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Abstract

This paper describes the work of the Alexandria and Mediterranean Research Centre, and its initiative to record the social history of the Cosmopolitan Alexandria that came to an end in the 1960s, through the reminiscences of people who lived through this era. The story is told through extensive verbatim quotations, and the Author makes the case for preserving such narratives for future generations

The City

No city, says E. M. Forster, has had such a glorious entry into history, for it was founded by Alexander the Great. This is the classical city whose Pharos and Library endure as symbols of enlightenment and learning, and which witnessed the immortal drama of Cleopatra and Anthony. But that is not the Alexandria I want to talk about. Mine is a city that may not have eclipsed the ancient one, but which also has a magic of its own. This is the cosmopolitan city of the 19th and early 20th centuries which has fascinated writers like Cavafy, Forster and Durrell, and which continues to appeal to writers, travelers and ordinary tourists, though there are few physical remains to prove that it ever existed.

Cosmopolitan Alexandria was revived after a long decline by Mohamed Ali, the Ottoman soldier who hailed from Cavalla, just like Alexander the Great. He ruled from 1805-1847 and is indisputably the founder of modern Egypt. Under his rule, Alexandria flourished from a forgotten backwater to the foremost city in the Mediterranean. Hundreds of thousands of foreigners (they were not called immigrants then) flocked to it, in search of opportunities and security. Alexandria opened its arms to them, and in return for its hospitality, they built, embellished and enriched it – both materially and culturally. For a

hundred and fifty years it was a multi-ethnic, multi-denominational, polyglot city where for generations foreigners lived with Egyptians harmoniously in their city of adoption. This cosmopolitanism, however, could not survive in the face of successive political events: World War II, the Suez Aggression of 1956, and the nationalizations of Gamal Abdel Nasser's socialist regime. The sixties witnessed a mass exodus that put an end to Alexandria's culturally diverse population, and those who remained behind sank from being the elites and notables of the city to small group of marginalized old eccentrics, living on the edge of a Moslem Arab society.

The Narrative: Stories without writing

This, in a few lines, is the history of Alexandria. In this paper, I will retell the story as it was narrated to us by Alexandrians, the story that is not written but which survives in the memories of a fast disappearing community.

Over a period of two years, we recorded on audiotape, interviews with over a hundred Alexandrians from all social classes, neighbourhoods, ethnic communities, denominational affiliations, and vocations. We interviewed Alexandrians who continued to live in Alexandria and others who left but are starting to come back for vacations. Our focus has been the older generation, those who actually lived the experience, or heard about it from their parents and grandparents. Put together, their interviews create a story that brings to life "another Alexandria", one that is hardly recognizable today. It is also a story that was never told by our history books, for in our schools and media, we were told that the revolution put an end to a corrupt system that had favoured imperialism. The value of the story lies not only in the small details it contains that go towards making everyday life, but also in its heteroglossia and the many voices who are speaking. Equally important is the fact that they narrate a story the younger generation is entirely oblivious of, one that will be preserved for them if they care to listen to it and learn about the rich heritage of their city.

The Origins

Isabelle Tawil

"My father is French. His grandmother was Peruvian, but he was born in Paris not in Peru. He ended up marrying a Bolivian. I was born in Paris. My husband is originally from Damascus."

Basile Behna

"My family originated in Mosul in Iraq. We belong to a particular sect called the Syrian Catholics. We had to leave Iraq in the 19th century, around 1830-40, and settled in Aleppo until the end of the 19th century. My grandfather came to Alexandria between 1893 and 1897."

Nicolette Mawas, born Pinto

"The Pintos came from Livorno with my great grandfather David and his wife, brother-in-law and six children. Within a month and a half three of them had died of cholera,

leaving a woman with six children. My grandfather and started working in cotton and left his children a handsome fortune.”

Laila Defrawi, born Nashashibi

“My father is Palestinian, and my mother is Spanish, from Constantinople. My father’s family, the Nashashibis, have been in Palestine for 800 years. My grandfather was mayor of Jerusalem.”

Irene Karam, born Camilleri

“I am Italian. My grandfather was working in Malta, then he was transferred to Alexandria and we’ve been here ever since. My mother was Greek. The Greek colony was the biggest in Alexandria.”

