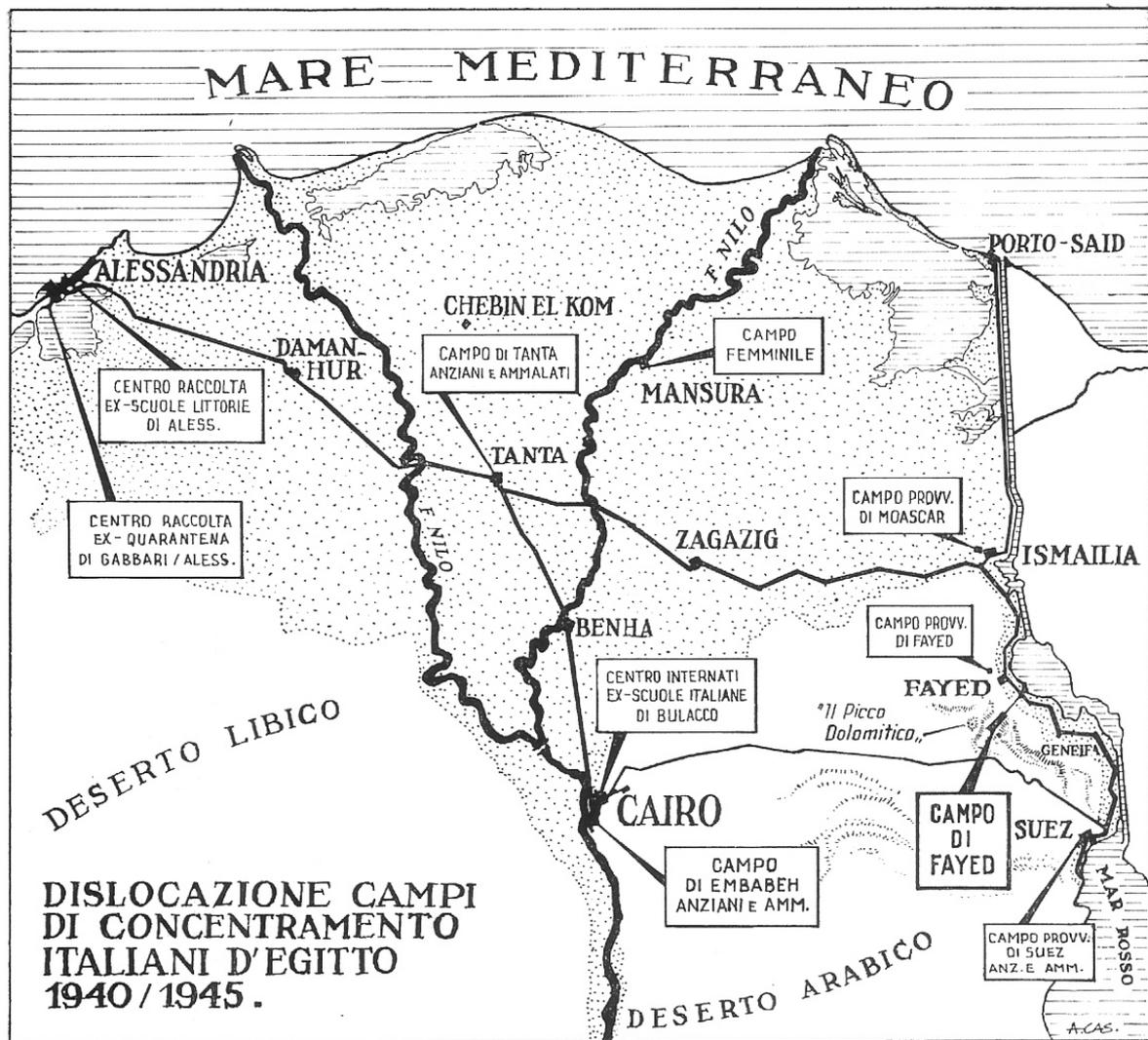


# Joe Carbone

## My Italian Father's Internment in Egypt 1940 - 1944



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## **Italians in Egypt**

There appears to have been a continuous presence of Italians in Egypt since the time of Cleopatra and Mark Antony. The Italian community grew significantly until it reached around 55,000 just before World War II, forming the second largest expatriate community in Egypt. In order to control the Suez Canal, Mussolini encouraged Italians to move to Egypt after the First World War, especially to Alexandria where Italians became an integral part of the city's workforce in professional, political, creative, merchant, trades and labour spheres. They lived peacefully beside other nationals and indigenous locals.

Both my paternal grandparents (Carbone) and maternal great-grandparents (Buffo) were amongst those who migrated to Egypt from Italy, seeking new opportunities in work and lifestyle. Like many expatriate communities, the Italians retained their citizenship and links back to their home country. Relationships between Italy and Egypt had historically been excellent and Egyptian rulers had engaged Italians to help design and construct the modern state.

