

AAHA = Amicale Alexandrie Hier et Aujourd'hui

George PSAROS

# Return to Alexandria

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*"The best way of seeing it is to wander aimlessly about"* - E.M.Forster



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I left Alex in 1952 to attend university in England. Now I was returning with my wife Annette who had been listening to me, my relatives, and assorted Old Victorians wailing about La Belle Époque in Alex for nearly forty years. Annette is very patient and very polite.

Our departure from London was not straightforward. Having duly proceeded to the departure gate for our Lufthansa flight to Frankfurt we were informed 15 minutes before take-off that our plane was not going anywhere for the foreseeable future. The luggage had to be reclaimed and we queued for 3 hours to get rescheduled to Athens by BA next day. We befriended an anxious Mrs. Suliman who was also hoping to get to Alexandria some day. So our first night away from home was spent in London at one of the living machines they call hotels. Next morning we set off again and duly arrived at Athens airport where Mrs. Suliman insisted I call Delta Hotel on her mobile. Just as well, because Lufthansa had failed to notify anyone in Alex that we had missed the Frankfurt connecting flight because of the cancellation of their London flight. Our flights cost £ 640.25.

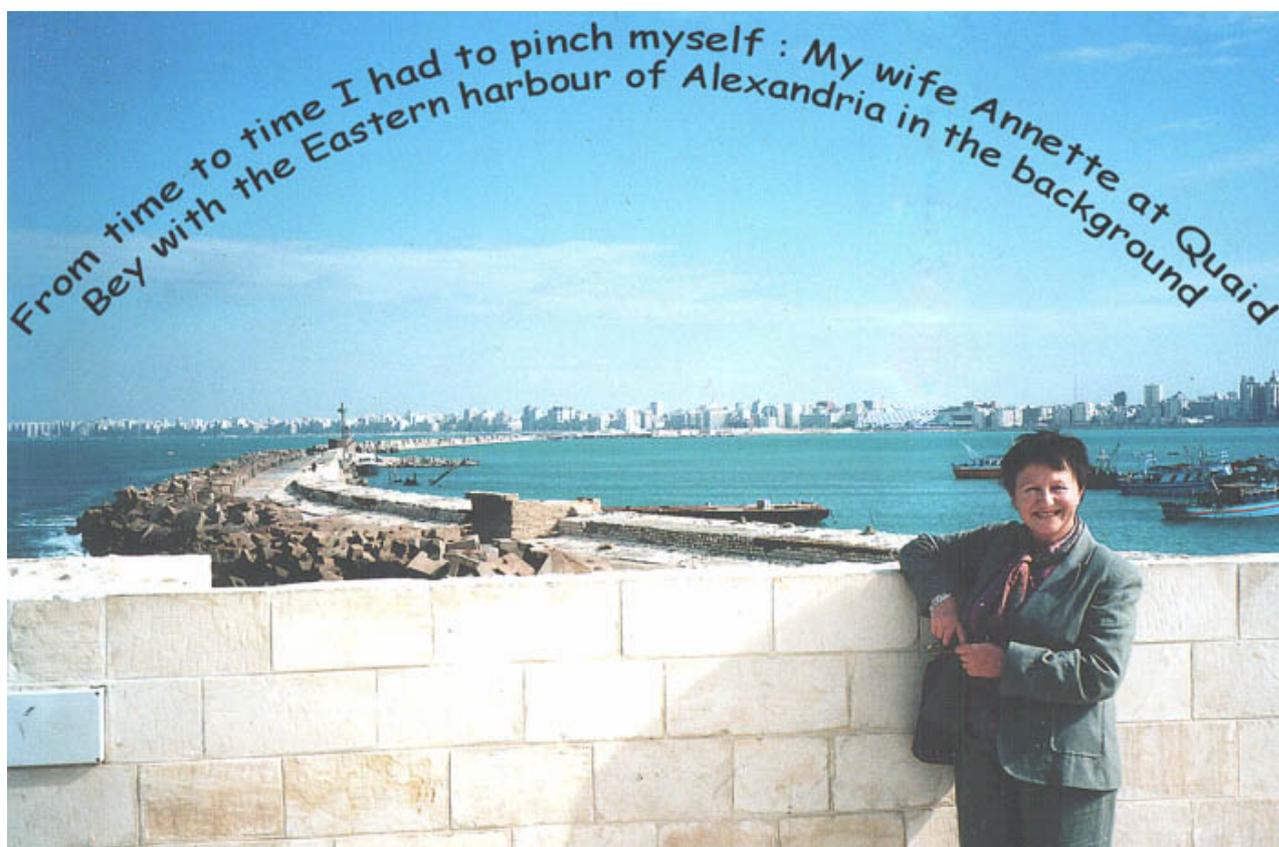
We disembarked from our Egyptair jet at Nouzha and I felt immediately that this trip was going to be a success after all. Just as the coach was about to take us all of 80 meters to the terminal a distressed Egyptian official came running up screaming at a huge party of smiling Japanese who were not supposed to have got off the plane as they were bound for Cairo. As he explained in English that he wanted them back on board their smiles broadened and grateful bows showed their appreciation for what they thought was a welcoming speech. "Mish kalleml Inglizi" muttered the disbelieving airport official as he ran off to get help. At which point bladder-control became an issue.