Nayla Bassili

“The family originated in the Greek island of Chios. Our ancestor had a merchant vessel and used to ply the route between Chios and Tripoli in Lebanon. He fell ill in Tripoli, married a Lebanese, and eventually died in Tripoli. They had one son, Yacoub Bassili, who is the ancestor of the whole family. So originally the name was Vassili, and it became Bassili.”

Ahmed Abou Zeid

“I was born in Alexandria, as were my father and grandfather before him.”

The Arrival

Anahide Meramedjian, Armenian

“We are originally from Istanbul. Khedive Ismail offered my grandfather, Zenob Bey Meramedjian ten places on board the royal yacht the *Mahroussa*. My grandfather accepted and came to Egypt with his two sisters and his wife, and built on the Suez Canal a palace for the Empress Eugenie for the inauguration of the Suez Canal.”

Vahan Alexanian, Armenian

“Many of the Armenians who came to Egypt were escaping massacres and genocides in Turkey and Syria. They were put in orphanages in Cyprus and from there they came to Egypt or Lebanon. Many chose to come to Egypt because it was an open country. The Egyptians always welcomed us and shared their bread with Armenian immigrants.”

Tatiana Monti born Serikoff-Andrievsky, Russian

“Both my parents were Russians who escaped the revolution. They were evacuated by the British who collected them in ships and brought them to Egypt. As always, Egypt was marvellous. She offered them hospitality and protection. They were extremely well treated. They were placed for two years in a camp in Sidi Bishr, then gradually they began to adapt, to work, to get out of the camp and they lived in Alexandria. My parents met and got married in the camp. Egypt saved us. Not just me and my family, but all our community, which ended up here and received a wonderful welcome. The Russian

Revolution was very bloody and very, very cruel, and the community had felt extremely insecure. Egypt was the welcome, tranquillity and security.”

Demis Roussos, Greek

“The Egyptian Greeks all came from the islands. I don’t know why, probably there was no money.”

Dimitrios Feng Chuan Ching, Chinese

“My father came from China in 1929. The political situation in China was really very bad at that time, so my grandfather preferred that he would leave China for a while until the situation got better, but he stayed here.”

Nayla Bassili, Lebanese

“At the beginning of the twentieth century, around 1900, there was a famine in Lebanon and many Lebanese migrated. Among them was Assa’d Bassili, who came to Egypt. He found there was no timber here, so he started importing it. That’s how the timber business started, and it continued till was nationalized by Nasser.”

I was born in Alexandria, in this house, which has now become the National Museum of Alexandria. I do have recollections of the house. As soon as I stepped into that museum, I recollected a heap of things, the arrangement of the house and who had which rooms. I can see once more my grandmother in her bed in the mornings, when we children ran to embrace her.”

Life in Alex

Edmond Cassimatis, Greek

“The Greek community used to mix with all the other communities of Alexandria, and with the Egyptians. It was part of the Egyptian social fabric. The temperament, habits, manner of speech, and way of living of the Greeks is similar to that of the Egyptians. When they go to Greece they are told: “You are not Greeks, you are from Egypt.””

Esther Zimmerli-Hardman, Swiss

“This city was extremely multi-cultural. We never had problems of “You are Jewish” or “You are Greek”. We were all friends. There was a great friendship between all the nationalities. I loved it especially because we could speak all the languages throughout the day. When I came to Switzerland, I heard nothing but Swiss German all day long, and I found that not at all interesting.”

Isabelle Tawil, French

“When I arrived, Egypt was paradise on earth. I found a marvellous country and a beautiful climate. The people are amiable, hospitable, and extremely nice. And I would like to spend my last days here, in a spirit of gentleness that one no longer finds in Europe.”

Haj Mustafa el Mulla, Egyptian

“There were all nationalities living in Kom el Dikk, just like any aristocratic quarter: Greeks, Italians, French and Germans. They lived with us like family, and their kids played with ours. There was no difference between Jew and Moslem, or intolerance. Kom el Dikk was full of Copts [Egyptian Christians]. The Christian woman would send food to the Moslem woman, and all lived together as one family without any difference between Moslem, Christian or Jew. But the British were occupiers, and walked around in military uniforms not in civil clothes, and so they were treated differently from the ordinary foreigner. We hated them.”

Mohamed Ibrahim Abel Samad, Egyptian

“The British were occupying us. We’d go into their camp and throw stones at them.