## **World War 2**

As World War 2 spread across the Mediterranean into Africa, Italians living in Egypt began to fear that their peaceful existence would end and that they would be caught up in battle. On 10th June 1940 Benito Mussolini entered the war on the side of Germany, in effect, declaring war on Britain. Prior to the war Britain had maintained a political and military presence in Egypt. This resulted in the British hierarchy influencing King Farouk to promptly impose sanctions and intern all Italian men in order to protect British interests, even though Italy had not declared war on Egypt. With the war and the internment of Italian Egyptian men, the peaceful, multicultural community in Alexandria was deeply affected.

## **My Father in Alexandria**

My father, **Ciro Carbone**, was born in Alexandria on July 6<sup>th</sup> 1919 to parents who had migrated to Egypt as young adults. He was 20 years of age when Mussolini entered the war. Word spread throughout the community that all Italian men were to be interned. At that time my father was living with his older brother, **Gennaro**, and working at the Alexandria Engineering Works where he had commenced employment on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1934. **Ciro** resigned from his employment on 16<sup>th</sup> September 1940 and waited with his brother for the local authorities to transfer them both under armed escort to an internment camp somewhere in Egypt. This occurred three days later on 19<sup>th</sup> September when they departed the comforts of their home and surroundings and were transported by van, with only one piece of luggage, to an interrogation centre in Alexandria.

There was an expectation that civilian internees would be placed in camps close to where they lived. This would allow families to make short periodic visits. New camps, however, were built in haste in faraway places such as **Fayed** which was a distance from any town and devoid of regular signs of civil life and service.

Once processed, both Ciro and Gennaro were bussed to the Alexandria train station where they were confronted by police, soldiers, onlookers and family members who had come to say their goodbyes to loved ones. They were deported by train to Ismailia and then onto the civilian Internment Camp Fayed. I can only imagine how sad and depressed they must have been during their journey to the unknown. My father spoke little about his wartime experiences. He had never been to Italy and held no strong political views.

At the same time as my father was detained and transferred to an internment camp, my paternal grandfather, Francesco Buffo, was taken to a local Italian school to be processed, leaving behind his wife and five daughters. He had been born in Egypt in 1884 and was 56 years of age. His ultimate destination was internment Camp Tanta, situated south of Alexandria, where the elderly and infirm (anziani e ammalati) were to reside for the next four years.

My father's brother-in-law, Edigio De Domenico, husband of his sister, was also transferred from Alexandria to Camp Fayed during September 1940.

### **Camp Fayed**

The internment camp at Fayed was situated in the Canal Zone near the Bitter Lake and some 35 kilometres south of Ismailia. It was one of many camps that had been established to hold some of the eight thousand Italian men living in Egypt aged between fifteen and sixty five. Other camps included Tanta, Embabeh, Bulacco, Mansurah and Moascar.

Camp Fayed consisted of a number of smaller, individual camps, each holding around 300 to 500 internees. These camps at Fayed, fenced with high wire perimeter, were flanked by desert, a British airbase and the Suez Canal. My father and my two uncles were placed in Camp #13.

Although the camps at Fayed imposed a harsh life, the internment regime tended to be mild compared to camps in the far-east and Europe. The Egyptians were not anti-Italian and had respect and sympathy for those who had lived in and contributed to their country. The British did not object to this stance taken by the Egyptian authorities. Considering the almost complete freedom inside the camp, few prisoners, contemplated escaping. Although a few of those who did try to escape were shot, the majority were caught unharmed.

The camps consisted mainly of hundreds of canvas, military-style tents. There was no direct supply of electricity or water. Kerosene was used for lighting. Conditions were very basic with each internee supplied with a straw mattress, a pillow and blankets to protect them from the bitter cold nights and severe hot sun during the day. My father and his brother shared a common tent.

Sanitary and hygiene conditions were poor with many internees falling ill to gastroenteritis, dysentery and other ailments. Health care was inadequate with Italian doctor internees treating sick patients with limited medical supplies sourced from the Egyptians. During his stay in the camp my father contracted a virus of some type which left him with ongoing bouts of ill health throughout his life.

Although internees were allowed to send two letters and four postcards per month there were no restrictions on incoming mail. All mail was viewed and stamped by Camp censors.

Life was reported to be very boring in the camp as internees had no work. In order to pass the time many of the men engaged in sporting activities, some cultivating gardens and others involved in theatrical performances. They built a football pitch with an open air stand. Towards the latter years of their internment many Italians, including my father and uncle, began to make mud bricks. These were used to build houses to replace tents, theatres, monuments and other basic structures. A chapel was built in 1943.

### **Families Left Behind**

Once the Italian men were transferred to the internment camps, the Egyptian authorities and banks seized all Italian bank accounts, safe deposit contents, shares and any assets where loans could not be repaid. As a general rule, residences occupied by wives with children and aged family members were not confiscated. Even those with homes, however, still lived in fear, faced poverty and very difficult conditions once the bread winner departed, as most had no source of income to survive. Few Italian women had employment. Old multicultural neighbourhoods now became areas of distrust and many Italian women were largely ignored or rebuked. The Italian government came to their aid by granting them a small monthly allowance. This was accessed by registering and obtaining funds from the Italian Consulates in both Alexandria and Cairo.