As we entered the hall a very large business-like member of the Tourist & Antiquities police shouted "Mr. George!" My initial fear of arrest was quickly dispelled when he smiled as I slowly raised my hand. Both the hotel or Aly Ibrahim had been busy and we were obviously being treated as Missing Persons. I duly surrendered and we were escorted to the Visa Counter where we were relieved of the £Eg equivalent of \$30. A very relieved chauffeur, Esmail Abas, was also standing by with his "tourist taxi" and we were whisked away in seconds. He had spent most of the previous day waiting for us at the airport and been accused of "losing" us when he returned to the hotel without us. He gently drew my attention to the fact that he was, of course, out of pocket on this assignment – so far.

I think I should start by highlighting the welcome we received throughout our stay. Not only in the hotel, restaurants, etc. but where it is meaningful - in the streets, on the trams, everywhere. All whom we met were friendly and helpful. On countless occasions we heard shouts of "Welcome!" from people of all ages, sometimes from the pavement opposite. I was embarrassed by my poor Arabic.

The Delta Hotel was excellent. Our room was spacious, comfortable, and clean; everything worked, and they have a French-style restaurant and patisserie which many a European hotel would be very proud of. We found it as a result of a chance encounter with an Egyptian student several years ago in Bournemouth. My

daughter Susan hosts foreign students attending courses at English Language Schools in our area. When Tarek, an Alexandrian, turned up she alerted us and we had him over for a very agreeable lunch during the course of which I asked him whether he knew of any hotels which were not in the town centre, but not out at Montazah either. When I mentioned Mazarita because I had lived there he promised to send us a video of Hotel Delta and the neighborhood of Sharia Stabile where I used to live. This he did, bless him. The hotel is built on the site of the Psyachis gymnasium. Mazarita is now El Azarita and Sharia Stabile is now Sharia Moustafa Mohamed Ismail. We paid £Eg 6,826.41 for 11 nights (including 25 piastres for Sports Tax).



Annette and I walk a lot when we are on holiday. She says it is good for us. In Alex we walked for many hours. In addition to the town centre we explored Anfushy, Attarine, Kom el Shugafa, Kom el Dik to name but a few. Annette had developed severe doubts about crossing the road soon after we passed our first Corniche pedestrian/car accident on the first day. The result was that we were a bit slow and people were staring. On two occasions we were helped across by huge young men who were obviously full of pity for a helpless old couple. We liked the trams because their intentions and direction were more predictable.

Changing the long-established names of streets, landmarks, etc. should be banned world-wide. In Alex it was tiresome at times because a comprehensive street map of the city does not exist in any language. We had several street maps – all bad. Happily, all the locals we met knew the old names. But there are many new Midans and Sharias.

At an exchange rate of about £Eg11.50 to £1 the cost of getting about, eating out, and sightseeing was very low by European standards. The most convenient Bureau de Change for us was Thomas Cook at Mohatat Raml. The staff was first class and dealt with TC and cash transactions very efficiently. The low prices meant that I lost all incentive to haggle. It would not have felt right. We were happy to pay up on demand even in the case of taxis, and our three outings in an arrabeya hantour. And the prices of souvenirs and silver jewellery, too, were more than reasonable. Annette had a great time in Sharia Faranza (now Moustafa Hafez). We met a young cat with her leg in plaster convalescing on her dotting owner's lap. He insisted that she had fallen down the stairs. I looked at pussy and our eyes met. She turned away in disgust. She knew I knew how sexually-active cats break their legs.