The foreigners were living with us in safety as neighbours. We’d ask about them, and they’d ask about us. We’d eat their food and they’d eat ours. They used to call Attarine the foreigners’ quarter. There were very few Egyptians there. Our house was full of Greeks, and this house and that house. We, the Egyptians, were strangers, not them.”

Identity

Dimitrios Feng Chuan Ching, Chinese-Greek

“I have a lot of Chinese and Greek in me. I’m more inclined to the Chinese way of thinking, more than the Greek and the Egyptian, because my Chinese roots are very deep in me, you see.”

Tatiana Monti, Russian

“We Slavs, we are different from everybody else. We are a very particular race, but we adapt. My husband Sandro, an Italian, is Mediterranean, and I get on very well with him, but we are obviously different. I am not Italian because I was not born Italian, and I am not Egyptian. I don’t know what I am.”

Zizi Niazi-Badr, Serbian

“My father was Albanian and had a Serbian passport. We have mixed blood also on my mother’s side. There is some North African blood, Tunisian or Moroccan. And then there is the Turkish blood. But even though we have such a mixture of blood, we are 100% Egyptian.”

Laila el Defrawi, Palestinian

“My husband is Egyptian. I got the nationality two years after I got married. My children are Egyptian, and I consider myself Egyptian. When people ask me what I am, I say Egyptian.”

Nadine Camel-Toueg, Egyptian

“When I went to Paris, I had to say where I was from and who I was. Unconsciously, I would immediately whip out my Alexandrian card and say at once: “I am Alexandrian. It’s not the same as Egypt.” I am the citizen of a city.”

Polyglots

Anahide Meramedjian, Armenian

"I've never been to school. In our days, only one or two of our friends went to the Lycee Francais. But we all had French and English tutors at home. In addition, I spoke Italian with my nanny, who came from Trieste. This was my first language. Then I spoke Armenian with my mother, French with my father, Greek with the cook, and Italian with the chamber maid. My father spoke Arabic very well, but unfortunately he died when I was eight, so I never learnt to speak Arabic."

Isabelle Tawil, French

"Alexandria staggered me. It was an extremely elegant city where all languages were spoken: French, Italian, English, German, all. Everybody spoke French."

Max Salama, Egyptian

"All my education was in French, even in the Jewish Union School. At home we spoke either French or Italian. My mother spoke Italian fluently. It had been the lingua franca before French took over."

Social History

a) Governesses

Zizi Niazi-Badr

"We used to have English governesses, and one of them, called Miss Griffith, would take us for a walk on the beach at sunset. And every time she'd say, "Do you see the setting sun?" and we'd answer, "Yes, Miss Griffith." Then she'd go on, "The sun is setting, but the sun never sets on the British Empire.""

Lucette de Saab

"I loved our Italian chauffeurs. During World War II, when we thought the Germans were going to enter Alexandria, everybody cried, but not me. I was thrilled. I wanted them to come and liberate our two Italian chauffeurs and carry off my English governess."

b) Traditions that have died out

Hala Hafez

"My mother was very particular about her kohl. She would ask the maids to collect jasmine flowers from the garden, which they did in large quantities. Then she would pour on the jasmine two drops of almond oil, and heat the flowers over a low fire, covering them. Eventually, the soot which had collected inside the cover would be scraped and put in the *mak-hala*, the kohl container. That was how they made the kohl."

c) Entertainment and play

Omar Koreich

"The inter-war period was very lively. My great uncle saw Sarah Bernhardt and my father saw Anna Pavlova."

Laila el Defrawi

“There used to be a rich cultural life in Alexandria. All the great ballet troupes used to come, the Bolshoi, the Italian opera, the Comédie Francaise, Edith Piaf, Malraux ...”

Khamis M. Khamis

“Those foreigners weren’t just interested in food and commerce. No. they had a flower show in April, every year, and competed for the cup. In her palace, the lady would discuss matters with the gardeners all year round, just so that the pasha would win the cup at the end of the year. If he didn’t, there would be mourning!”

Lucette de Saab

“In the summer we used to go to the beach, to Sidi Bishr no. 2. I don’t know why, but it was more chic than no. 1 or no. 3. We also used to travel to Europe for three months a year. We’d go by boat and take our car with us.”

Hala Hafez

“Going to the cinema was an important occasion. Women had to wear their furs and full make-up.”