Family members were able to obtain permits to travel and visit internees in the camps on a monthly basis. This required having sufficient funds to travel from their residences. My aunt, Beatrice De Domenico, often travelled from Alexandria to Camp Fayed to visit her husband and two brothers Ciro and Gennaro. My grandmother Giuseppina Buffo also went to Camp Tanta to visit my grandfather on a regular basis.

Due to shortages of food and necessities in camps, family members would periodically bring food parcels, cigarettes and any other items to their men. When they could not travel to visit they would give parcels to others to transport for them. There were no apparent restrictions on what could be brought into the camps. From time to time visits were suspended or stopped by military authorities. This created anxiety, sadness and depression amongst both the internees as well as family members who longed to see their loved ones.

### **Returning Home**

My father's last day of internment was 30<sup>th</sup> September 1944. Once free he returned home to Alexandria with his brother, seeking a return to normal life. Like most Italian internees, he felt some bitterness about the four long years of captivity, deprivation and separation from his old life, friends and family. It was a period that he would never forget.

Many Italians who returned home could not find work due to their old businesses being closed, lack of funds, new discriminatory laws and few employment opportunities. My father, however, was fortunate to have a trade and skills that were in demand. Within a month of his return, on 23<sup>rd</sup> October 1944, he commenced work with Atelier Macanique Industriel.

The troubled times which followed saw many Italian families in serious financial difficulties. The good life that they had previously enjoyed had been destroyed by the consequences of war and internment. Many families decided to leave Egypt as refugees, either returning to Italy or migrating to distant countries in search of a new and better life. By 1952, the Italian Egyptians were reduced in number to just a few thousand.

While most went back to live in Italy, my parents, who had married after the war, with my sister and myself, aged three and five years, moved to Australia.

While we now think of ourselves as Australians with an Italian background, we continue to feel a deep connection to Egypt, the place of our birth. This connection continues to draw me back into the past and explore both family history and the history of the Italians living in Egypt and loving it as their homeland. To this day, my mother weeps with nostalgia thinking of Alexandria and the beautiful life she once lived there. The second world war changed the world forever, and changed the direction of my family, turning us all to new horizons.