Having arrived in Alex quite exhausted we thought that we should spend the first day being carted around by Esmail Abas in his tourist taxi. Off we went for our first visit to the beautiful Montazah Palace grounds via the Corniche. I do accept that it was necessary to widen it, and I agree that the bridge carrying the multi-lane

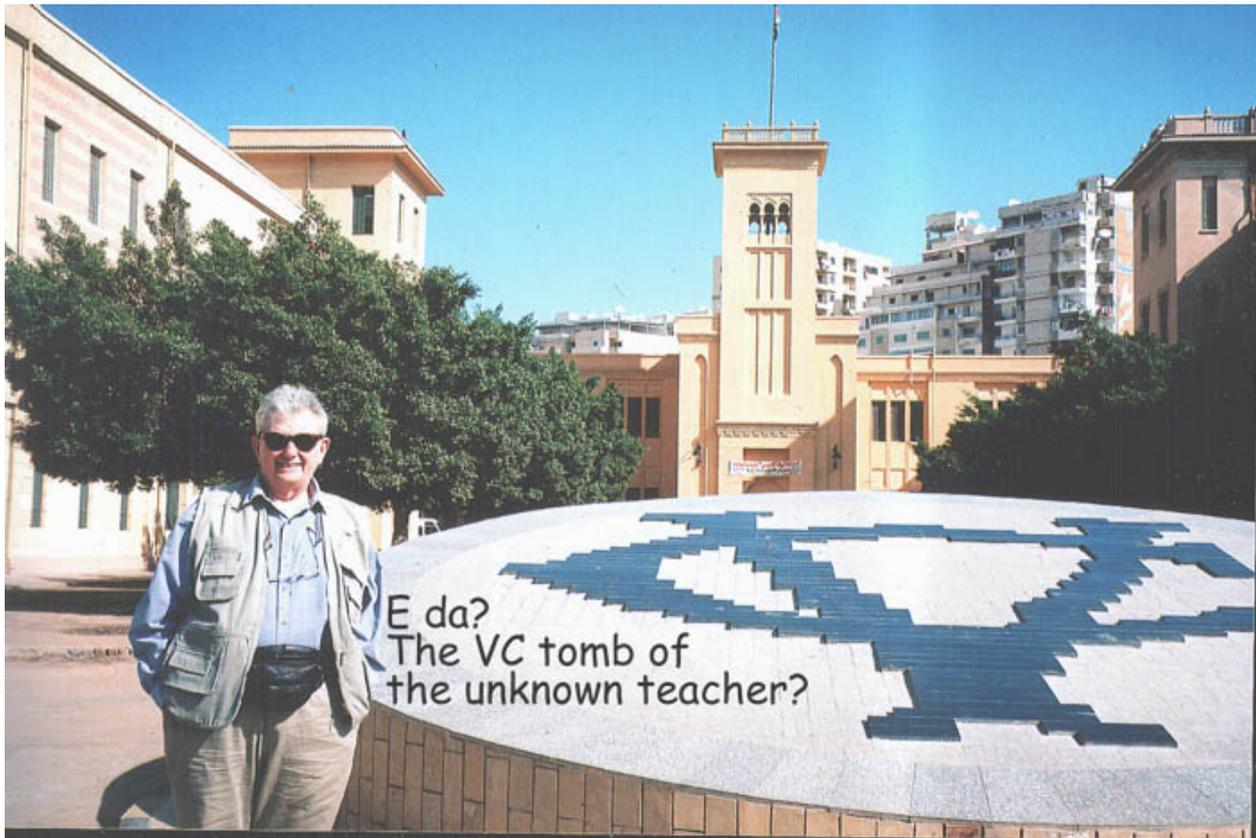
highway across Stanley Bay is a beautiful design and a great feat of civil engineering. But I am not turned on by motorways and wish this one had not happened. Long stretches of beach have been lost and crossing the Corniche is not for the slow or faint-hearted unless you happen to be close to one of the few underpasses. It was a lovely day and there were people swimming in the sea. We popped into the Salamlek palace – the first one to be built – now a hotel. We looked at the photo, coin and stamp collection, all very interesting and evocative of our period. We returned to Alex for lunch at the Samakmak in Anfushy. Grilled bouri and barbounia! Some things had not changed! And on to Kom el Shougafa – the Catacombs and Pompei's Pillar. Mention of either always conjures up a vision of our wonderful Mr. Fam who worked so hard to fire up our interest in Ancient History and Archaeology. Having married an Archaeology freak I hope he can rest content in the knowledge that he has saved my marriage.



That evening in the hotel restaurant after a splendid dinner I had a heart-to-heart with Maitre Ahmed Fathi. Breakfast had been a disappointment. As he surely knew Lipton tea bags were so bad they were unavailable even in England, and were we not entitled to have coffee made from coffee beans? Instructions were issued and assurances given. Our tea with leaves of naanaa would in future be Arab-style, koshari (strong), and served in a glass. The coffee would be Arab. Mazbout for the sitt and ziyada for me. Problem solved. Much relief all round.

Just to ensure a good start to the day one of the hall porters made a point of handing me a complimentary copy of the Egyptian Gazette every morning. I forgot to enquire about La Bourse Egyptienne and Tachydromos.

