermicelli covered with sugar, honey and nuts, and served in silver bowls<sup>12</sup>. In the midst of all these delicacies towered a huge basket of fruit full of mandarins, oranges, medlars, and in contrasting yellow, sweet lemons, which despite their sugar content, were almost tasteless. When the banquet was over, we would pass into a room decorated with different colored tiles in the center of which a small fountain trickled. In one corner was a divan covered with precious Persian rugs, in another some



Photographs of workers in the fields, taken on our trip to Qaha

comfortable leather stools surrounding low tables decorated with ivory and mother-of-pearl marquetry. On these *kursies* were placed some small carved brass coffee pots. The matching coffee cups consisted of small containers also of carved brass resembling egg cups in which were placed small bowls without handles. On a slightly larger table was a very fine tea set in fine white porcelain bordered with gold. The teapot and all the cups were decorated with portraits of the parents, brothers and sisters of Gamil Bey. His father had had this tea set made in Europe especially. After the adults had sat down for coffee, a richly dressed servant would appear bearing a silver tray on which were two carafes made of blown glass, one pale green and the other blue turquoise, accompanied by matching glasses. One of the carafes contained pomegranate juice, the other mango juice which seemed very exotic to us at that time.

In addition to the sumptuous lunches and dinners, I have kept a vivid memory of our breakfasts in Qaha. These consisted of fresh yoghurt, homemade flat bread, fig or *banati* jam made from sweet seedless grapes. The strong tea was drunk with boiled buffalo milk. This milk had such a high fat content that after boiling it was covered with a layer of cream thicker than one's finger, which was then served in lieu of butter. As soon as I had finished my breakfast I would go to see the six Arab stallions in their stables and feed them long stemmed clover. Each day I was allowed, under supervision, to take a donkey ride. As I rode, I watched the peasants plowing the earth with the most primitive of ploughs just like the Ancient Egyptians. I saw them harvesting cereals either with a sickle or simply by pulling them up by hand. On another occasion I attended the threshing. The threshing machine which was on rollers and had metal semi-circular blades, was pulled by buffalo or sometimes by camels. They would drag it back and forth over the cereal until the grain and straw were sufficiently crushed. Then the grain would be separated from the chaff by a large sieve. To quench my thirst after the ride, I would go to the orchard on the edge of the property. Gamil Bey allowed me to visit his



small plantation at any time of the day. Rows of orange and mandarin trees laden with large, juicy fruit stretched out under the hot sun. Amongst them one caught glimpses of the small green fruit of the lime trees. In a corner of the orchard were rows of apricot and pomegranate trees as well as some date palms and a number of mango trees.

On the edge of the orchard, Gamil Bey had created for his youngest daughter a small zoo with only young animals. Brightly colored parrots continually let out piercing cries, whilst Nile crocodiles slept lethargically alongside the rather meager pond. Nothing seemed to disturb the slumbers of the small light grey desert fox either. On the other hand, the enclosures of the gazelles and of the macaques were a hive of ceaseless activity.

The garden in front of the villa looked like a park and smelled wonderfully of roses and jasmine. From a distance, one glimpsed the bright red flowers of the poinciana trees and the blue flowers of the jacaranda trees. These dashes of color stood out against the green backdrop of fan shaped palm trees and tall clumps of graceful bamboo. At the center of the small rose garden was an oval shaped ornamental pond where papyrus, the oldest and most emblematic of all the Egyptian plants, grew.

When we were not invited to Qaha for Christmas, we would go to Cairo instead. We would take the Alexandria Cairo desert road which was built in 1917. The two hundred kilometer stretch of road was monotonous and seemed endless to us children, although in fact it was less long than the Delta road, which on the other hand was much more interesting. My father had to keep very alert, for driving along this perfectly straight road tended to make the driver sleepy. The only distraction in this vast expanse of sand, were the empty petrol cans strewn alongside the tarmac every two or three hundred meters, and the telegraph poles stretching along one side of the road as far as the eye could see. We occasionally passed by a solitary Bedouin with his camel, or spotted in the distance before us a shady mound which, as we drew closer, turned out to be a poor nomad's tent.

Halfway, we would stop briefly at the Rest House for refreshments and then start out again for the remaining hundred kilometers of the journey.

The image of the pyramids as distant silhouettes gradually emerging from the desert as we approached Cairo and finally appearing before us in all their majesty has remained fixed in my memory. At that time this whole area was wonderfully peaceful. There were no coaches full of tourists polluting the atmosphere, no souvenir vendors, nor any guides to importune us let alone any beggars, in this remarkable landscape at the foot of this unique wonder of the world. Here and there a few camel drivers would pass slowly by us in total silence, so we could bask unhindered in the tranquil atmosphere of Giza's ancient site. On another occasion, we visited the mysterious sphinx at dusk and then went on a lonely camel ride in the surrounding desert. I can still see the image of the three great pyramids against the bright colors of the setting sun.

Nowadays, the Egyptian capital has a population of over sixteen million and stretches almost right up to the pyramids. But in the 1940s when its population was barely two or three million, there were just a few luxurious villas alongside the avenue which led from Cairo to the suburb of Giza. The lifestyle in the streets and different quarters of the capital was much calmer and more carefree than today. There were no crowds rushing around everywhere. When we visited the various sites, we hardly ever came across other tourists, and in the museums there were never more than a handful of other visitors.

We generally visited the Egyptian Museum. At that time, we children were still too young to really appreciate the Pharaonic exhibits. Our father used to draw our attention to various objects which had a particular significance such as the wooden statue of the priest, which was commonly referred to as the Village Mayor, or *Cheikh El Balad*. We, on the other hand, were much more impressed by the huge statue of King Khefren seated. This was the pharaoh who built the second great pyramid. Likewise, we would

gaze admiringly at the treasures from King Tutankhamen's tomb discovered in 1922 by the English Egyptologist, Howard Carter. Naturally, we also visited the Coptic Museum in Old Cairo, where I admired the wood-carvings incrustated with ivory as well as the *moucharabiehs*, a kind of balcony enclosed in wooden latticework in front of a window. These would decorate the façades of most Muslim and Christian houses until the end of the nineteenth century.

Afterwards, to reward us for our cultural endeavors we were taken either to Groppi's to eat delicious ice cream and éclairs or else to the grand Shepherd Hotel where we would dine on the terrace. Once, luck had it that our friend Gamil Bey and his family were in Cairo at the same time as us. We were naturally thrilled when he invited us to a sumptuous dinner on his boat on the Nile not far from Guezirah Sporting Club.

Before leaving Cairo we would always visit Khan el Khalili Bazaar which seemed to us a kind of Aladdin's cave. There, rows of tiny shops crowded close together sold a variety of Oriental goods such as pastries, perfumes and spices. Next to them, other shops crammed with merchandise competed with their colorful displays of bales of cotton and iridescent silk fabrics. From a distance we caught sight in the jewelry stalls of countless glistening gold or silver bracelets, earrings, nose rings, as well as set precious gems, turquoise hands of Fatima and other Oriental jewelry. In another alleyway of this vast bazaar were the coppersmiths' workshops where they would make finely chiseled copper pots with matching bowls used by Muslims for ritual ablutions before praying. These craftsmen would also make plates, goblets and other everyday objects, many of which were finely decorated with beautiful Koranic calligraphy. They would engrave the copper object firstly by cutting a groove with a sharp pointed tool and then hammering a very fine silver wire thread into it. They used the same technique to decorate brass objects with copper or silver elements. It was only much later, with the arrival of mass tourism, that

the bazaars and souvenir shops had to cater for the huge demand for miniature pyramids, heads of Pharaohs or of Queen Nefertiti and other reproductions of antiquities.

## OUR FIRST TRIP AFTER THE WAR

One fine morning in the mid 1940s whilst I was still attending the Swiss School, I was astonished to see two employees from the Flückiger patisserie giving out currant buns and brioches during the break time. Upon asking the reason for this treat we were told that the armistice had just been signed: it was 8 May 1945.

Seven long years had passed during which my parents had only been able to maintain contact with their loved ones in Switzerland by letter. In fact, there would often be long months without any news. Thus they would have loved to travel with us children already in the summer of 1945 to Basel and Lucerne, but that was still entirely out of the question. Most of Europe was in ruins and the waters of the Mediterranean were still too dangerous being infested with the numerous mines and shipwrecks left by the war. Moreover, there was practically no place available on board ship for civilian passengers. Finally, with the help of an old acquaintance whose family also wanted to travel to Switzerland, my father succeeded in the spring of 1946 to find a Swedish cargo and passenger vessel with two cabins still free. However he had a lot of difficulties to overcome, and was obliged to patiently pay out numerous baksheesh in order to fill the appropriate forms and get all the required documents ready for our trip to Switzerland. Just as in 1938, when my mother and I traveled alone, it was once again impossible for my father to accompany us on the journey due to his medical obligations. Three months later, he at last found a colleague able to replace him and so joined us in Switzerland.

Finally, our date of departure arrived. On Palm Sunday 1946 my father drove us with our hand luggage to the great port south west of the city, a port which had been named Eunostus in ancient times: the Port of Safe Return. Our vessel, the SS *Farnebo* bound for Genoa, was anchored at the central quayside not far from the warehouses and depots where the Egyptian cotton was cleaned, pressed and packed. As we waited, watching the incessant comings and goings on the quayside, my father left us to fetch the large cabin trunk which he had deposited at the offices of the navigation company a few days earlier. Here, thousands of bales of cotton were collected from all over Egypt. Bare-chested workers would push and drag the heavy loads, whilst donkeys and mules pulled two wheeled carts piled incredibly high with enormous bales of the white cotton.

Meanwhile, Mr. and Mrs. Fierz had arrived with their two sons who were the same age as my brother and I. Mr. Fierz was also unable to accompany his family for professional reasons. As the hour of departure arrived, we all had to bid farewell to our respective fathers. We reached the ladder leading on board which I climbed with dread as always. Shortly after, the ship pulled up anchor, the engines started throbbing and the SS *Farnebo* sailed out of the port. We stayed a long while glued to the ship's rail until our fathers were mere dots on the distant quayside.

The crossing went smoothly. Once however, the ship came within five meters of a mine floating at the surface of the water. Luckily, we children had not the slightest idea of the disaster which we had just escaped. The food served on board ship was at times rather odd as if the chef had been hired specifically just for the needs of a few private passengers. I remember in particular a kind of tasteless greenish pudding. In the afternoons, black tea with sugar and milk was served and trays of biscuits. We children would pounce on the biscuits as if famished until our mothers would call us to order and stop us from devouring them all before dinner. One evening, as we passed by the kitchens we caught sight of a cook throwing biscuits overboard. From that moment onwards we would take

the leftover biscuits back to our cabin, for the fish probably did not enjoy them as much as we did! Later on, when we caught the train in Genoa we were delighted to be able to share the biscuits with the Italian passengers who were used to food rationing. At breakfast time we were always served freshly ground coffee. I would rise early, dress, and go to stand in front of the ship's storeroom to watch the ship's boy sitting, grounding the coffee. He had a very individual way of completing the task: he would wedge the coffee mill between his feet, upon which I noticed that he had only four toes on his left foot. So it is hardly surprising that there were always a few coffee beans lying on the floor.

As the SS *Fernebo* entered the port of Genoa, the destitution caused by the war in Europe sprung before our very eyes. Even before we disembarked, I caught sight of the crowd of scrawny dockers in rags, boarding our ship to unload the cargo of cotton and onions. I especially noticed a little old man crouched in front of the ship's storeroom painstakingly picking up the coffee grains and slipping them into a cone made of a piece of crumpled newspaper.