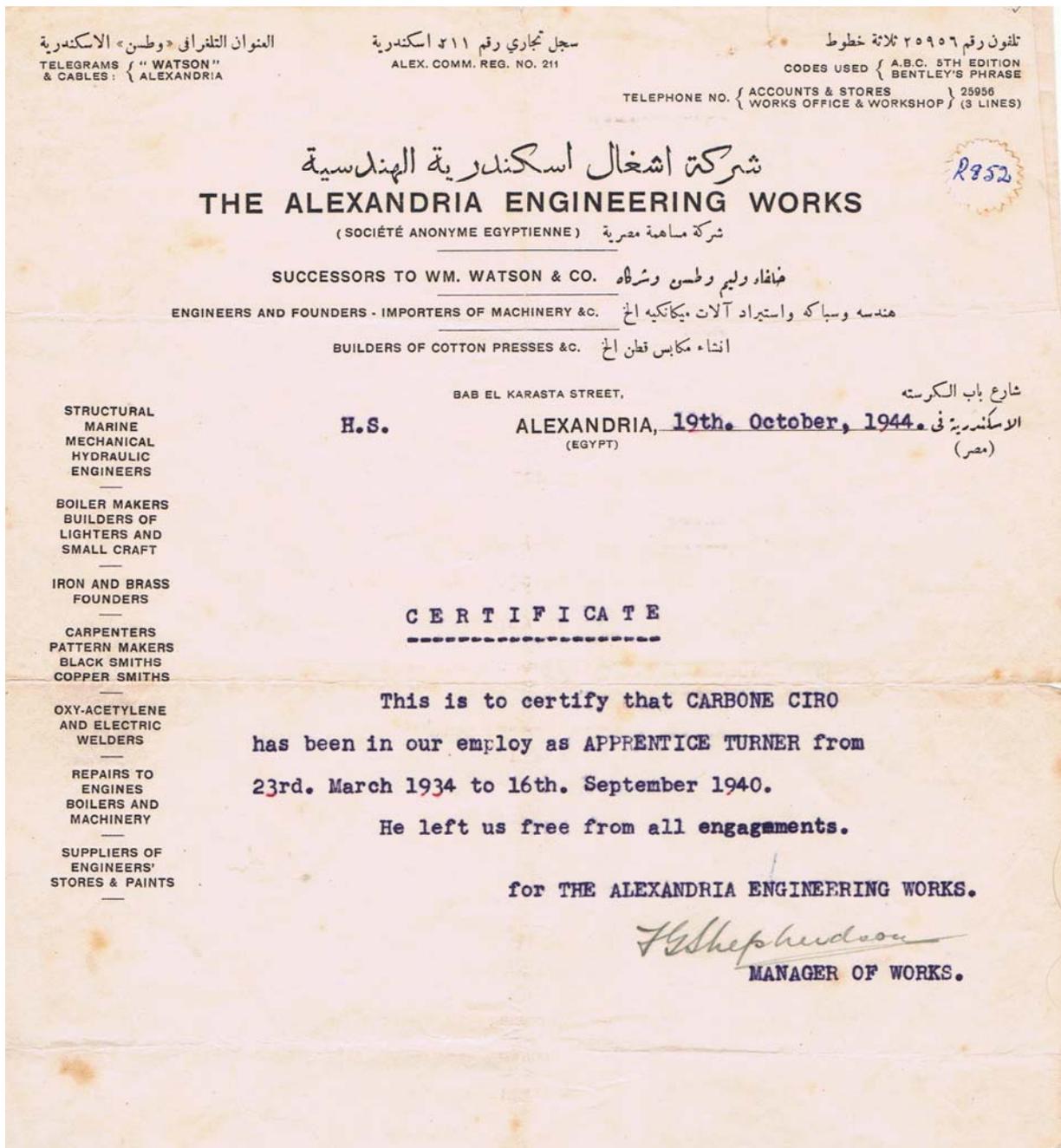


Photo 1. A certificate of employment showing my father's last day at work before internment.



Photo 2. Photo taken in 1941 of my father (behind the person with the guitar) and other internees with their musical instruments at Camp Fayed



Photo 3. Photo taken in 1943 showing the internees playing football at Camp Fayed



Photo 4. My father (second from left) with three other internees (note the wire fences)



Photo 5. Photo taken in 1944 at Camp Fayed no 13. My father is on the bottom right.

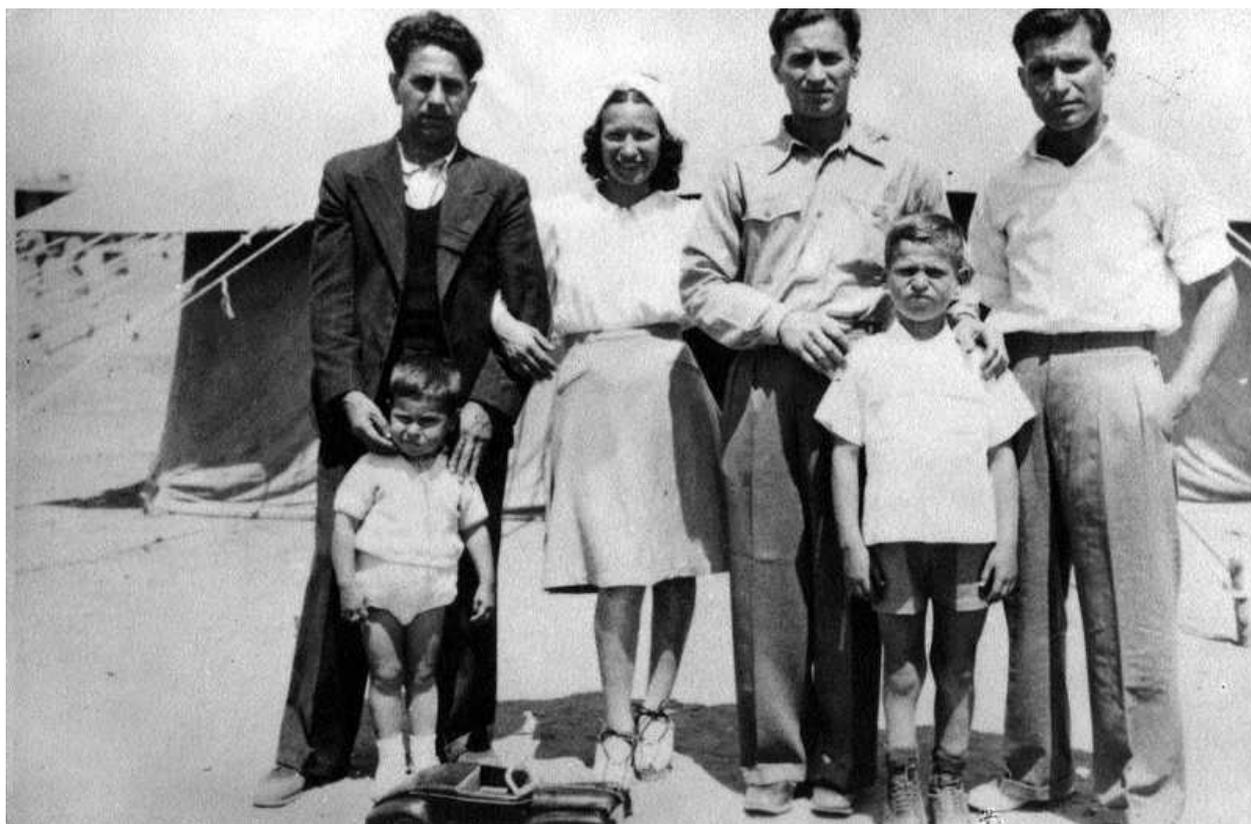


Photo 6. This photo is of my father, aunt, two uncles and my **two cousins** during visiting **day** at camp Fayed.