But the first day was not over yet. It was a pleasant evening so we decided to amble down to Mohatat Raml. I could not resist popping into Athineos. As I was trying to work out why it looked smaller up came the manager to explain that it was now divided up into 4 sections. The patisserie, restaurant, and two rooms earmarked for weddings. I am not sure how he managed it but we were propelled into a wedding in full swing. The guests gave us a rousing reception, and the parents of the bride and groom decided that we were not merely honoured guests but a speech by me was highly desirable. We were very touched and would have loved to stay but were simply too tired to cope with an all-night party and pleaded successfully to be allowed to leave on medical grounds (true to some extent).

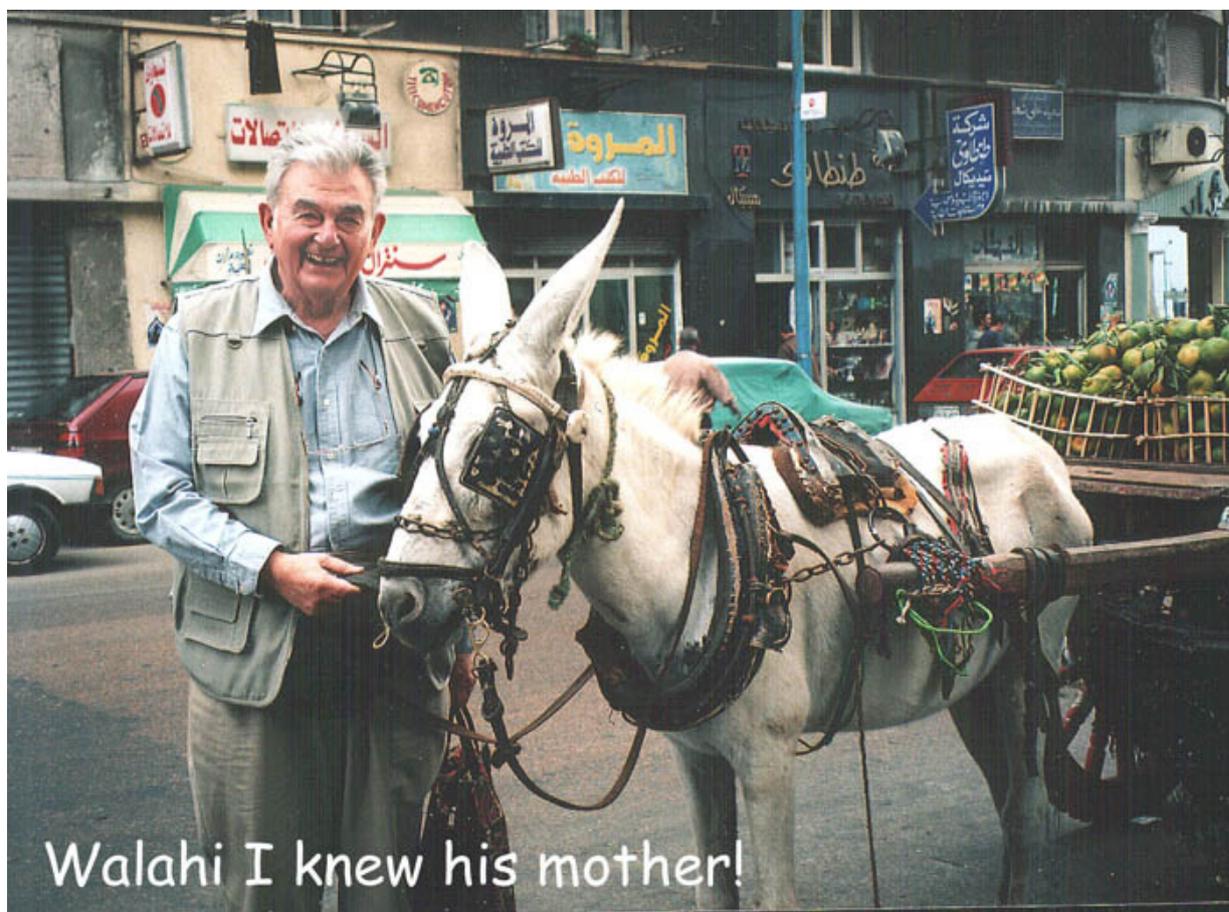


Across from Athineos where Alakefak once proudly stood and dispensed the best sandwiches in the world I saw a KFC sign. Just another reason for hating all things American.

The next morning we were delighted to see Tewfik Elzik arriving in his car. And off we went. The Abu Kir route to Victoria and VC! A quick trip round the school which looked good. Amazed to see the old wooden Pavilion still standing. On to Abu Kir. Unrecognisable. Found the old sand-hill by which we camped. On to the Zephyrion and Bella Vista restaurants for a peep. Back to EGC, Lycée Français, and other institutions from which poured out the predatory sex-starved girls de bonne famille who chased us around Alex. And having collected Tewfik's charming wife Therese it was time for lunch at Balbaa, after which Tewfik very kindly agreed to drop us at Victoria tram station.