We boarded a train to complete the penultimate stage of our journey, from Genoa which in parts was severely damaged, right up to Milan. Although this city had escaped most of the bombing we had great difficulty in finding suitable lodging for the night. The boarding house which we finally found was very modest, but the Signora running it proudly insisted on treating us to her homemade tagliatelle. The pasta roller lay in pride of place at the center of the unheated and rather primitive kitchen, and the homemade pasta dough was rolled out on a large white sheet.

The following morning, our hearts full of joyful anticipation, we boarded the train which was at long last to take us back to our country. Then on Easter Sunday as we arrived in Basel station, my mother was overjoyed after an eight year separation to be finally able to embrace her parents and sisters again! Somewhat intimidated, my brother

and I stood apart: my brother especially since he had been a mere two month old baby during our last stay in Switzerland shortly before the war.

Easter fled past in no time as we had so much to say to each other! One of my aunts, who was no linguist, could not fathom out why her niece and nephew spoke almost exclusively in French amongst themselves. At the Swiss School of Alexandria, French had become as familiar to us as the Basel dialect which we spoke at home and to which my father gave great importance.

We thus spent the season after our arrival with my mother's family who lived in a large villa with a magnificent garden full of flowers and fruit trees, not far from the forest. The thing which fascinated me the most in this garden was the small stream which served as a border between our cherry and apple trees on the one side and the neighbor's kitchen garden on the other. On the other side was an old shady hazel tree with masses of branches under which we would eat lunch on hot summer days. That garden had many wonderful things which were unknown to us in Alexandria: dark red and black cherries, raspberries, blackberries, red currants, gooseberries, violet colored plums, light green summer apples, and pears in autumn shades. What pleased us less however, was the stewed rhubarb which was so sour that we had to drench it with sugar. At that time many foodstuffs were still rationed in Switzerland and could only be obtained with specific ration cards, so our grandmother was greatly relieved when we also were issued with such cards. The distribution of our monthly ration cards was meticulously inscribed in my mother's passport.

Naturally, I also spent some time with my paternal grandmother who lived above Lucerne in an impressive villa built the previous century in the middle of a large park of ancient trees. On the villa's south façade, the balcony covered with fragrant wisteria looked directly out onto Mount Pilatus with its snowy peak. Further down in the distance

one could see the glistening cold waters of the Lake of the Four Cantons with the silhouette of the Burgenstock in the background. I was very sad to no longer be able to go for walks with my beloved grandfather who had passed away due to pneumonia at the beginning of the war. It was he who transformed Lucerne into a center for music, and he was also its highly respected mayor for many years.

Sometimes I would go swimming in the lake with my grandmother after which, despite the fact that lunchtime was approaching, she would treat me to the most delicious strawberry tarts I have ever tasted. After the scene my mother had witnessed in Alexandria, needless to say that fresh strawberries were never served up at our table again!

I will still remember that warm sunny day when my grandmother took me down to Lucerne on an excursion across the Lake of the Four Cantons aboard a paddle steamer. As we sailed, I gazed at the breathtaking view: the steep cliffs jutting out of the lake's greenish blue waters, slightly further up the green meadows surrounded by forests of dark pine trees, and well in the background, the majestic alpine landscape of the snow-capped mountain permanently glistening in the sunshine. I felt a rush of pride to think that this magnificent country, which I still knew so little, was my country.

When my father arrived in August for one month, the four of us went to Grindelwald for a fortnight. The rest of his stay went by far too quickly with all the visits to his mother in Lucerne and to his beloved sister as well as to all the other members of the family.

Seeing that throughout the war we had been unable to return to Switzerland, and that it took much longer and proved more difficult to book our return boat journey to Alexandria than expected, we ended up staying for almost six months. Under the circumstances my father was able to obtain school leave for us children. However, worried that our holidays would be too long, our parents decided to send us for a few months to the local elementary school in Riehen. The schooling there was entirely in German, not French, which was difficult for me since I knew the language of Goethe less well than that



of Molière. Obligated to speak the local dialect with the other children during recreation, instead of either French or English, I was glad when my stay at this school came to an end.

In early fall, the time to leave inevitably came. In my mother's passport I can still make out amongst the numerous stamps, the one of the French Consulate in Basel dated 19 November 1946 belonging to the transit visa allowing her and both her children to cross French territory within the month in order to board the ship for Egypt. My maternal grandparents accompanied us to Geneva. From there, we continued by train crossing the French customs at Bellegarde. As we started out at nightfall on our long rail journey, the train at one point began to advance just one meter at a time. Looking out of the open window we realized with horror that we were perched on a bridge above a deep gorge. In our compartment there was an old man in threadbare clothes. When my mother asked him why the train was crossing the bridge in such a strange fashion, he replied somewhat sadistically and sparing us no detail that the bridge had been totally destroyed during the war and that we were now crossing a temporary bridge just recently erected. Our terror finally subsided when we arrived the other end safe and sound, and we then continued the journey all through the night. The following day, as we approached Toulon we at last caught sight from afar of the Orduna, the British military vessel which was to take us back to Alexandria.

## A NEW SCHOOL

During the nineteenth century many schools were founded in Egypt by French and English missionaries. Most of the population naturally spoke Arabic, but at the beginning of the twentieth century the Egyptian elite began to speak French, and later on

English too. However during the period I was there, as free schooling improved and the influence of the nationalist movement increased, both spoken and written Arabic grew in importance.

At the end of my fourth year of elementary school, my parents transferred me to the Scottish School for Girls so that I would learn English. Most of the teaching staff at that missionary school were native English speakers. I still vividly recall Miss Blake who had previously spent many years teaching in a missionary school in China: we would watch in amazement as she would trace the most elegant Chinese characters in India ink. My twenty-five classmates one day all signed their names in my poetry book, and as I reread them now it occurs to me that they came from all over the Mediterranean: Magda Kamel, Denise Halifi, Kiki Partheniades, Sona Yeghiayan, Fofu Isataliou, Simone Zeitouneh and Fifi Alvares, to name but a few. Amongst all these Mediterranean names however, there is one solitary English name, Peggy Wood, next to an Indian one, Usha Baveja.

Whereas during lesson times we were obliged to speak in the subject language only, during recreation on the other hand, one heard an incessant mixture of many tongues. Moreover, our every sentence was peppered with words from all the other languages we knew. Some however, only spoke Greek, Armenian or Levantine French. Our timetable was full, because in addition to English, we were also taught French and Arabic, for which finding it difficult I had little enthusiasm. Our Arabic teacher, Mrs. Fahmy, followed a system which suited me perfectly however: she would ask us one by one in alphabetical order to read from the exercise book. Since my name was right at the end of the alphabet, and I had therefore heard the said page read umpteen times by my classmates, by the time it was my turn I knew the page practically by heart. This caused Mrs. Fahmy to observe, “I don’t understand. You read Arabic so well, but your grades for dictation are disastrous!”

Like in all the Egyptian and foreign schools, except for the Swiss School, the pupils wore school uniform. This usually consisted of a dark long-sleeved cotton overall with a white collar, sometimes worn with a colorful scarf. Our school uniform consisted of a light red overall with a white collar and a red belt. In some of the French missionary schools, the more deserving pupils were awarded medals which they proudly wore<sup>13</sup>.

Despite all my efforts, I made little progress in Arabic. My weakness in the subject forced my parents to transfer me to another school where it was not compulsory. That is why I had the privilege of attending the distinguished English Girls' College for three years, until our return to Switzerland. This institution was founded on the same lines as British "public" schools, which as everyone knows are in fact private schools. The pupils fell into two categories: the day girls and the boarders whose parents lived far away in the Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Syria or Palestine. The school's founders had done things on a grand scale, so it had a variety of facilities including its own swimming pool. It also had a large hall with a stage where, each year, we would put on works by Shakespeare or other classic English playwrights. There was a summer and a winter uniform. During the summer term we would wear a simple plain pastel cotton dress in either pale pink, green, yellow or blue, with a grey jacket for cooler days. In winter we wore grey blazers, skirts and ties, with blouses in the same pastel colors as the summer uniform.

## LEISURE AND ENTERTAINMENT

All year round, affluent Alexandrians especially of Greek and Levantine origin, would lead a prominent social life. In those days, as it was easy to obtain domestic staff, people often held large private receptions. Invitations to five o'clock tea alternated with those to elegant dinners and cocktail parties. People would be introduced to each other



A class outing with the Scottish Girls' School, by the beach near Stanley Bay. I am in the second row, first on the left with plaits.

at the horse races in Alexandria Sporting Club founded in 1890, or at the select Union Club or the Royal Yacht Club. Even during the war years, there was no shortage of dinner invitations in town as well as other forms of entertainment. An amusing incident, that is to say amusing to everyone except the individual concerned, occurred one evening during a grand dinner attended by a number of important officials. One of the guests was known to have the unfortunate habit of filling his pockets with delicacies from the table during such banquets. When the opportunity presented itself as this guest was seated at table, it was decided to play a trick on him. It was the end of a long copious meal, and coffee was served with candies and sugared almonds. A fine crystal dish full of sugared almonds was placed directly in front of him. Our somewhat light-fingered guest waited for a suitable moment to stuff his pockets. Suddenly the lights went out, and before he had time to react the dish of sugared almonds was replaced with a large bowl full of whipped cream. When the lights came back on a little later, our guest whose hands were now covered in cream no doubt wished the ground would swallow him up!

The social life of the Swiss community revolved essentially around the Swiss Club. One of its main events was the annual charity sale which was planned well in advance. Every Monday afternoon a small circle of ladies who were partial to needlework would meet in the villa of one of the group. In fine weather, they would sit in the well-kept garden, under the shady trees and enthusiastically knit, sew or crochet for the auspicious event. As they labored, they would gossip about their children, the fashion, the problems with their domestic staff or about how happy they were to have at last found an honest and hard-working servant. Occasionally, they would even discuss in a low voice the latest love affair or other scandal to shake the Swiss community. Meanwhile, the hostess would take care of her guests serving them refreshments on silver trays, or Earl Grey tea, accompanied by finely cut sandwiches and delicious sweetmeats. Finally, the important day would arrive: the great hall of the Swiss Club in Ambroise Ralli Street<sup>14</sup> in