From left to right : Egidio De Domenico with son Anthony and wife Beatrice De Domenico, Gennaro Carbone, nephew Nino Ferrara son of **Beatrice's first** husband) and my father **Ciro Carbone**, Beatrice is the sister of Gennaro and **Ciro**.



Photo 7 : Internment documents of **Ciro Carbone**

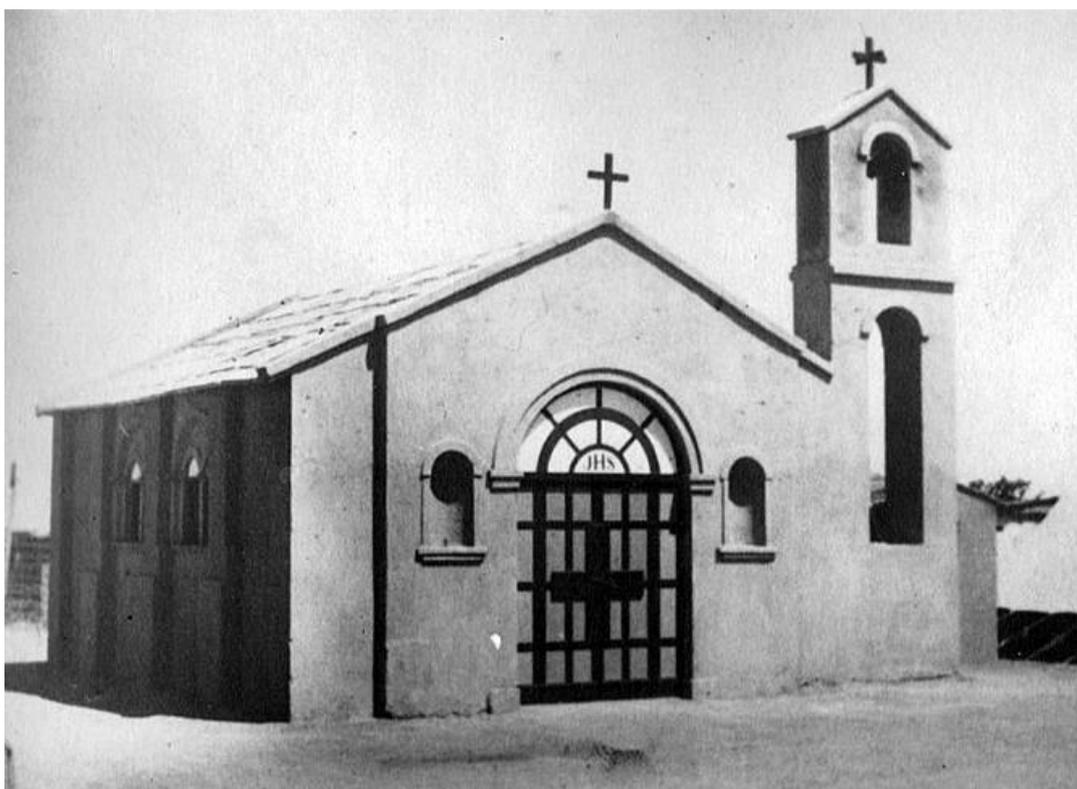


Photo 8. Chapel built during 1943 at Camp Fayed



Photo 9. Chapel built during 1943 at Camp Fayed

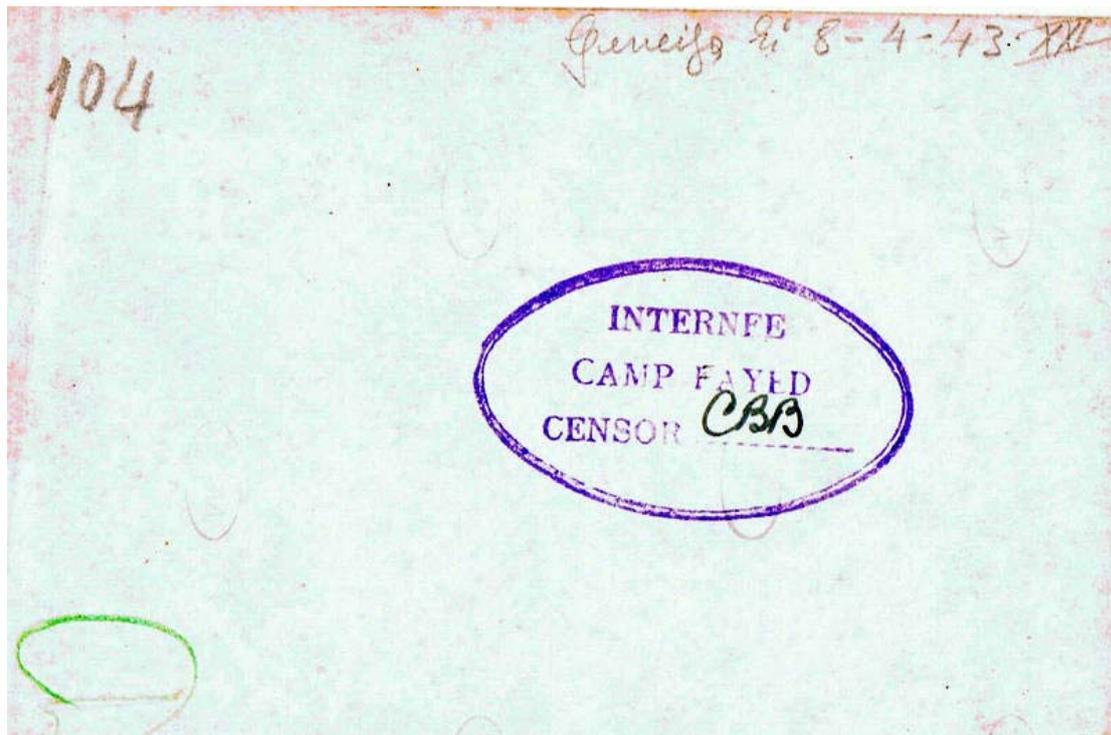


Photo 10. Camp Fayed Censor stamp

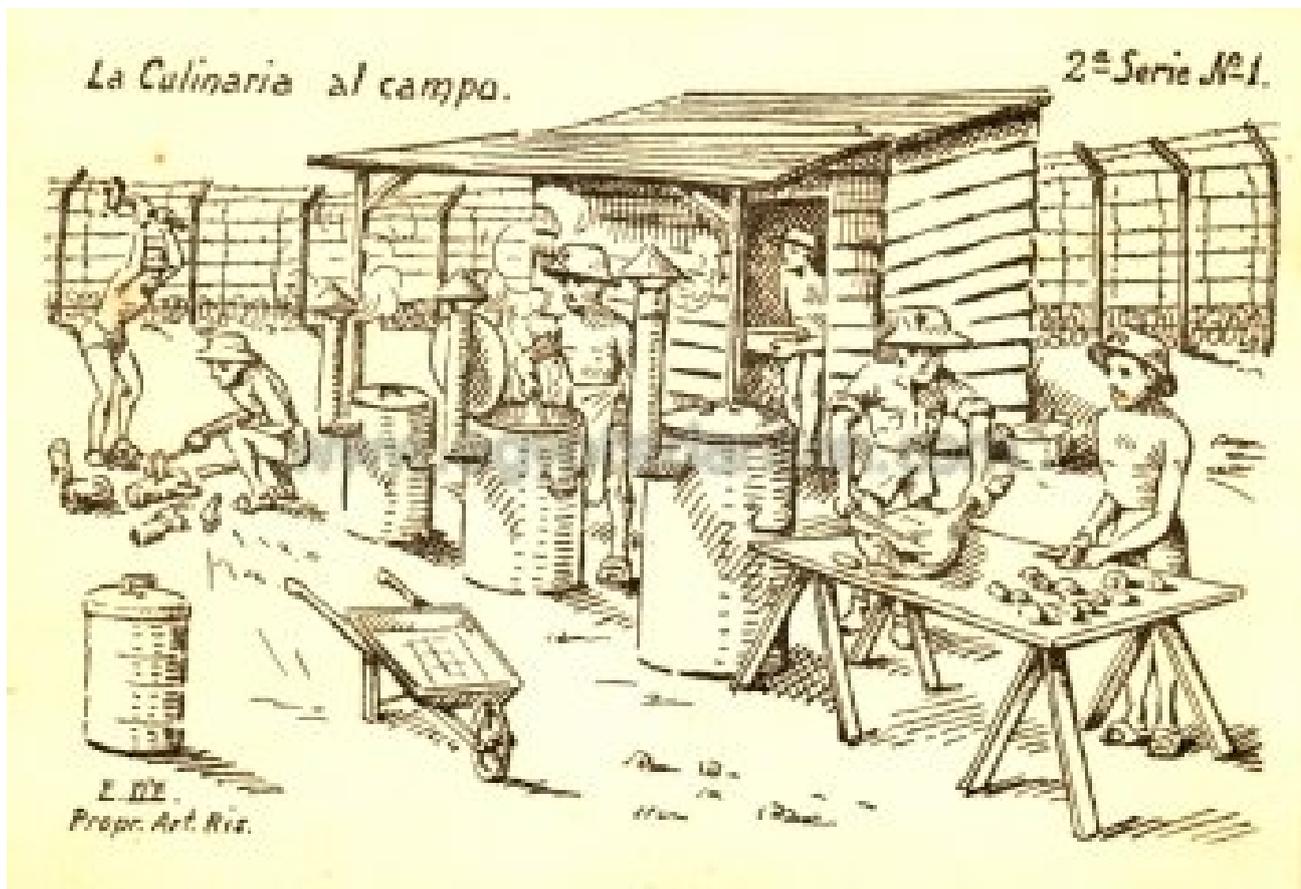


Photo 11. Collection Max Karkegi

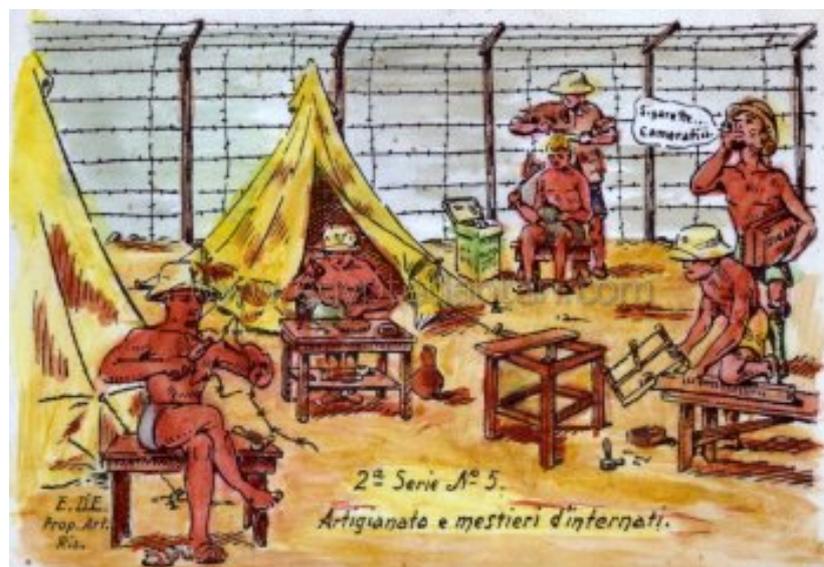