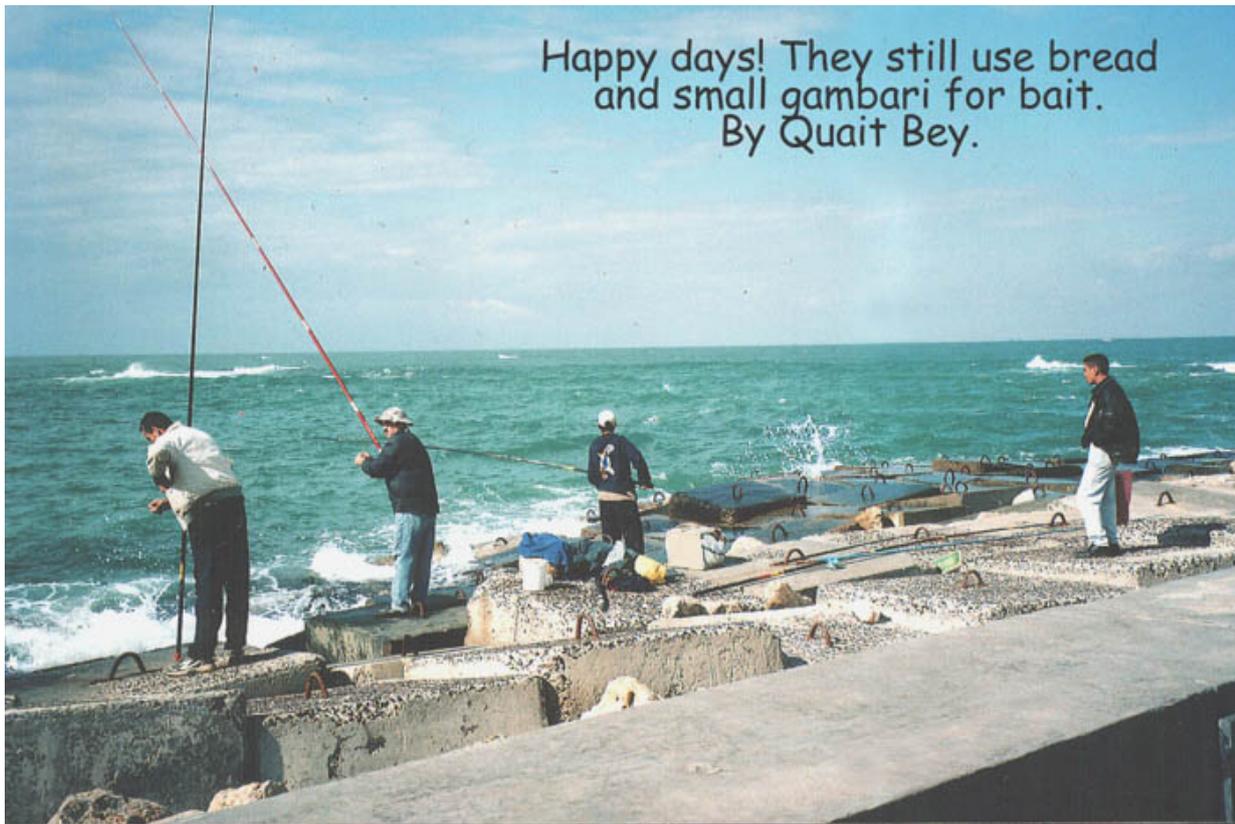
Someone has moved the platform a short distance down the track, Bandas has a successor who looks just as miserable, the fare is up to 25 piastres, and there is only one class. But I was about to do the Victoria – Mazarita tram run! The very same trip which I had survived 4 times a day for 6 years during term time. From the moment we left Victoria the fun started with our good-natured fellow passengers. By the time we clanged past Sidi Bishr our end of the tram was a scene of general merriment, and the repartee was crippling. The “maasalams” at Mazarita were very moving. It was not our only tram journey.

A word of caution. There are now many more stations and lines, and the names of the stations are not obvious. There is segregation. We had read that the middle section in 3-carriage trains was girls only, but I was caught out when on a 2-carriage tram the carriage I boarded was girls only. Much general amusement particularly when I pretended my mistake was deliberate.