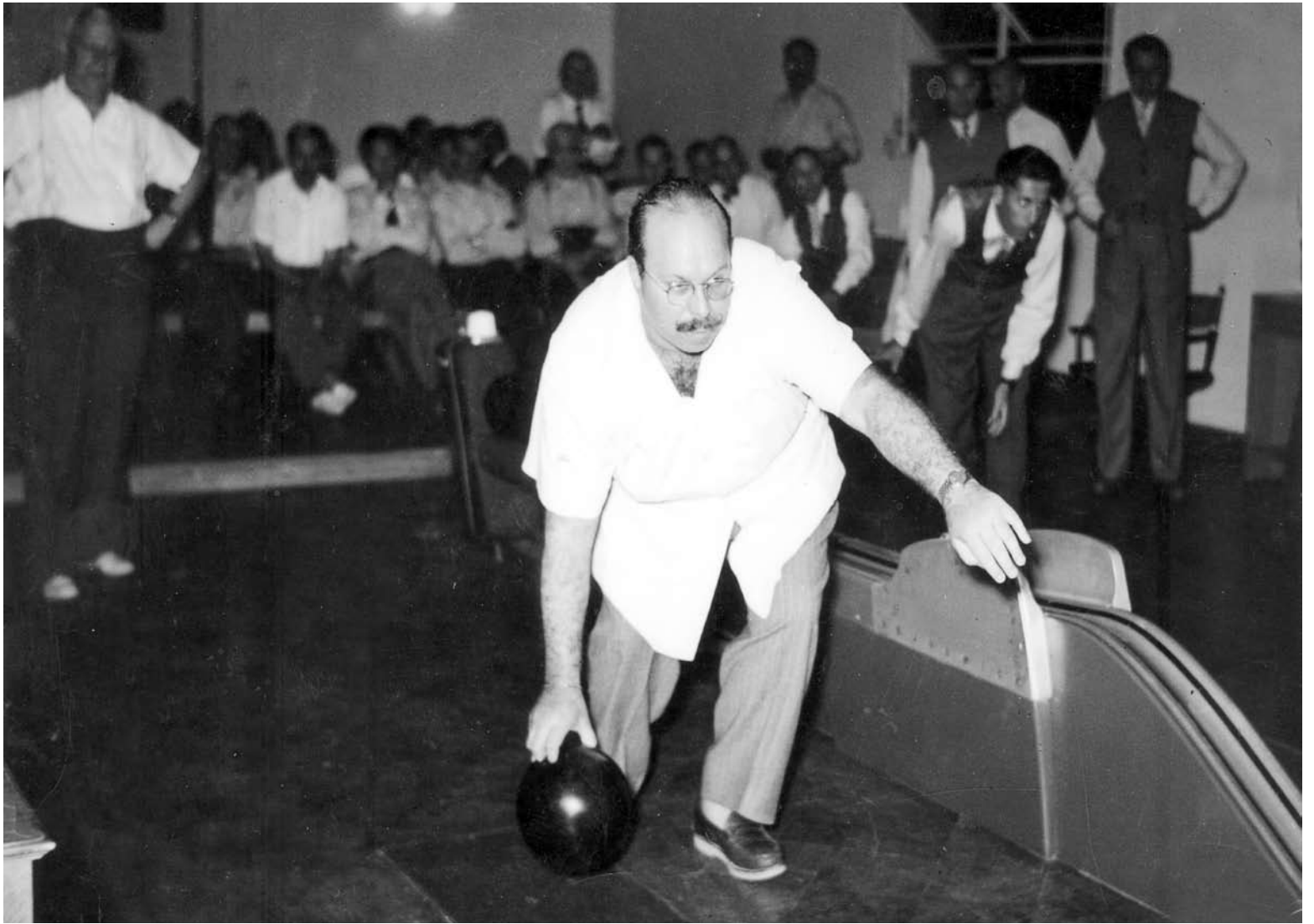
Chatby would be decorated for the occasion. The ladies, dressed in their smartest Swiss traditional costume, would proudly stand behind their richly adorned stall bedecked with tea cosies, artistically embroidered table linen in the finest Egyptian cotton, bed jackets, pale pastel knitted or crocheted baby clothes, felt-covered coat hangers, and amusing handmade dolls' clothes. There was also a stall selling homemade pastries, cakes and real Swiss chocolate.

Young children could try their luck in a corner of the hall at the lucky dip: this consisted of a child's wooden playpen in which there were lots of small parcels to be fished with the help of a rod with a large hook at one end. Another main attraction was the stall selling colorful wooden Swiss coats of arms as well as beautifully carved puzzles depicting Swiss calendars.

We naturally also celebrated Christmas with a crèche and Christmas tree, although during the war years a decorated thuya was used instead of a fir tree. Then there were the Swiss National Day festivities on 1 August with Chinese lanterns, bonfires and the enthusiastic singing of the national anthem. There were also many dances, some small, others grand affairs such as masked balls or New Year's Eve balls, to which everyone would wear evening dress or Swiss national costume. Apart from the general assembly, the club also organized a variety of cultural activities including conferences, plays and Swiss films, in addition to sports events such as shooting contests, rowing races and skittles: indeed the skittles players had a reputation which went far beyond the walls of the club. The *Journal Suisse d'Égypte et du Proche Orient* via which we were kept informed of all the Swiss Club's activities, in its issue of 28 May 1947 invited all the Tuesday evening skittles teams to register with the club's general factotum, Mohamed, so that if necessary they could be called up within twenty-four hours to play against the skittles teams of the USS *Hyman* and USS *Dickson* which were anchored in the port. Another issue of the journal, dated 29 November 1944 this time, gives an account of a skittles competition in

which His Majesty King Farouk participated. As a matter of fact the king often came to the Swiss Club to play skittles. Shortly before my return to Switzerland, I had the great surprise of seeing him myself attending a fête at the Swiss Club! My father and another doctor were presented to His Majesty on that occasion and so I had the unique opportunity of seeing him close up. He looked totally different from the portraits of him I had seen on display in departmental stores and government offices. On stamps also, especially on the brown one milleme and on the orange two millemes stamps of the 1940s, his portrait was that of a handsome young man. On the dark green thirty millemes stamp which had pyramids in the background and was issued at a later date however, the king appeared already more stout. But the man in front of which my father was bowing was almost unrecognizable. What I least expected was his blond hair and blue eyes betraying his Albanian origins, in addition to which he had put on a considerable amount of weight.

In addition to all the Swiss Club's community activities and to one's private social life, there were numerous cinemas showing films with their original soundtrack. Most of these were either American, French or English. Egyptian cinema being still in its infancy, we rarely had the opportunity to watch an Arabic film, but when there was the chance to do so it was usually a real delight because those films really touched people's hearts. I remember in particular one scene from an Arabic film at the Strand Cinema near Ramleh Station: rows and rows of coffee cups filled the big screen rather like a regiment of soldiers. Right in the center was one cup slightly larger than the others out of which appeared a well-endowed belly dancer writhing like a snake and wriggling languorously to the sounds of Arabic music. It reminds me of another scene I saw at that period from a French film this time, in which the actress Martine Carol, entirely naked, climbed into a bath in the form of a sea shell, barely hidden from view by a valet holding a silk towel in front of her. At that moment one of the spectators in the front row suddenly stood up on



King Farouk playing skittles at the Club Suisse in the 1940s



tiptoe leaning towards the screen no doubt in the hope of catching a glimpse of Martine completely naked!

American and European films were subtitled either in French or English depending on the original soundtrack. The Arabic translation would figure on the right hand side of the screen. At the beginning of each showing, the Egyptian national anthem was played whilst the portrait of King Farouk filled the screen.

In addition to the French and English films, the cultural and cosmopolitan lifestyle in Alexandria included painting exhibitions, concerts and plays. Both before and after the war, famous European actors and celebrities were often invited to come to Egypt. I can still remember a Chopin recital given by the blind piano virtuoso, Georges Themeli who brilliantly displayed his talent, as well as an evening performance by the famous Italian baritone, Tito Gobbi, not to mention General Guisan's unforgettable visit to the Swiss Club. These three celebrities did me the honor of signing my poetry album.

## UNPLEASANT SURPRISES

On Sundays when we did not visit grandpapa Jacot and when it was too cold to go to the beach, we would often drive to the zoo near the Mahmoudieh Canal. Descending a few steps we would reach the large cage occupied by the king of beasts, which would spend most of the time lazing in a corner, snoring loudly. The cages nearby were occupied by various species of monkeys. To my father's great annoyance, a large group of local youngsters would remain fixed in front of those cages and continually tease these playful creatures with mirrors and peanuts. The lemurs however, seemed to be waiting just for us, and so we would spoil them by feeding them dried raisins through the fine wire mesh. Not far from the porcupines was the enclosure of the gentle, rather sad-looking gazelles. No

doubt they were homesick for their native steppes. On arrival at the seals' pool, we would ask our father to slip a baksheesh to the keeper. As soon as the man caught sight of the shiny coin in my father's hand, he would rush off to a tiny room to fetch a few fish which he would toss to the seals. In the pool opposite, two fat hippopotamuses would be wallowing in the grimy water. Here, there was no need to bribe the keeper for him to thrust a fistful of fodder down into the creatures' gaping mouths. We would naturally also pay a visit to the Indian elephants, the multicolored parrots and the reptiles including the giant boa.

The panthers and other large spotted cats were in separate cages. Whenever I stood in front of one of those cages, I could not help thinking of the terrifying incident which happened to Miss Oatway. This charming English lady was an old acquaintance of my parents. She had lived abroad for many years and would willingly recount her extraordinary experiences in India. When her fiancé of many years never returned after the First World War, she had searched for work outside Europe as a governess. She finally found a well paid situation as tutor for a rich maharajah. This Indian prince lived with his wife and three children in a magical palace surrounded by a park. On the southern edge of the property a slow running river constituted a kind of natural barrier, whereas the rest of the park was separated from the surrounding virgin forest by a thick screen of bamboo. Miss Oatway and her three protégés had found an ideal spot where they would often picnic on the weekends. On one particular Sunday, the children as usual spread the blanket out on the ground and waited patiently as Miss Oatway distributed the sandwiches she had prepared. She then gave each a Bakelite beaker filled with iced tea from the Thermos flask. The four of them then sat enjoying their simple meal in their natural surroundings. When they had finished, the beakers and sandwich boxes were packed back into the basket and they lay down for a brief siesta. Although no-one else knew of their picnic place, Miss Oatway felt suddenly ill at ease, as if someone were watching her. She looked around her and all of a sudden saw only a few meters away the silhouette

of a black panther, crouching on a big branch and looking straight at her with bright green eyes. She understood perfectly well that if she alerted the children, they would panic and in so doing provoke the panther to attack. Although petrified, she heroically succeeded in keeping totally calm so that the children noticed nothing. She asked them to immediately, but quietly and calmly, stand up and to go straight home by the most direct route. As her protégés looked at her enquiringly, she whispered that she suddenly felt ill and was suffering from a terrible migraine. Carefully, and almost on tiptoe, they quickly left. Although their picnic spot was not far from the house, the walk back seemed interminable this time. When she at last arrived with her three young wards in the safety of the house's grand entrance, Miss Oatway could once again breathe at ease!

On a different occasion, as she had gone up to her bedroom one evening to fetch a handkerchief from the chest of drawers, she had yet another unpleasant surprise. As she opened the drawer and inserted her hand to take out one of her fine embroidered cambric handkerchiefs her hand touched something cold and smooth. To her horror she found a small snake sleeping on her handkerchiefs! Fortunately the creature did not seem hungry. Miss Oatway at first wondered how the snake could have slid into the closed chest of drawers. She finally found the answer to the mystery: the wooden planks at the back of the drawers were not well aligned leaving gaps through which the reptile had slipped.

### THINGS NOT SPOKEN OF

Since the weather was almost always sunny with deep blue clear skies, it hardly constituted a subject of conversation. It is true however, that in the Nile Delta and the coastal towns such as Alexandria the winter months from December to February were more marked than in Cairo or Upper Egypt: the north of the country is exposed to sudden

Mediterranean storms. A stroll along the Corniche by a tempestuous sea in a force ten gale would make quite an impression on us as children. At times the sky would suddenly darken with thick clouds, which would then burst into torrential rainfall. We would run for shelter in the nearest doorway and then wait for the first free barouche. The rain would never last all day, but only a few hours at the most, however it was often very cold and windy. Throughout my years in Egypt it only hailed once. As for snow, I only knew what it was from children's stories or hearsay. Towards mid December, a number of shops would decorate their windows with cotton wool snowflakes the size of plums, trying to create a Christmas atmosphere. So it is hardly surprising that during my first long holidays in Switzerland after the war, I was somewhat disappointed to see for the very first time tiny insignificant-looking snowflakes silently falling.