Thalia el Naquib

“I remember there used to be a lot of dances, really, especially fancy dress which were always very amazing. And I remember lots of tea parties with all the women I was taken to be introduced to because I was the young bride as it were and I was incredibly impressed by the beautiful houses that you had here which don’t exist anymore, and the incredible generosity of the people and their hospitality which still exists of course.”

d) Worship and feasts

Isabelle Tawil, Catholic

“We all shared each others’ feasts. Ramadan and Yom Kippur There were church processions on the streets. There was a largeness of spirit that I loved to see, and which is difficult now.”

Nicolette Mawas, Jew

“On my father’s side, the family was, well, I don’t want to say atheist. But we strictly celebrated the great feasts – certainly because my maternal grandmother came from a much more religious family. When she died in 1949, we stopped those celebrations. My brother did his Bar Mitzvah, but we girls did absolutely nothing, because our family was anti-clerical. My uncle and his brother were buried in the civil cemetery. There was certainly a tree at Christmas.”

Zizi Niazi-Badr, Moslem

“Once it happened that Christmas and the Islamic feast, the Eid, coincided. So I had this Christmas tree with carols in the background, and at the same time I went round with plates piled with Eid cakes.”

Hosni Ahmed el Turki, Moslem

“Because of the number of shrines in this Square of Mosques, *moulids* [religious festivals] were held here that lasted for 14 days. They would chant religious songs and praise God Almighty and the Prophet Mohamed, peace be upon him. There were lots of games during the feasts, like shadow plays, football, swings, puppets. We would be so happy to see so many people coming from all over the country to play.”

e) English vs French

Thalia el Naquib, English

“I noticed the enormous French influence when I first came here. The way you furnish a house, you know, it’s French, it’s not English. The furniture in Mrs. Finney’s villa was not English, but then they were all very mixed, weren’t they? I mean, Mrs. Finney wasn’t English, was she? There was a lot of gold plush and red plush, and this always surprised me because it’s very un-English, you know. I always considered it French.”

The Changing Times

a) World War II

Alessandro Monti, Italian

“When the war broke out, a lot of Italians here were surprised to find themselves on the wrong side, because Egypt was allied to England. Those Italians who had reached a certain age were interned in camps – not exactly prisons – in Fayed on the Red Sea. My father was not interned, because he directed work at the port, which was in the service of Egypt, so there was no reason to intern him. In general, the Italians led a normal life in Egypt. There was no xenophobia.”

Haj Mustafa el Mulla, Egyptian

“At the beginning of 1940 we migrated to Simbellawain. We came back six months later. When there were bombs or air strikes we’d travel again, and spend 3 or 4 months away. So we’d come and go, not to leave my father on his own. When the air raid siren sounded all the people would go to the shelter underneath their homes till the raid was over. These were very difficult days. We lived through the wars of 1956 and 1967 and 1973, and we didn’t see the things we saw in the German war.”

Lucette de Saab, Lebanese

“My sister and governess went to the clubs of the English soldiers, to cook eggs for them. Mrs. Baker, the wife of Sir Baker Pasha, was a foreigner – Greek or Armenian – and every Saturday evening she would give a party, to which my sister went regularly. All the young women died of envy and would give anything to go and meet the English soldiers. There were lots of marriages.”

Isabelle Tawil, French

“The war years were the great madness. We went out every evening. First it was the age of the Poles – because of the Polish contingents one saw nothing but Poles. Then we saw nothing but Greeks, and then it was only this and then only that. And always the parties and dances, to distract those who had been at the front. Then there were the charity dances organized by the different communities: the Greek, the Italian. It was very cosmopolitan. There was a lot of social activity, with dances left, right and centre. It was incredible.

As the Germans advanced upon el Alamein, which was only 200 kilometres away from Alexandria, those foreigners whose country was at war with Germany fled to Cairo. They were terrified. The Jews fled as far as Luxor.”