My flirtation with the Greek Orthodox Church ceased the day I lost my small fat Greek grandmother – my priceless Yiayia. But there was no way I could resist the urge to visit St George’s, Chatby (where I was baptised), St Savvas, Manshia, where my cousin Athena was married, and Evangelismos, Attarine, to which I was regularly dragged by Yiayia. The first had to be unlocked by an aged caretaker, the

second was open, but the third was undergoing massive refurbishment and I could not enter. Possibly just as well. I also walked into the Greek Sports Club Enosis and nearly collided with a huge new marble bust which I instantly recognized as my god-father Achilles Coutarelli! He owned the Papastratos cigarette empire and was invited to be President of the club by my father who was the General Secretary. Much more useful was a visit to the Greek Nautical Club in the Eastern Harbour where we had a huge lunch of grilled fish washed down with good old Stella beer. I had been a very keen member of the Club when it was located in the Western harbour alongside the other nautical clubs.



This reminds me. Other than party-going my leisure pursuits in Alex were exclusively concerned with the sea. Swimming, surfing, sailing, rowing, fishing, water-polo, snorkelling. Western Harbour, Agami, Eastern Harbour, the Corniche beaches, Abu Kir. That was how it was for me. I absorbed many skills, and much knowledge from my elders, including El Ries Goda (I still have his business card) who rented out a koter at Bab 6. I learnt about the Alexandrian winds which are sudden, vicious, and predictable. So before we took off bound for Alex I knew that El Moknessa was due within days but hoped that on this occasion it might not happen and said nothing to Annette. After 4 days of warm and sunny weather we were caught by El Moknessa out in the open whilst walking round the Greco-Roman amphitheatre. We were soaked to the skin, and struggled to get to Mohatat Raml against a Force 6-8 wind blowing up Sharia Nebi Daniel (it is a North-

Easterly). I could sense that Annette was not pleased. She holds me personally responsible for any bad weather anywhere in the Mediterranean. And she knows when I am lying. So I had to admit that Alexandria does occasionally have the odd bit of bad weather. Nothing is perfect. Her cold is much better now.



It was inevitable that I should join the school Scout Group when it became a Sea Scout Group. We were so lucky to have “Skip” Young in charge. I have him to thank for my membership of the Scout Movement in the UK as a scoutmaster between 1953 and 1971. I thus met the best Akela in the world – my wife Annette. We saw Skip often and he attended our wedding in 1967. We visited him in hospital just before he died.

Arriving at the top of Sharia Nebi Daniel was really weird. I thought I was lost. The Kom in Kom el Dik is gone - all of it! In its place is a huge crater at the bottom of which is this beautiful amphitheatre. All around it the excavations by a Polish University are uncovering extensive ancient buildings. This is going to be an enormous archaeological site of great importance.

The bad weather did prevent us from doing everything on our wish-list, particularly because the days were short. However we did manage the one day with Tewfik Elzik, had a couple of days with Aly Ibrahim, and had coffee with Bahgat Tartoussieh at the hotel. Aly Ibrahim took us to the new offices of the Old

Victorians Association on 7<sup>th</sup> floor, 73 Sharia Fuad (now Horreya), Tel 0020 (0)3 48 42 66 45 . The new omdah is Vahan Alexanian who has plans for a library, sitting room, and much else to create an attractive meeting-place for OV's. An agreeable morning was followed by an agreeable lunch at Gad (the restaurant at Sharia Mahmoud Azmi , opposite the National Bank of Egypt) and after all these years I was sitting opposite dear Aly tucking into eggs & bastourma. Unreal.



In addition to artefacts from Kom el Dik and elsewhere many hundreds of important artefacts have been recovered from the sea in and around the Eastern harbour as well as Abukir. The old Archaeological museum at Sharia el Mathaf el Romany has been transformed and will surely have to be moved to much bigger premises very soon.

And there is a new National Museum. So new nobody knows where it is. My dear friend Antoine Bassili who has tried to be helpful for as long as I have known him, had sent me directions by e-mail for finding it which I had not read. Not until we set off walking up Sharia Champolion. I knew it was going to be a bad day when I read that it was housed in Assad Bassili's villa by Bobby Kohn's apartment block and of course I had never been to either. To cut a long story short please note that the museum is located opposite the huge floral clock at the Southern end of the new Midan whose name I have forgotten. We found it on our second attempt at 110

Sharia Fuad (now Horreya). This is another superb museum packed with important exhibits.

A short walk from our hotel was the Bibliotheca Alexandrina. Reading all about it on the Internet had not prepared us for the view inside. It is a stunning and enormous cavern. I do not care for modern architecture but this was something else. The design, the materials, the layout – first class all round. In addition to the library itself there are small but very important museums. We could not do it justice in one morning. Quite extraordinary. Outside there is a planetarium with a well organized display aimed at the more scientifically inclined. I thought developments in mathematics were particularly well presented.