During winter time the temperature would never drop below zero which was a blessing considering the number of homeless young beggars sleeping in the streets. To scrape a living, these poor wretches would collect all the cigarette butts they found lying around in old tins and return them to the cigarette factories for a few coins. I still recall seeing some of them on a cold winter's day, greedily devouring cauliflower stumps from a garbage can.

Between the months of March and May a hot sandy wind known as the Khamsin, could blow for days on end. The normally clear blue skies would turn dark and wintry, almost hiding the sun from view. The clouds of sand and dust would cover everything, penetrating every nook and cranny. We would constantly rub our eyes and grit our teeth. There were still no vacuum cleaners in those days, and it was completely useless beating the carpets whilst the Khamsin was blowing, let alone sweeping or passing feather dusters, for in no time everything would be covered again in a fine layer of desert dust.

From May to early October the weather was hot and dry. The summer heat would begin in early May, peaking in July and August. As the sea warmed up more slowly it

would be too early to bathe in May, however we could swim in the sea as late as mid November without feeling cold. All schools closed from July through to September.

The endless beaches, especially the immensely popular Stanley Bay beach would be crammed with masses of people, including Cairenes escaping the scorching heat of the capital. At times the multicolored parasols were so close together that there was barely a free square meter of beach to be seen. Naturally most of the holiday-makers would not remain under the parasols, preferring to keep cool in the sea, whilst yet others would stay in the shade in front of their cabins. But the sea was not always calm: sometimes the black flag would be flying, forbidding bathing. This would not prevent us from paddling, having firstly covered ourselves with sun cream. The summer months were often windy and so the sea being rough would become all sandy. During September on the other hand, the sea would become calm and crystal clear, thus encouraging us to spend long periods in the water.

It is therefore easy to comprehend our great disappointment in September 1947 when we discovered that bathing was forbidden. In July of that same year Egypt had had a cholera epidemic the likes of which had not been seen since 1883. In the beginning, only a few isolated cases were reported. But within a few days the death toll had already reached over sixty. It was well known that the newspapers had the tendency to minimize the number of deaths to avoid arousing public alarm. The epidemic caused the most damage in the countryside due to poverty, poor hygiene, and the lack of a clean supply of drinking water.

Within no time, the most amazing rumors would spread. The Nile with its complex network of canals has always played a major role in the life of the fellaheen. They would swim in it, relieve themselves and wash themselves in it, as well as wash the dishes and cook with it. It was not unusual to see a dead water buffalo or other animal floating in the water. Villages situated further away from a canal might have at least one well.

During the cholera epidemic, as soon as a death was reported in the countryside the health inspectors would arrive. They not only burnt down the house of the deceased, but also burnt all his worldly goods including those of his family! Thus these people lost the little they possessed without receiving the slightest compensation, despite the repeated assurances made to them by the local authorities. These broken promises are the reason why other villagers would hide their dead in the village well before the arrival of the health inspectors. After their departure, the corpses were retrieved and buried. As for the now contaminated well water, it continued to be used for the villagers' daily needs as if nothing had happened.

## ARMANT

In summer 1948, we once again spent a few months' holiday in Switzerland. Although the flight from Cairo to Geneva was naturally much shorter than our earlier sea crossing of spring 1946, my father still had numerous obstacles to overcome in order to obtain the visas and other necessary documents. Sometimes, for a single official passport stamp he would have to go from one office to another, each time to be dismissed with a shrug of the shoulders and a smile of sympathy indicating the official's incapacity to help. Or else he was sent off to another official who either had nothing to do with the matter, or was absent, or who did not even exist. The incompetence of the administrative authorities was not only very frustrating, but wasted an enormous amount of time.

However, the nonchalant attitude of the customs did also have its advantages. A friend of ours who used to enjoy a good drink once arrived at the Egyptian customs with a liter bottle full of kirsch but got through without having to pay. In a Basel chemist's shop he had had the kirsch transferred into a brown medicine bottle with the label, "Two

tablespoonfuls twice a day". When our friend arrived in Alexandria and the bottle in question was scrutinized by the customs, he took on a very poorly countenance assuring the officer that he suffered from unbearable stomach pains and that his Swiss physician had prescribed this medication. Upon hearing those words, the officer wished him a speedy recovery thanks to the contents of the bottle!

Towards the end of the 1940s, my father began for a number of reasons to consider returning to Switzerland for good. He was over fifty and wanted to go on working for another ten to fifteen years. Seeing that we would have to continue our studies in Switzerland, there were two options: either he would make the big move there and then, and set up a medical practice in Basel, or he would stay another fifteen years in Egypt, whilst we would continue our education in Switzerland far from our parents. Moreover the flight to Switzerland for our parents to visit us each year would be too costly. In addition to these considerations, the political situation in Egypt was becoming uncertain.

Thus it was not without some regrets that my parents decided to return for good in the summer of 1950. But before then, an ex-patient of my father's whose father ran a sugar refinery invited us to spend Christmas and the New Year in Armant, in Upper Egypt. We were thrilled because this meant that we would at last see the Egypt of the Pharaohs! Despite being long, our rail journey south through the Delta to Cairo and from there onwards up the Nile was both interesting and varied. By the end of the day however, we were happy to arrive in Armant, twenty kilometers west of Luxor on the other bank of the Nile, where the Pischler family welcomed us with open arms.

Our hosts lived in a huge villa surrounded by a magnificent garden with a large swimming pool, which was a real luxury at that time. I was struck however by the culmination of waste involved in the New Year's Eve preparations. Part of the swimming pool was covered with a dancing floor, whilst rose petals were sprinkled on the water's surface in the rest of the pool.

Our days in Armant were full, and we would visit various Pharaonic ruins almost daily. Walking by ourselves from one temple to another, admiring the reliefs in Luxor and Karnak, the deathly silence occasionally broken by the sudden shriek of a bird, was an unforgettable experience. In Thebes we were overcome by the sheer size of the colossal statues. I would amuse myself by sitting on one of the feet of the colossus of Memnon. Not far from there we came across the head of Ramses II lying on the ground in the Ramesseum. I naturally wondered just how the ancient Egyptians, with their primitive tools, could sculpt those incredible huge statues with such smoothly polished surfaces from blocks of granite.

Of course we also visited the sugar refinery where three thousand two hundred workers labored in shifts round the clock to produce six hundred tons of sugar daily from six thousand tons of sugar cane. To our great delight, we could cool down after our visit by jumping off the diving board into the pool, or else stroll round the garden in the shade of the date palms along the colorful flower borders. In the evenings, we would admire the shimmering sunset along the banks of the Nile, whilst my father would lament that his camera could not capture all the colors of the setting sun. In those days, color film was still unknown in Egypt. Our dream holidays unfortunately passed by too quickly and the time came for us to bid farewell to our charming hosts and to the Land of the Pharaohs.

A difficult time lay ahead of me for I still had to pass my higher school certificate, the Oxford and Cambridge Certificate, at the English Girls' College. Having passed successfully, I then spent my last summer holidays in Alexandria. During those hot summer months it was at times very windy by the sea so we would often drive to the west port where the *Mutz*, the yacht belonging to the Swiss Club, was anchored in the waters of the Swiss Boat Club. There was happily always someone there who could navigate and thus take us on a ride round the port. On those boat rides we would often pass by the royal yacht, the *Mahroussa*, from the chimneys of which always floated wisps of smoke. Rumor had it at





Summer 1947. A ride in Alexandria Harbor on the cutter *Mutz* belonging to the Club Nautique Suisse. From left to right: my mother, Mr. Luchsinger, Mr. Luchsinger jr., my brother Christoph, myself and another lady. The boat with three masts in the background is King Farouk's yacht, the *Mahroussa*.

the Swiss Club that the yacht was ready to set sail night or day, should King Farouk decide, either of his own accord or under pressure, to leave the country in all haste. This is in fact what happened after the coup d'état of 26 July 1952, when the young officers Naguib<sup>15</sup> and Nasser ordered Farouk to abdicate within twelve hours and leave the country by sea.

Unlike the king however, we had embarked entirely of our own accord two years earlier. On 3 September 1950, it was with heavy hearts that we boarded the SS *Zagreb*, due to set sail for Venice with ten other passengers. Most of our furniture including my piano and our household appliances were entrusted a few weeks later to a well known transport company: the whole lot packed into a single crate with a capacity of twenty-one square meters. The rest was sold by auction. Our huge trunks and my father's Morris Ten were stowed in the *Zagreb's* hold.

In Alexandria it is said that "Whoever drinks of the waters of the Nile will without fail return sooner or later to the ancient land of the pyramids." In my small red suitcase there was a little box filled with some fine sand from Sidi Bishr, the beach of my childhood: the very same beach which forty years later, I would barely recognize from my hotel window.

## NEW BEGINNINGS

After leaving dear Alexandria with much regret, the whole family came to live in Switzerland. My father set up his new surgery in Basel, which lies on the River Rhine where Switzerland, France and Germany meet.

It took me quite a time to get accustomed to my new surroundings, especially during winter when only a weak sun broke through the frosty sky and the stark black tree trunks were practically the only dash of color in our snow covered garden. It was during

the cold months that I missed all the more the bright warm sunshine, the deep blue sea at Sidi Bishr, and the many colored bougainvilleas and brilliant red of the flamboyants.

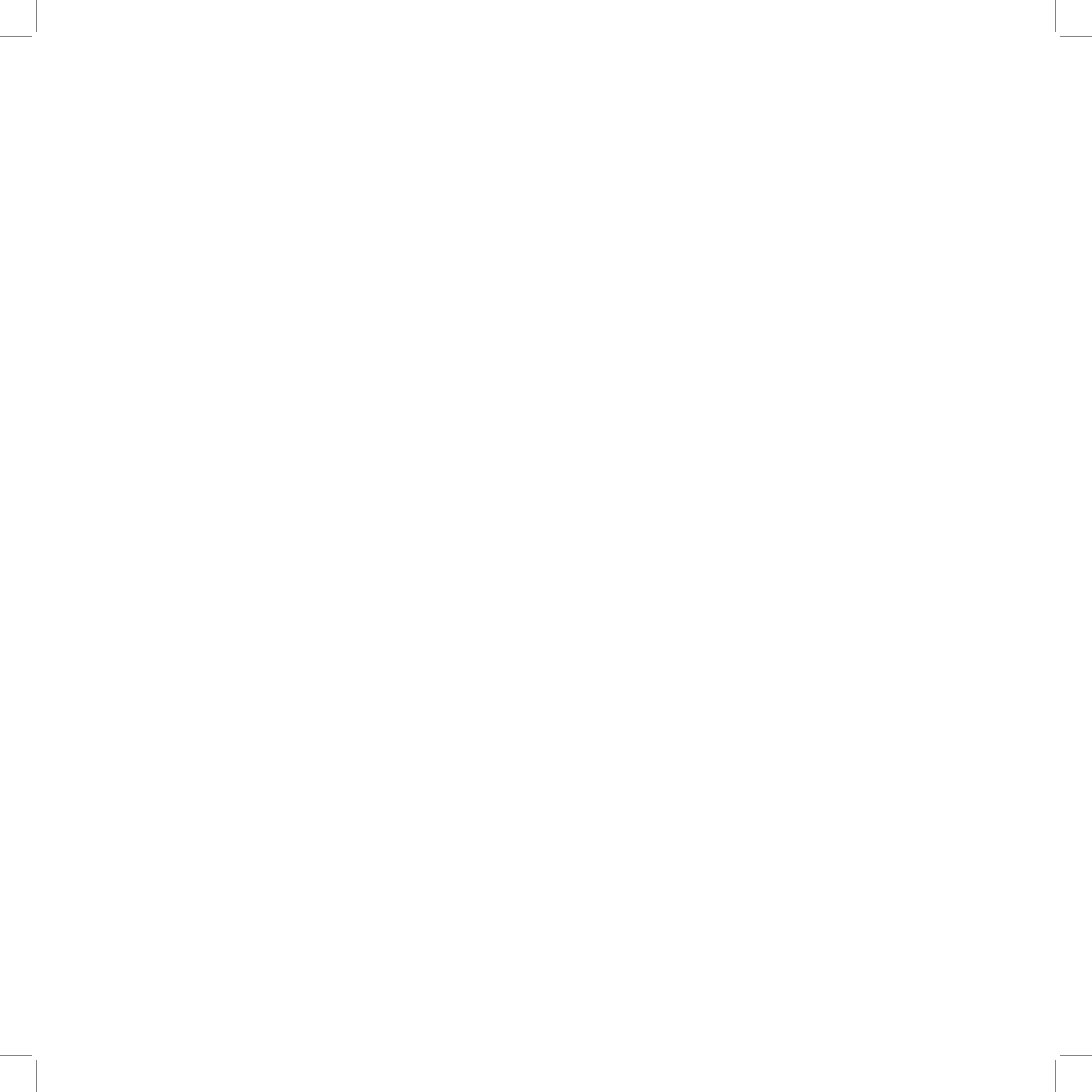
One summer I met my future husband Thomas Hardman while on holiday in the Swiss mountains. He was a very keen mountaineer and a regular officer of the British Army.