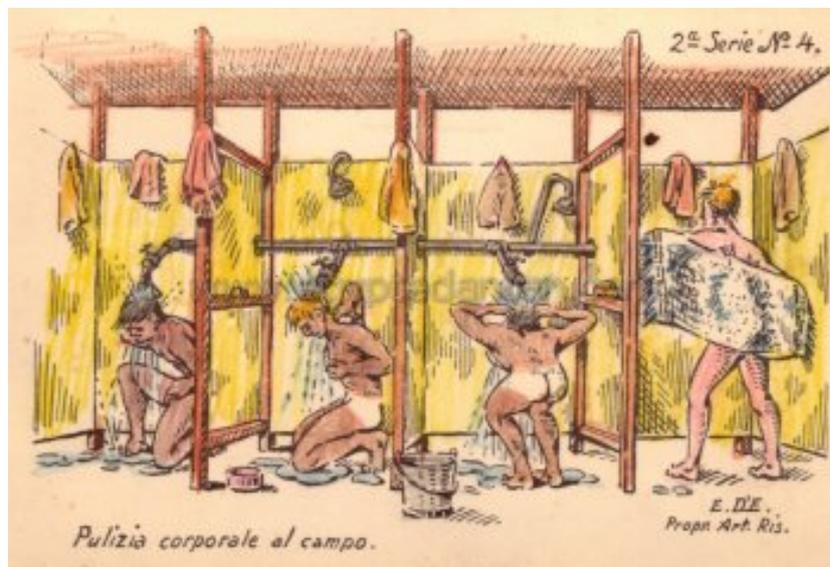


Photo 12. Collection Max Karkegi



Photo 13. Photo of family members visiting their loved ones at Camp Fayed



Photo 14. Photo taken at the camp. Unknown personnel



Photo 15. Photo taken at the camp. Unknown personnel



Photo 16. Photo taken at the camp. Unknown personnel

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شركة النور لبون وشركاه صندوق البريد رقم ٢٤١ الاسكندرية  
السجل التجارى رقم ٣٢٨ اسكندرية

Alexandrie, le 13 Mars 1946

No. ....

**شهادة** **CERTIFICAT**

انا الموقع عليه ادناه اندريه رامنجيه مدير شركة النور "لبون وشركاه" بالاسكندرية اشهد بان الخواجبا اتورى منزوني الحق بخدمتها بحقة مهندس من اول سبتمبر ١٩٣٤ لغاية ١٠ يونيو ١٩٤٠ وهذه شهادة بذلك ليعمل بها عند الاقتضا

Je soussigné ANDRE RAMINGER, Directeur de l'Usine à Gaz et de la Centrale Electrique d'Alexandrie, certifie que Monsieur ETTORE MANZONI a été attaché auprès de notre Compagnie, en qualité d'ingénieur du 1er Septembre 1934 au 10 Juin 1940.

En foi de quoi je lui délivre le présent certificat pour servir et valoir ce que de droit.

*Andre Raminger*

30

Mod. S.O. 1 - 10.000 - 0.45 C.

Photo 17. A certificate of employment showing Mr Ettore Manzoni (father of Sandro Manzoni) last day at work before internment.