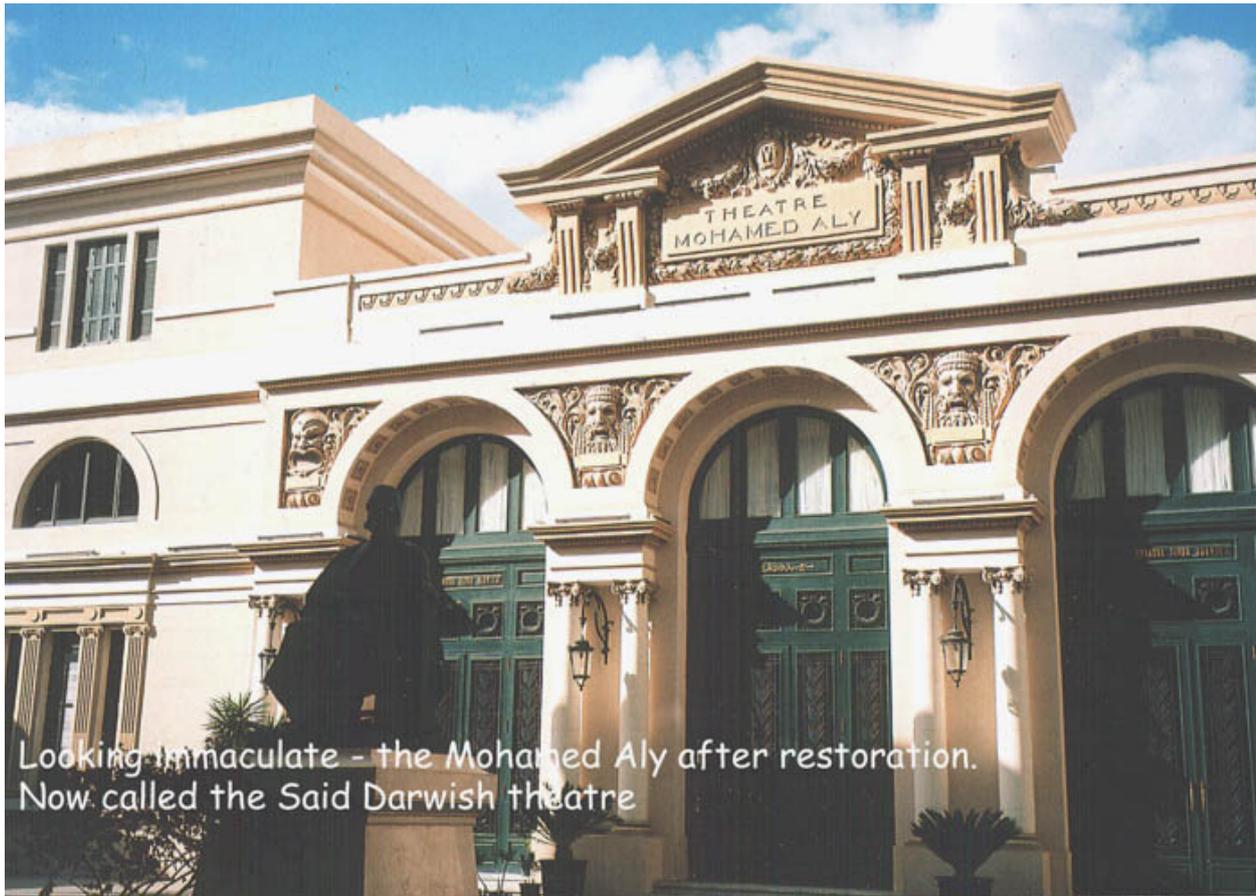
Across the road the whole of Silsileh is used by the military and closed to the general public. I used to go there a lot.

Also a short walk from the hotel were the Shallalat Gardens where I played cache-cache over 60 years ago. Annette took a picture of me in front of my favourite tree! It has grown. I forgot to show Annette the El Nabih cistern. More abject apologies.





Our visit to Kait Bey was also a first for me and the views of Alex were magnificent. I had not realized how big the fort was. At the fort Annette was mobbed by a huge swarm of very friendly and noisy schoolgirls. Again, I was ignored. How hurtful can it get? We used our emergency torches (yes we do) to light up one of the big dark rooms which you enter down a spooky tunnel. While we were peering at the walls in torch-light a small boy skipped in and switched the floodlights on. He gave us a puzzled smile. There are a couple of museums (National history and Aquarium) by the entrance to the complex which I think should be missed out altogether. Waste of space.



The staff at the Tourist Information Office at Midan Saad Zaghloul were very charming and very competent.

Unfortunately they could not help us with our search for a performance of Egyptian folk dancing and singing. The troupes perform only in Spring/summer. There was nothing on at the Sayed Darweesh Theatre (ex Mohamed Aly) or the Mohamed Abdel Wahab Theatre.