After spending four years at a business college, and thanks to my good schooling at the English Girls' College in Alexandria, I obtained secretarial posts both in London and Paris.

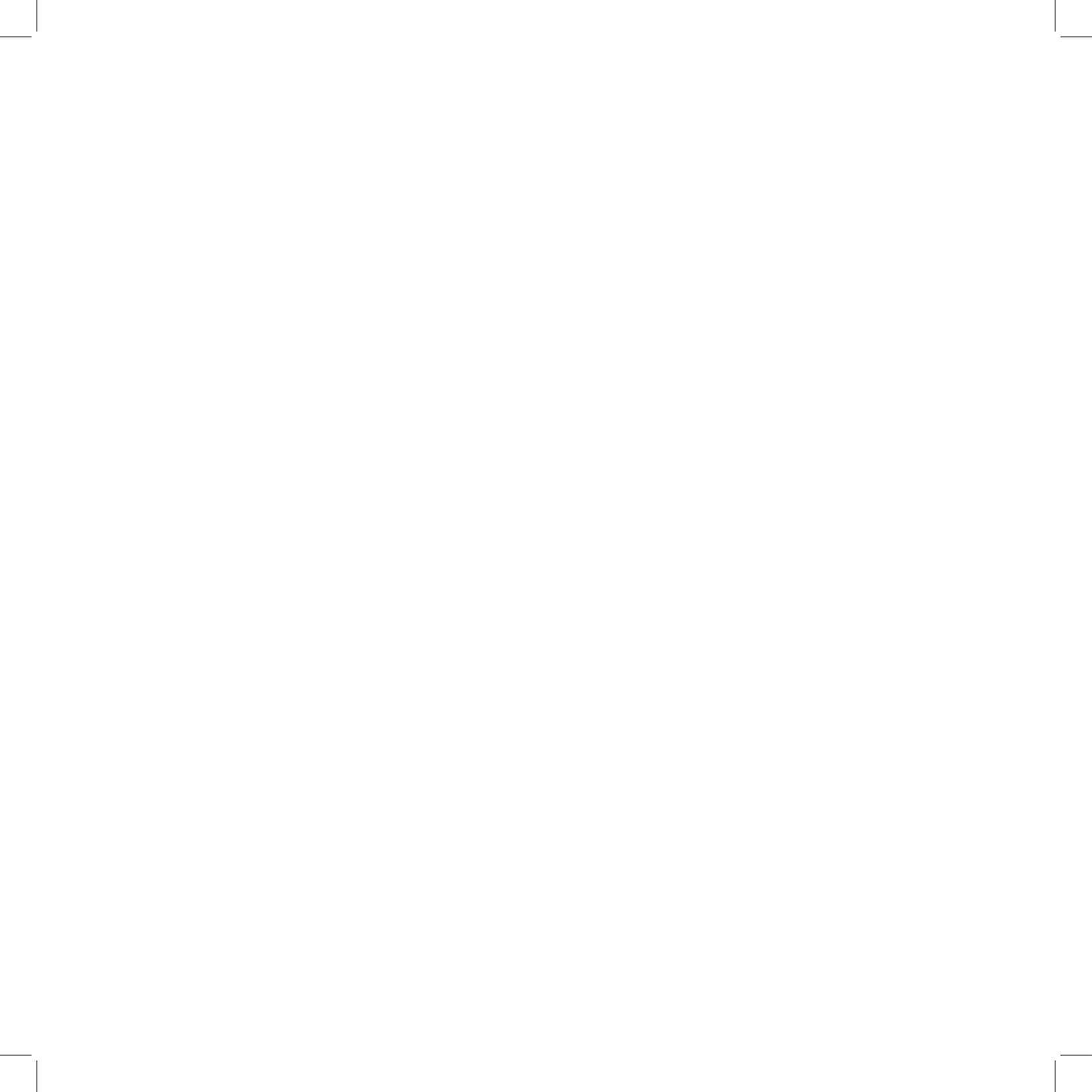
I got married in spring 1956. Since Thomas was at that time stationed in Germany, we began our married life in Göttingen, a charming old university town. A year later we had our first son, Guy. We then spent two interesting years in Berlin during which Guy's sister, Christine, was born.

Since my husband was then due for Overseas Service, we were very lucky to be sent to the Caribbean island of Jamaica. There we had our second son, Eric. We returned to Europe shortly after Jamaica gained its independence. Meanwhile, Thomas had been promoted to major and was happy to be sent back to the British Sector in Berlin. However during our stay in Jamaica, Berlin had undergone a dramatic division: it was no longer a straight forward matter of moving freely from one of the four sectors to another. Now an abominable concrete wall had cut this pulsating city into two, preventing all movement and transactions between East and West Berlin.

Sadly, as time went on, things were no longer working too well in our marriage. After Berlin, Thomas was sent for a couple of months to Northern Ireland. There our marriage, which had begun under the best of auspices, finally broke up. After the divorce I returned to live in Switzerland and took up secretarial work again. A couple of years later, I met a charming elderly man by the name of Walti with whom I spent many memorable years, and whom I dreamed of introducing one day to the country of my birth, and to the city where I had spent such a happy childhood: Alexandria.



LONGING FOR THE LAND  
OF MY BIRTH  
1991



## RETURN

I have always been fascinated by travel, by seeing new countries and peoples. Thus whenever my work or finances have permitted me, I have set out on a journey to discover new places. Of course this has no longer been for long periods of time as in the past, but more generally for holidays. On some of my travels with Walti, I have had unique experiences such as our visit to the royal city of Petra in the heart of the Jordanian desert, or attempting to swim in the Dead Sea, known for its high salinity and situated at four hundred meters below sea level.

It was whilst on a cruise that, for the first time after an absence of thirty-seven years, I returned with Walti to the country of my youth. Several acquaintances had warned me that Alexandria now had little in common with the city I had left behind on one fine sunny day in September 1950. Upon our arrival at the port of Alexandria, we discovered that the city had not donned its best finery, for everything was a shade of grey, with overcast skies and the port facilities shrouded in mist. Patches of oil were floating on the surface of the water, splashing against the ship's hull as it anchored. As it was a Friday in the month of Ramadan there were few people about, most being at prayers in the mosque. A number of coaches were parked along the quayside waiting to take us on the daytrip to Cairo.

I had great difficulty holding back my tears as we drove through a large, almost empty square in the town center, the present name of which, Midan el Tahrir, meant nothing to me. Sudden gusts of wind blew old newspapers, empty Coca-Cola tins and other refuse lying on the ground. A few pathetic palm trees shriveled by the wind gave a touch of green to this rundown square. I had no idea where we were, and it was only when I caught sight in the center of the square of the imposing statue of the founder of modern Egypt, Mohamed Ali, that I realized that we were in what used to be Mohamed Ali Square.

Then I suddenly remembered how we often used to come there with my mother. In a small side-street off this animated square, my mother had discovered a small shop which sold the best orange cordial we had ever tasted. I can still remember the bottle which had a pale green label depicting a slender Pharaonic queen bearing a gold chalice. How things had changed since then! In the old days, in addition to all the peddlers, to the young shoeblacks rushing around, and to the street urchins painstakingly picking cigarette butts up from the ground, elegant gentlemen dressed in perfectly ironed trousers and a dark red fez would parade up and down, whilst ladies of all ages, dripping with jewelry, would show off the latest fashions in front of the Cotton Exchange, the business center of Alexandria. Indeed, in those days my mother and I would love to stroll alongside the well-kept lawns with flowerbeds of red and yellow cannas, and in front of the elegant shop windows and majestic buildings. But now, in May 1987, although the majority of the buildings were still standing, most had not had a single coat of paint for over thirty years. On the other hand, most of the roofs were covered in masses of television antennas. In front of the windows hung washing lines of clothes and bed linen. The shutters of some buildings were hanging off their hinges whilst on others, the rollers blinds could no longer slide down properly and thus remained stuck half-way. However, what struck me the most was the fact that the signs above shop windows and entrances were all in Arabic. There was not a single sign in French or English. Moreover, there was not a European to be seen anywhere. I finally understood that I was in a totally Arab city, which over the last few decades had taken on an Oriental character just like the country's capital.

On the way to Cairo we drove past Lake Mariout with its pinkish waters and along the banks of which young boys were fishing. The desert road was now a highway, and to my surprise the irrigation installations had enabled large parts of the desert to be cultivated. It was extraordinary to see fields of clover, orchards and vineyards stretching on into the distance, where once there were only telegraph poles and strewn empty barrels of tar



to break up the monotony! As we approached Cairo, we passed by numerous barracks. Then all of a sudden, the outline of the pyramids appeared in the distance. Gradually their shape became clearer until we were within only a few hundred meters of the imposing monuments. Just as in the days gone by back in the 1940s, when I saw them for the very first time, they were an overwhelming and majestic sight. However, at the same time they seemed to have lost something of their mystical aura: they no longer seemed unattainable because the city had spread almost right up to them. But for me, the worst thing, were all the groups of tourists crowding the site. My companion did not share my mixed feelings, quite on the contrary, he found all this hustle and bustle entertaining. He was nevertheless very taken aback when a young Arab came up to him and shouted the word “*chuchichästli*”, meaning “small kitchen cupboard” in German Swiss dialect! This is in fact the word that the German Swiss try to make their French Swiss compatriots repeat in order to laugh at their difficulty in pronouncing it. This young boy had immediately recognized us as Swiss, and we then had great difficulty getting rid of him as he proved to be rather intrusive, hoping that his linguistic talents would lead to a baksheesh! We soon had the impression of being engulfed by a swarm of bees, for the more we tried to get rid of him, the more other youngsters would run up to us. Finally as we got really sick and tired of this situation, I shouted in their general direction “*Ana kallam arabi*”. As if struck by lightning, they disappeared in a split second, no doubt thinking it useless to importune someone who spoke Arabic.