Jimmy Mawas, Egyptian Jew

“A judge got us a house in a village and the whole family went there and spent two years there. It was enchanting. My cousins and I became close to each other, like brothers, and we had a happy time together. There was a dear headmaster in the village who got us what we wanted, and there was the governess and my mother who tried to teach us some reading and writing. But we were always playing or going on walks or visiting the neighbours, such as Mr. Nimr, who had a huge agricultural property. There we learnt how to make butter and bake bread – that kind of education.”

b) the 1952 Revolution

Edwar el Kharrat, Egyptian

“The 1952 Revolution, I believe, has destroyed the concept of Alexandria as the second capital of the country, neglecting and distancing Alexandria to some extent, economically, politically and culturally. It was difficult for a writer or a journalist writing within the boundaries of Alexandria, to reach a large audience or a large readership. Writers have to move to Cairo in order to be read, to become recognized by an audience and to gain recognition and popularity.”

c) the 1956 War

Vahan Alexanian, Armenian

“A lot of Jews left in 1956. This was a bonanza period for the Armenians, who stepped in to take the place of Jews in banks and big institutions.”

Omar Koreich, Arabian

“I remember the Suez Crisis of 1956 very well. We were terribly frightened and left for Damanhour to spend a few days there. There were bombings and everybody was scared in Alexandria. It didn't last very long, but sadly we lost a lot of friends. When we came back to the family home, there were lots of tears. All our Greek friends, all our Jewish friends, all were gone. That was it.”

d) the Nationalizations of the 60s

Asma el Bakri, Egyptian

“In 63, when the nationalizations started, we had these rushed departures. I still remember, when I was at school, month after month the class was getting more empty, people were leaving the country, the ships were full. It is during these periods that we could buy a lot of books as people were selling everything in hurry and disappeared for fear of being put into jail.”

Omar Koreich, Arabian

“A lot of our friends left in the second sequestrations of 1963. Alexandria lost its charm and the last traces of its cosmopolitanism.”

Beyond the Narrative

This, then, is part of the oral narrative of the cosmopolitan city that came to an end in the 1960s, as it has been gathered in book form entitled *Voices from Cosmopolitan Alexandria*. Much has been left out, due to time considerations. I have not referred to schools, public spaces, neighbourhoods, homes, houses of worship, folktales, vocations, and community clubs, homes and papers, all of which would have enriched the portrait. Despite all these omissions, I do realize I have quoted at length, but the purpose has been to allow for a multiplicity of voices from such different backgrounds to narrate the story. And the surprising thing is that the story is the same, regardless of who is telling it. It is the story of a multi-ethnic, multi-denominational city of tolerance and enlightenment, where there was enough space for this rich diversity to prosper. Alexandria was a city of wealth and opportunity, culture, security, and religious tolerance.

The question that remains is: what is to be done with this narrative? It needs to be preserved, I believe, in both forms: written and oral. And it needs to be disseminated to Alexandrians, first and foremost. For the rest of the world, it is an academic curio, but for us, it is a salutary lesson in diversity and tolerance. More importantly, it preserves a history and a heritage that our youth are entirely unaware of. They are clueless as to why their tram stops are called Bulkeley and Zizinia and Bacos and Laurens, which by the way, are being Arabised so that soon no one will ever know Count Zizinia ever existed. They do not know that the Alexandria National Museum was once the house of a Lebanese timber merchant, or that the Sacred Heart School was the house of another Lebanese timber merchant. Nor do our historians know these stories either, for this is not the stuff of history. These personal tales are not part of the grand narrative of the country, but the alternative story of, as I have mentioned earlier, a marginalized group that will soon be extinct. In a few years, all that will remain will be a few buildings whose history nobody knows, and some street names that sound awkward and foreign.

I also think that the other salutary lesson to be learnt is that this cosmopolitanism enriched all those who were involved in the experience. Nadine Camel-Toueg, an Egyptian who lives in Paris, feels it has given her an advantage. She says, “Because of our cosmopolitanism, because of the stories that have nourished us, we can’t help feeling superior wherever we go. We are aware that we have lived the better life, and

we are there as a choice, not as an economic necessity. We have nothing to envy or need. We are not immigrants.” Even the foreigners feel that by living in Alexandria they have changed for the better. The English Thalia tells us: “We have all gained the advantage of being cosmopolitan by living here. I mean, we’re different, because we’ve lived here, because we’ve had the opportunity to mix with people of so many different nationalities. You have a much broader point of view, way of thinking, understanding.”

In fact, I think there is a lesson for all of us today. Living with the Other has proven to be, rather than a threat to one’s identity and religion, an enriching experience in every way. It is a story we would do well to remember, and to spread. Holding up Alexandria as an example would not be a bad way to start, and so, today, I look to you for help in getting me started.