Annette is serious about hygiene. For 12 days I humped around Alexandria a bag containing 2 days emergency supply of Aqua Siwa (believe it), 1 full toilet roll, several boxes of tissues covering all requirements – thin & thick, wet & dry, fragrant and odourless – for all occasions and parts of the human anatomy. Vital medicines including 2 forms of Imodium were checked into the bag every morning. These precautions were supplemented by a total prohibition of any goodies from the

hundreds of street stalls that we passed every day. Fruit juices, fresh fruit, dried fruit, ice-cream, nuts, seeds, durra, koulouria, chestnuts, sugar cane, palm heart, and much else – kulu mamnoua. This oppressive regime on the lines of “you can look but don’t touch” was successful to the extent that we were constipated for 4 days and I yearned for a mild dose of food poisoning. Thankfully we did experience a mild stomach ache caused, allegedly, by a rogue kofta and normal service was resumed helped along by the Delta’s lentil soup. I was not allowed another kofta.



Our walk round Midan Mohamed Aly (now Tahrir) was very interesting. The Stock Exchange where my Uncle Alexander, a stockbroker, had spent his entire working life until it was closed down was gone – destroyed by fire. Off the square in Adib street the office block which once housed my father’s company premises was still there and so was Coq d’Or next door. We entered to admire the interior and were accosted by an Egyptian who was completely fluent in Greek! Must eat there next time.

Off Midan Mohamed Aly as we walked through the Attarine markets we saw fish jumping on the fish stalls, shell-fish opening up and crabs moving about. I was pulled away from a loukoumades stall.

We did manage a few meals here and there. During the day we usually lunched out. Athineos, Elite, Dennis, Gad, Samakmak, Balbaa, Greek Nautical Club, Asteria, etc. Of course we had a foul & falafel lunch at Benjamin!! With tahina, hummus, bed maslooq, gibna maqlee, torshi, etc. We really splashed out and the bill came to £Eg15 (£1.50). Several establishments known to us including Santa Lucia and Patroudis were closed for refurbishment. Others were still at it : Delices, Grand

Trianon, Fluckiger, Brazilian Coffee Stores, Taverna, Sofianopoulos. Baudrot was also being tarted up but we were served ahwa in the garden at the back. It is very clear that many restaurants and patisseries have opened since the 50's and their offerings looked very good to me. Because of the short days we usually had dinner at the hotel. Though it was not the peak season the kitchen did very well. We love soup and with a choice of soupe de poisson, soupe à l'oignon, potage de legumes, creme de volaille, soupe de tomate and the quite outstanding and effective soupe de lentilles we could not ask for a better start. Maitre Ahmed's party piece was a filet de boeuf a la crème flambé au cognac executed as it should be on a trolley by our table. Absolutely gorgeous. £Eg 38. Work it out.

And suddenly it was time to pack. The 12 days had flashed by and there was still so much more to see and do. I had not expected to come away feeling that to-day's Alexandria had this much to offer old Alexandrians. Of course, like all cities in the world the population has increased dramatically, traffic has increased dramatically, public services are under pressure, etc. I think it is a tribute to the authorities that it works as well as it does.

It was interesting to note that Alex is free of dog-mess on pavements and streets. There are few dogs. We counted 2 in 11 days. Eat your hearts out London, Paris, Athens, etc.

Tourism now accounts for about 11% of Egyptian GDP (about \$4 billion). Egypt has been good at foreign tourism longer than anyone else. It started with Antiquities in Cairo and Upper Egypt, and in the East the tourists come in their thousands for the sun, sea, sand, and watersports package all the year round. Alexandria's situation is interesting. I am told that on public beaches from Chatby to Mandara (?) women have to cover up. Some private beaches (Montazah?) allow normal swimwear but these few cannot support significant tourist numbers. Thus Alex is ruled out as a beach holiday destination for foreign tourists. I doubt whether that worries the authorities as the large population of Alex is supplemented by the hordes of Cairenes descending on the Corniche every year, as they always did, and I am sure the beaches, etc, are full.

Clearly, the next major expansion of the tourist industry will take place West of Alex. There has already been considerable development and much more is under way and planned. There is talk of clearing WW2 minefields. Watch this space.

Are we returning to Alex? Tabaan. Insh'allah. And we will let everybody know in case you want to be there at the same time.

**George Grey (né Psaros) was born in Alexandria in 1935 to Greek parents. He was educated at Victoria College (Cairo & Alexandria) and left Egypt in 1952 to attend university in the UK. Following a career in General Management and International Marketing with several multinationals he established a company in 1978 with his wife Annette. He is now retired and lives with his Annette in Christchurch on the South Coast. They have 3 children and 2 grand-children.**