The remainder of the trip through Giza along the main road right to the center of Cairo was a real disappointment to me. Whereas long ago, this avenue had been lined with lavish villas surrounded by magnificent gardens, now there were almost exclusively apartment buildings built at random. The few individual houses which had survived but known better days, seemed literally engulfed by the tall buildings. I could hardly believe my eyes when, a few meters from this beautiful elegant avenue, I caught sight down a

small dusty side-street of half naked children and stray dogs rummaging through garbage cans. As we approached the city center, the density of the population, of the traffic and of the buildings steadily increased. The continual bustle was incredible: there were taxis enveloped in exhaust fumes and frantically hooting, air-conditioned tourist coaches, motorbikes dodging in and out of the traffic, battered local public buses, and in the midst of it all, a camel driver trying with the greatest of difficulty to get his beast safely across the road, whilst in the fast lane opposite, Toyotas and Mercedes were speeding along.

After lunch and a visit to the Egyptian Museum full of tourists, we returned to our coach which was to transport us to Port Said where our ship was anchored. I still recall a minor incident which occurred on the long route to Egypt's second port, which owes its existence to the piercing of the Suez Canal. We reached the desert shortly after leaving the Cairo suburbs. Dunes stretched out into the horizon and then the landscape became more monotonous with sand everywhere as far as the eye could see. Then I noticed a few meters further on a small car parked by the roadside. I presumed that the poor devil's car must have broken down in the middle of the desert. But then my compassion changed to respect as I spotted the fellow next to his car, kneeling down on a small rug facing the direction of Mecca, in order to pray. A few meters further on, I saw another figure next to the ditch by the road gently heating a cooking pot on a low fire. No doubt he was heating up his dish of beans, for it was during the month of Ramadan and as the sun was just setting, he would not have drunk or eaten anything since sunrise.

## CLEOPATRA

In November 1991, I went back again with Walti to the country of my birth to visit the banks of the Nile. This time however, it was with a group of people who had also grown up in Egypt or who had lived there for many years. My main objective on this trip was the final two day stopover in Alexandria, where I had merely quickly passed through on my first return trip four years earlier.

After a wonderful flight over the snow covered Alps with a magnificent sunset in the background, we arrived in Cairo late at night and so had to stay there before catching the plane for Aswan early the following morning. The formalities over, our coach drove us to the Shepheards Hotel, which had been completely rebuilt in 1957 after all the damage it had suffered during the political turmoil of 1952. I was thrilled at the idea of spending the night at this luxurious hotel which, with the exception of Mena House near the pyramids, was considered the best until the mid 1950s. In the early days of British occupation at a time when mass tourism did not yet exist, when one would stay at this smart hotel accompanied by one's servants, the Shepheards acquired a reputation equal to that of the renowned Raffles Hotel in Singapore, where Somerset Maugham amongst others was a regular guest. Whenever concerts were held there, anyone who was anyone in high society would meet on the hotel's grand terrace. During the war years, khaki greatly overshadowed the bright colors of the ladies' lighter attire. Many high ranking officers could be seen there, in addition to more shady individuals who were no doubt spying for one or other of the two sides.

But that November, little remained of the Shepheards' old charm. Some rooms were indeed still richly furnished with Oriental furniture and splendid carpets. The walls of the large dining room were decorated halfway up with finely carved *moucharabiehs*.

These were not overhanging, but purely decorative. Despite all this however, the authentic atmosphere of the old hotel had gone. On entering our bedroom on the fourth floor I was disappointed. One of the windows had a view on a rather grim interior courtyard where piles of unused furniture were strewn all over the place. The other window looked out onto the façade of a modern hotel, and if one leant out far enough one could just see a bit of the Nile. The bedroom furniture was dark and bulky, whilst one of the faucets in the bathroom was leaking, leaving a constant trickle of brownish water in the bath. There was a musty smell of Fly-tox in the room, which did actually conjure up some childhood memories: for that was the insecticide we would use on all the insects which plagued us. My mother was very meticulous when it came to hygiene: citrus fruit and tomatoes were always washed with soap prior to being eaten, whereas grapes and lettuce were soaked in permanganate before being served. As for the Fly-tox spray, it was always within reach. So considering the state of our hotel room, and armed with a few well chosen Arabic expressions, I complained to the hotel manager who, somewhat taken aback, finished by giving us a much lighter and more spacious bedroom on the seventh floor. This room's view was more what we expected, and being well ventilated and tastefully decorated in the Empire style, it compensated for our initial disappointment with the first room.

At seven o'clock the following morning we took off for Upper Egypt, arriving two hours later in Aswan where the temperature was much cooler. We were to spend several days there. Just as during our visit to the pyramids four years earlier, I had difficulty getting accustomed to all the masses of tourists swarming round the ancient temples and royal tombs. Moreover, the sight of all the activity on the river Nile itself was totally new to me: there were all kinds of boats including ferries decorated with papyrus and lotus leaf designs just like Pharaonic temples. In the old days, one merely saw occasional feluccas gliding silently along the waters of the Nile with their cargo of bales of cotton,

sugar cane or building materials, now and then passing by a steamboat with its passengers waving. Now, the air was full of the sound of a multitude of boat engines, as well as of felucca crews and tourists, haggling over the price of the fare to the ancient sites.

From our hotel balcony on Elephantine Island, which we had reached by ferry from Aswan, we had a magnificent view on the sandstone hill overlooking the west bank of the Nile. On its peak, which shone golden in the sunlight, was a sheikh's tomb. Against this sand colored landscape, the green and sometimes dark silhouettes of palm and eucalyptus trees stood out, swaying gently in the breeze along the banks of the river. The utter tranquility reminded me once again of the past, of when I came with my parents and brother to Elephantine Island. The much smaller island opposite, which had once belonged to Lord Kitchener, was covered with oleanders, purple bougainvilleas and pomegranate trees, as well as many rare species. Our father had shown us all the different types of palm tree which the famous British field marshal had had planted there. Having walked all round the botanical garden, my parents rented a felucca which took us back to the landing stage in Aswan on the east bank, but not before my brother insisted on us making a detour to see the famous nilometer, which was thousands of years old<sup>16</sup>. The marked intervals on it indicated the depth of the water during the annual Nile flood. I still remember clearly that peaceful boat ride, as the gentle breeze blew on the felucca's huge triangular sail and we glided silently over the waters. The only sounds which interrupted this blissful silence were the occasional creaking of the old wooden oar and the squawking of ibis fighting over good nesting sites in the treetops. I longed to dangle my hand in the river and let the water flow through my fingers. But before I could even give in to the temptation, I was sternly rebuked by my father who reminded me that I could easily catch amoebic dysentery (I am always amazed to observe how many visitors to Egypt carelessly take needless risks). As we floated along, we passed by numerous boulders of dark brown granite. Their round shape, at times smoothly polished at others rough, made

them resemble elephants bathing. Maybe that is how Elephantine Island got its name. Unless, in earlier times this used to be a gathering place for the creatures, giving rise subsequently to the ivory trade. Who knows?

After our brief stay on Elephantine Island, we headed for the landing stage in Aswan where an especially chartered boat fitted out with the most modern conveniences, the Seti II, was awaiting our group. This boat, undoubtedly for the very first time, was to descend the Nile flying the Swiss colors from its stern! During the next few days it was to transport us to the various sites in Upper Egypt, sites which I had long ago visited and remembered well, with the exception of the temple of Horus at Edfu and the double temple of Kom Ombo. Our Nile cruise ended at Luxor, where we disembarked and headed for the airport.

An hour after take-off, I caught sight of the outskirts of Cairo. Since Walti and I did not intend to visit the pyramids for a second time, we rented a taxi to go to see other less well known sites. On Roda Island we visited Manial Palace, built in the early twentieth century for Prince Mohamed Ali, the wealthy son of Khedive Ismail, the viceroy of Egypt. In 1955, this palace was transformed into a public museum. Seen from the exterior, this small palace in the center of town, surrounded by a garden with exotic banyan trees over a hundred years old, was less impressive than from the interior. Although the museum grounds were located next to the Club Méditerranée, we were astonished to find ourselves the only visitors to its countless treasures that morning! With the exception of Gamil Bey's villa in Qaha, it was the first opportunity I had to see the extraordinary wealth and beauty of an Egyptian Oriental residence. In the stair-well, there was a one meter high model of a mosque of the finest marquetry, made of dark wood inlaid with mother-of-pearl. At the top of the stairs we entered a dark room with a pleasantly cool atmosphere. The windows made out of small colored panes of glass allowed only a dim light to penetrate thus keeping out the intense summer heat. The side walls were lined with low sofas, in

front of which were placed small low tables, also inlaid with beautiful mother-of-pearl marquetry. The only things missing were the narghiles and the small coffee cups. In the adjoining rooms, what impressed us especially was not so much the furniture as the richly decorated red, white and blue ceramic tiles covering all the walls. As we continued to explore, we discovered a number of more intimate alcoves with soft divans and beautiful silk cushions. Some of the ceilings were decorated with wooden carvings of many colors. Precious porcelain dinner services, as well as valuable individual pieces such as bowls and vases, which according to our guide were made from rhinoceros horn, were on display in glass cabinets. Finally, we visited the hunting museum and the gold prayer room of the small mosque, both located within the palace grounds.

Next, our taxi took us south of the citadel to the City of the Dead, where we visited a few old Mameluke tombs. Our final excursion was to a seventeenth century mansion, Beit as-Suhaymi, in Cairo's old quarter. With our chauffeur, we walked down a whole series of narrow, winding, filthy alleyways, until we reached our destination. It was well worth our effort. The house of several stories, had splendid *moucharabiehs* both on its façade and on the walls of its indoor courtyard. Admittedly, the interior decoration was not as ornate as that of Manial Palace, but the blue ceramic wall tiles and the old carved wooden armchairs, as well as the china plates on display were from a much earlier period.

Our journey was gradually approaching its end. What remained, however, was our two day visit to El Iskandareya, the city of Alexander the Great where Cleopatra once liked to bathe.

Instead of taking the more interesting but longer route across the Nile Delta, our coach driver chose this time also the shorter desert route. This enabled us to make a small detour to one of the four Coptic monasteries in the valley of Wadi Natroun. During the summer, numerous small lakes in this valley evaporate leaving behind a deposit of salt

and natron which the ancient Egyptians used to preserve mummies. The ninth century hermitages and monasteries had been transformed into veritable small fortresses with high walls for protection against Bedouin attack. The churches were domed. We had the rare privilege of visiting the monastery of Saint Bishoi, located about halfway between Cairo and Alexandria. Upon passing through its ancient doorway, we were astonished to discover a lush vegetation growing there right in the heart of the desert! Tall, slender palms towered above short, bushy banana trees. A royal poinciana, which at that season was not yet covered with its characteristic magnificent red flowers, grew next to a bush full of yellow blossom and numerous oleanders. A pergola covered with Virginia creeper provided welcome shade, whereas the other end of the garden was planted with vegetables. There was little to see inside the monastery's church except for some biblical scenes and a few old portraits of monks painted on wood with Coptic inscriptions.

Our visit to Wadi Natroun over, we departed and finally reached Lake Mariout which I had known since childhood. There were however, many newly built tall apartment blocks which I had never seen before. We continued our journey along the Corniche with its dense traffic until we reached the Ramada Renaissance Hotel right at the other end of Alexandria, in Sidi Bishr. As I gazed from our hotel balcony, I had absolutely no idea which of the three Sidi Bishr beaches was in front of us, because things had changed so much since my childhood. The mere view of the Corniche looking eastwards, with all its high-rise apartment buildings stretching almost right up to Montaza Palace, was enough to shatter my memory of Sidi Bishr No. 3! Had the construction of the high dam in Aswan influenced the sea level in some way so that the beach's topography was now altered? I doubted it, nevertheless it was in vain that I tried to recognize some landmark or other. When I asked at the hotel reception, in front of which of the three Sidi Bishr beaches we were located, I was told that they had never heard of the beaches ever being numbered!





Sidi Bishr beach in 2006

The following morning we went on a preliminary inspection tour of the city. One member of our group, Georges Bouvier, turned out to be an excellent guide, having frequently returned to Alexandria in recent years. We went to the far end of the old Eastern port and visited Qaitbey Fortress. Next, we made a brief detour to Pompey's Pillar and then coffee at the patisserie Pastroudis. I barely recognized this once elegant patisserie. Where had all those elegant ladies and gentlemen gone, whom one would see coming out of Pastroudis carrying boxes of mouth-watering pastries? As we entered the dark, shabby premises which were almost empty, we were hit by a smell of disinfectant instead of delicious pastries! As a result, all we could bring ourselves to order was Turkish coffee. A small, light blue Chevrolet delivery van was parked in front of the entrance. Although it was very rusty and battered, we could still make out the dark blue lettering: PASTROUDIS. I would certainly have forgone any pastries delivered in such a van!

Unlike most tourists, we were not very interested in seeing the city's relatively few sites. What we really wanted, was to see the places of our childhood or in some cases, which had a connection with a later period of our lives. We were extremely anxious to reach Chatby, where, thanks to a special permit, we would be able for the first time in thirty years to visit our old school, the École Suisse d'Alexandrie. I hardly recognized the red brick building where I had spent my first years of schooling. In the small courtyard in front of the stairs which used to lead to the primary classrooms, a large group of boys and girls were playing. They were all in uniform, the girls like their teachers wore white headscarves. As we arrived, they looked at us with astonishment. I searched in vain at the back of the stairs for my beloved *pas-de-géant*<sup>17</sup>. But in its place and where the large playground had once been, two buildings had been crammed in, so that the tall building at the back almost hid the sky from view. We quickly climbed up the stairs to see our old classroom. Where once we had been a class of eight children at the most, now there were over fifty boys and girls squeezed in amongst a sea of desks. As soon as we had introduced

ourselves to the teacher as old pupils, the class welcomed us smilingly. The classroom layout had not really changed much. Children's drawings and Arabic multiplication tables hung on the walls. The visit brought back many a memory of our school days to a number of us. The visit over, we departed through the very same old heavy wooden door. As we left, I glanced at the other side of the street and could not help but smile as I noticed that amongst all the tiny shops with their signs up in Arabic, there was one, where the shopkeeper had added underneath his red Arabic shop sign, a blue one which read, "Lausanne". Perhaps he had visited Switzerland, or maybe it was a reference to the Swiss Club located right next to our old school?

Our next visit was to the Swiss Club. Despite the dwindling numbers of Swiss citizens left in Alexandria, now barely a dozen, the club's layout had hardly changed over the last thirty-five years. Nearly everything still looked the same: the bowling alley where King Farouk was a frequent guest; the main hall with its stage where as a young girl I was proud to participate in a nativity play disguised as an angel in a white dress and cardboard wings; the club's library with its color photograph of General Guisan; the bookshelves full of the Société Helvétique's annual reports and large bound yearly volumes of the *Journal Suisse d'Égypte et du Proche Orient*. I was astonished to find the announcement of my birth in one of them! In a panelled room decorated with the cantonal coats of arms, a splendid buffet had been laid out in our honor. There were stuffed vine leaves, and various salads and meat dishes. For those of us with a sweet tooth a whole variety of Egyptian pastries had been thoughtfully prepared, puff pastry fritters drenched in honey and filled with hazel nuts, and in place of prominence was a huge rectangular cake on which had been drawn in icing a man wearing a red fez and smoking a narghile. The white plates with the Swiss flag motif were from the dinner service we had used long ago at Swiss Club events.

Having thus brought back so many old memories as well as living new experiences during our first day back in Alexandria, Walti and I still had some free time on our hands. So we set off to find my old home in Rue Marc Aurèle, since renamed Ahmed Kamha Bey Street much to my father's regret. I had great difficulty in making myself understood by the taxi driver who only spoke Arabic, for I had to confess that after such a long absence my knowledge of the language had somewhat dwindled. Added to that, was the fact that all the streets had been renamed. Moreover, when I mentioned the Greek Cozzika Hospital to our taxi driver, it meant nothing to him. We used to be able to see it from the balcony of our house. In fact, this hospital no longer belonged to the Greeks and had also been renamed. Then I at last remembered that shortly after our departure, some university buildings had been built on the no-man's land facing our house, but as unfortunately I did not know the Arabic for "university", when I instead told him "*madrassa*" meaning school, that got us nowhere. We did find the address in the end, but only after having stopped several times to ask passers-by. Once again, I was in for a shock. Everything had completely changed. Where our house had once stood, there were now several four storey buildings with a new street perpendicular to ours. The garbage lying everywhere was unbelievable. The only minor detail which faintly recalled our old house was the green color of the shutters. I felt slightly awkward vis-à-vis Walti, for he could hardly imagine what this place had once looked like when I used to live there with my parents and brother, and where we spent so many happy years.

The following day, our coach took us along the Corniche again, but this time eastwards as far as the little village of Aboukir once reputed for its small inns<sup>18</sup> which served a variety of fish. Our destination was Zephyrion, a long established fish restaurant where one could eat the most delicious seafood and shellfish on the terrace. However, Aboukir is not famous on account of its culinary specialties, but because it was the site of two great battles fought by the French army under General Bonaparte. The first was a



The site where the Faculty of Engineering of the University of Alexandria was to be built. This photo was taken by my father from the balcony of our house on the day of the laying of the foundation stone by King Farouk in March 1950.



The same site in 2006

sea battle fought in 1798, when the British under Admiral Nelson defeated and virtually wiped out the French fleet. Then in 1799, the French defeated the Turks on land.

On route to Aboukir we passed by King Farouk's old summer palace in Montaza. I had only ever seen it before on the distant horizon from Sidi Bishr beach. Now seeing it close up for the very first time, I found it somewhat kitsch: a hodgepodge of various styles from different periods.

The way Alexandria has grown over the last few decades is quite extraordinary. Once upon a time, the village of Aboukir was about twenty kilometers away from the city center. Today, forty years later, although the actual distance from the center is the same, the city now stretches all the way to Aboukir. Along the coach ride we sometimes had difficulty recognizing where we were because all the new suburbs had altered the city's appearance so much. The notion of town planning seemed unknown. Apartment blocks of all shapes and sizes had sprung up like mushrooms. For example, a small four storey building had been squeezed in between two narrow fourteen storey blocks. Every bit of free space seemed to be inhabited including sometimes even unfinished buildings, with washing hanging from the windows and other gaps. We occasionally caught sight of a pigeon cote or chicken cages on one of the small balconies. Everywhere we could see vehicles of all types blocking the streets whilst trying to make their way through the crowds. Totally veiled women with their brood of kids in tow were chatting in front of the gloomy entrances of various apartment buildings. On almost every street corner were overflowing garbage cans. And in the midst of it all, one saw brightly colored pyramids of oranges and mandarins artistically arranged by the fruiterers.

After our excursion to Aboukir, I took advantage of the remaining free time to briefly visit the English Girls' College. Unlike the old *École Suisse d'Alexandrie*, the imposing ochre color building with its sloping entrance, its lawn and trees, and dark green shutters, did not seem to have changed much since the spring of 1950 when I attended it

for the last time to sit for my final examinations. A few smart cars were parked in front of the main entrance. Now about four thousand girls of all ages attended this English school as opposed to about four hundred in my day, but as it was late I only saw one. This young girl was wearing the same winter uniform as in my day, except for the fact that although her blazer had the same yellow initials E.G.C., her skirt on the other hand was a darker shade of grey and she was not wearing a grey tie over her pale yellow school blouse. Having asked Walti to wait for me in the taxi, I walked up to the main entrance where an elderly doorman tried to bar my way, however I managed to enter the building. There, I came across a young teacher to whom I presented myself as an old pupil of E.G.C. Upon learning that, her face lit up with delight and she led me upstairs to the headmistress's office. As I began to climb I noticed the royal blue mosaic covering the narrow columns in the open hallway and on the neat patio. In the center of the patio, still stood the very same small stone fountain surrounded by plants of various colors and a well-kept lawn. At one end of the lawn were some small shrubs, neatly trimmed to form the letters E.G.C. It was as if time had stopped.

However, when I reached the top of the stairs, I saw that some things had indeed changed. My guide led me towards an open door, by the side of which I noticed three plaques of different sizes with Arabic inscriptions, although the largest plaque, in brass, also bore the word "HEADMISTRESS". The headmistress greeted me politely and led us into the staffroom. As we entered, I was for a brief moment speechless, for everything had changed. In the front part of the room were sitting a large number of teachers, most of whom were wearing a black or colored veil, whereas the back half of the room was full of computers, all of which were switched on. As I did not want to keep Walti waiting too long, I was unable to take a look at my old classroom, nor to see the swimming pool with its diving board, where we used to enthusiastically show off our swimming talents on parents' day.

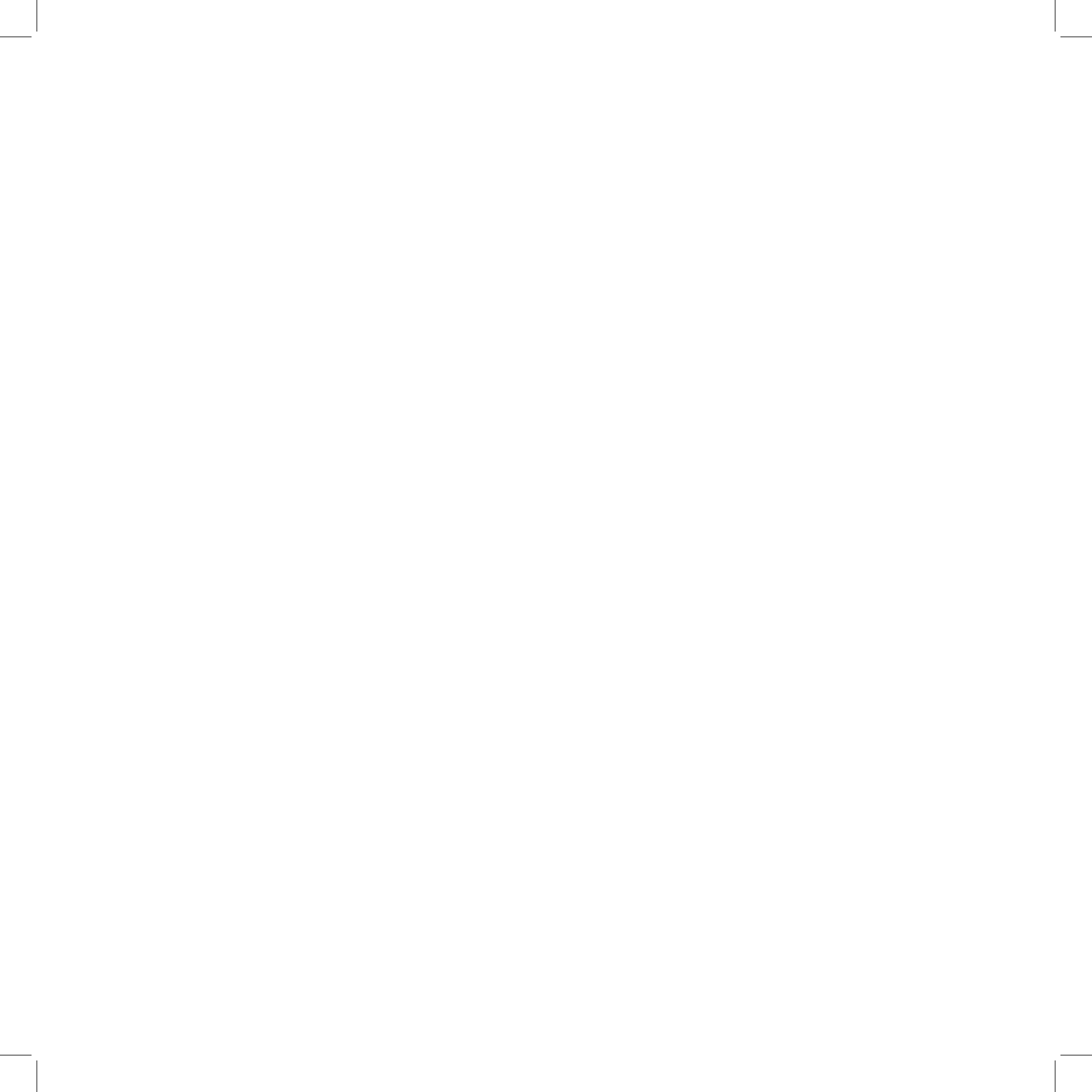


English Girls' College, 2006

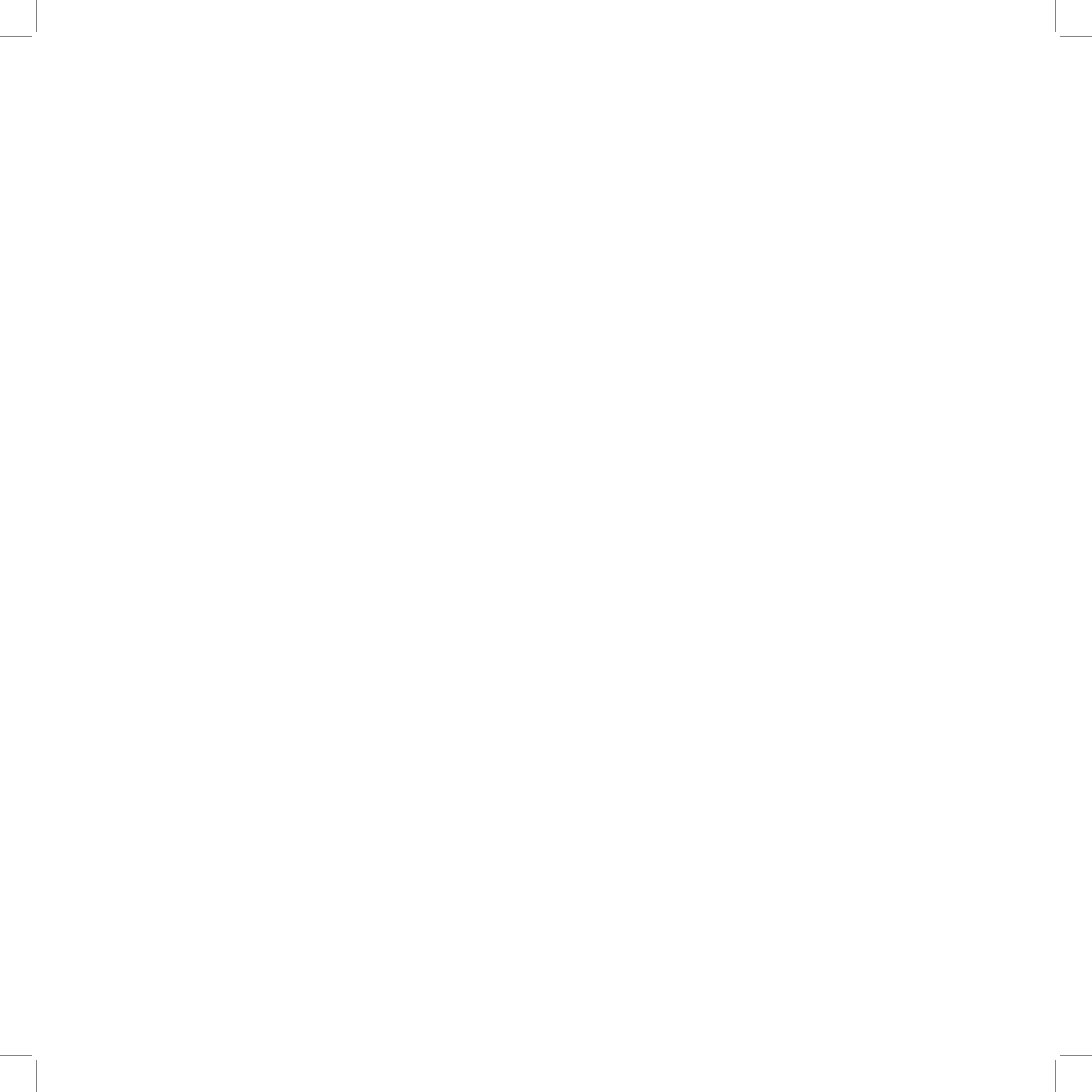


Since my last visit to Alexandria in the early 1990s, the city has once again made international headlines when an important discovery was made by a team of French archeologists carrying out underwater excavations near the base of Qaitbey Fortress, where one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, the old lighthouse, once stood. The city of my birth, with its long two thousand year history, has undergone a total transformation over the last forty years. However, I do not need an underwater discovery, fascinating as that may be, to bring back my feelings of loss and nostalgia for the magic of an era gone forever.

February 1998



THE PRESENT DAY



## OLD REUNIONS AND NEW ACQUAINTANCES

Over the last sixty years, a friendly annual reunion has been held in a different Swiss town each year amongst older and younger former members of the Swiss communities of Alexandria and Cairo. On that occasion, we partake in a delicious meal preceded by Egyptian hors d'oeuvres and accompanied by a good Swiss wine with old acquaintances recalling distant but unforgettable memories of the good old days on the banks of the Nile. Today as in the past, French is the language mostly spoken by the Cercle Suisse d'Alexandrie, of course peppered with Arabic expressions which we can at last bring out for the occasion.

In the early 1990s, an ex-pupil of the English Girls' College succeeded, after very long and indefatigable research, in locating one thousand former pupils dispersed across the four corners of the globe. Two years ago, we had the great pleasure of holding our second reunion during a long weekend in London. The climax was a reception held by the Egyptian ambassador at an imposing mansion in the heart of the British capital. About three hundred former pupils of E.G.C. attended, some with their husbands. It was a unique experience for me to meet old classmates whom I had not seen for over forty years and to indulge in so many old memories! They had come from all over the world: Europe, the Middle East, São Paulo, Texas, Sydney, Montreal, South Africa and Japan. There were even some former teachers as well as a former headmistress, Joyce Bloxham, who was the principal of E.G.C. when I was there. I remembered her quite vividly, because I had been sent to her office several times for having been caught speaking in French instead of English to a friend during the school break time. My punishment had been to copy out a few pages of a Shakespeare play.

In addition to these grand reunions in London every couple of years, smaller reunions are organized in about twenty other countries in Europe, the Middle East and

North and South America. A newsletter is produced once or twice yearly, mostly devoted to old school memories. Last year, the Old Girls' Association organized a reunion in Alexandria to duly celebrate the English Girls' College's sixtieth anniversary, which unfortunately I was unable to attend.

At around the same time a former pupil of the Lycée français d'Alexandrie, in association with others from the École Suisse d'Alexandrie, founded the Amicale Alexandria Hier et Aujourd'hui, the A.A.H.A. Whereas the English association consists exclusively of former pupils of E.G.C., the members of the A.A.H.A. are former pupils of various Alexandrian French language schools for both boys and girls. Its hundreds of members are also spread across the four corners of the globe. However because we hold similar and often close ties with the city of our birth and youth, Alexandria, both associations in their own way form a tight knit community. The French speaking community in Switzerland hold a small reunion every other month in either Lausanne or Geneva. In addition to these friendly get-togethers, the association organizes conferences and museum visits connected with our native city of Alexandria. We look forward to receiving twice a year a most entertaining magazine, the *Alexandrie Info*, with its motto *Dispersés, mais unis; unis mais divers*: Dispersed, but united; united but diverse. There is always something for everyone: letters from readers, reports of international reunions, book reviews, the latest news of the various sections with a list of the participants, old photographs of Alexandria from bygone days, brief accounts of childhood memories from various members, and poems inspired by the maritime city some of which are even composed phonetically in Arabic.

In August 1997, I met Shawki Fahim, an Egyptian friend of an acquaintance of mine, who was in Basel on a visit. Naturally, the subject of my German memoirs, *Kleopatra, Kranzler und Kolibris*, was mentioned during the conversation. Being a well known journalist in Cairo, he showed great interest in them. Following his advice, the

parts pertaining to Egypt were translated into Arabic and published in Egypt during the summer of 1998. Then, in 2001 I met the Egyptologist Jean-Yves Empereur who in turn recommended that I publish them in French, which I did the following year. Through the French version of my memoirs I met an Italian lady, Magdalena Fognani, whose brother was one of my father's many patients, whereas it is because of the German version, that I was invited to attend the general assembly of the Schweizerische-Aegyptische Kulturvereinigung: The Egyptian-Swiss Cultural Association. It was with raffle tickets bought at that general assembly, that I won a trip to Upper Egypt.

On account of my memoirs in German, French and Arabic I have both met new people and traveled, and so it is that my memories of Egypt continue to enrich my life to this day. So finally I took the decision to have them translated for the English reading public also and who knows what new experiences this may bring me?

## ENDNOTES

1. The Persians invaded Egypt briefly in 618 C.E. Then General Amr Ibn El Aas, under orders from Caliph Omar, invaded at the head of an Arab army, capturing Alexandria in 641 C.E.
2. Banat El Ashraf was a private girls' school founded by the early Egyptian feminist Nabawiya Moussa. It is today called Nabawiya Moussa School. Governmental or state schools did exist at that time, but they were actually fee paying schools and could be more expensive than the private institutions. During the 1940s there was only one state school for girls in Alexandria: Amira Faiza School.
3. This kind of paste, which is still used today, must be removed whilst still hot and malleable.
4. This cove is known in Arabic as *Bir Masoud*.
5. These kinds of vendors are still seen on the beaches of Alexandria today. The wafers, stuffed with nuts, are referred to as *fresca*.
6. The author is referring to Christopher Landon's novel, *Ice Cold in Alex*, which was made into a film.
7. The system of weights used was not yet unified in Egypt at that time. Kilos were not used in Alexandria until the early 1960s. Instead *oke* or *oka* were used. It was not customary to weigh poultry.
8. The purple stamp indicated that the meat had been passed by the government health inspectors.
9. At that time most cooking pots were made of copper and would be regalvanized when they wore down.
10. The term *les arabes* was commonly term by Europeans to refer to Egyptians, in a somewhat pejorative sense.
11. The summer police uniforms were white and the winter ones black.
12. Normally, *kunafa* was, and still is, served on plates rather than in bowls.
13. Medals were also awarded in state schools.
14. The rue Ambroise Ralli was later renamed Port Said Street.
15. General Naguib, born in 1901, was in fact a senior general at that time, chosen on account of his high rank to help the younger Free Officers.
16. Nilometer is the term given to a number of devices used to measure the level of the waters of the Nile. The nilometer at Elephantine Island, to which the author is referring in this passage, consists of a flight of stairs leading down into the Nile, with markings on the walls to indicate the depth of the water.
17. The *pas-de-géant* was a kind of merry-go-round with a long vertical pole at the top of which long chains were attached. At the bottom was a device resembling a rope ladder. The children would take hold of this device as they ran round the pole and would swing rather like taking a giant's stride.
18. These were and still are in fact restaurants.