**Joe Carbone** (Australia) was born in Alexandria in 1946. His father was **Ciro Carbone** (Alexandria 1919, + Melbourne 1986) and his mother is **Emilia Buffo** (Alexandria 1927). The family left Alexandria for Australia in December 1951. After his recent visit to Egypt, Joe wrote :

“My wife and I visited Alexandria during early May this year (2005). Prior to that I had visited in 1966 when I stayed with my father’s brother (**Gennaro Carbone**) and his wife (**Jolanda Carbone**) in Boulkeley. This uncle and aunt had remained in Alexandria as my aunt apparently suffered from agoraphobia and was too afraid to make the move. They were childless and as my uncle was very much like my father I felt at home with them and almost like their own son. In my memory it seems as though I stayed with them for several months but it may have only been for four weeks. The Russians had settled in various parts of Egypt at the time and were becoming an unwanted influence. My Aunt was full of fear.

Arriving in May 2005 was a very different experience to that of 40 years ago. The obvious physical changes included the burgeoning and almost exclusively Muslim population, the replacement of many of the old villas with high rise apartments and the development along the Corniche with a wider dual road eating into what was once beach. I was also instantly impressed by the warmth and friendliness of contemporary Alexandrians. This warmth from the people and the familiarity of the city made me feel instantly ‘at home’. From the moment **Joy** and I disembarked from the train at Masr Station we were made to feel welcome by people we spoke with. We must have been readily identified as tourists or strangers as we were frequently stopped in the street with smiles and a “Welcome to Egypt” greeting, followed always by “Where are you from?” When we replied, ‘Australia’, people – children, teenagers and adults – would tell us the English words they knew or a few things they knew about Australia such as Melbourne or Sydney. On the weekend we were invited to join family picnics on the beach and of an evening we were invited to attend weddings and concerts.

We stayed at the Union Hotel on the Corniche only a few doors away from the grand Cecil Hotel. The view from our 7<sup>th</sup> floor balcony captured the Mediterranean seaside from Fort Qayetbay to beyond Sporting. Unfortunately cleanliness was not a quality of the hotel management however the astounding view more than made up for the dirt.

The Italian Consulate was our first destination as I needed confirmation of family details/history and contacts at the cemetery and the Casa di Riposo. The initial cool reception at the front security gate was later transformed into valued assistance by one of the officials. Our visit coincided with Consulate officials not receiving visitors on Thursday afternoons nor on Fridays so we were extremely lucky to be given time.

A tram ride down to Chatby took us to the Casa Di Riposo where my aunt **Jolanda** aged 99 years spent her final years. Directions given by the Consulate were not clear. They were further complicated by inaccurate directions from a helpful resident of European descent who befriended us while we travelled on the tram. Instead of walking immediately across the road at the designated tram stop we roamed for over an hour searching for a place that was unknown to all locals. When we finally came across the rest home almost by accident, the caretaker **Michele** and spouse received us with a warm hug. They had been waiting for our arrival from the time the Consular official telephoned them. We were taken into the room where **Jolanda** had lived, read and slept and dreamed. It was an emotional time as I recalled my time spent with her and all the intervening years as she lived alone in this home after my uncle’s death.

The Latino cemetery where my aunt **Jolanda**, my uncle **Gennaro** (father’s side) and great grand father **Camillo** (mother’s side) were buried was a brief walk across from the Casa di

Riposo. With only half an hour before closing time we were able to search the archives for registrations of death and burial locations. Unfortunately the grave of Camillo could not be found amongst the thousands of Europeans that had been buried since the late 1800's.

Next day we journeyed to Sidi Gaber where we found the apartment that was my home from the time I was born until my family left Alexandria. The building had undergone renovations and the number of floors had doubled. The ground floor apartment where I had lived has now become a premise for restoring furniture. It was dark, dirty and had no resemblance of what was once my home. I took a photo of the window shutters as they reminded me of the fear I had during the riots of 1951 when stones were hurled against the shutters.

The Sacred Heart Church near Sporting where my parents were married and where I was baptized was a grand and beautiful building. The Italian Catholic priests had long since departed and the Church is run by the small Coptic community and African clergy who were willing to look at the archives. This huge old leather bound book finally revealed family registrations of marriage and baptisms, written in beautiful copper plate Latin script. We were given a copy of the registration of each event. My wife was really touched to see the Baptismal font where I was christened as an infant.

The only relatives who remained in Alexandria after our departure were my Aunt Jolanda and Uncle Gennaro. We journeyed to No 8 Sameh Cassen, Boulkly only to find that the original dwelling where they had lived and where I had stayed with them had been replaced five years ago by a high rise apartment block. We were delighted however to find neighbours and shopkeepers who had fond memories of my relatives.

The last place that I needed to visit to complete my Alexandrian journey was the Catholic Cathedral of St Catherine where my grandparents (maternal) were married. We were welcomed by the only Catholic priests remaining in Alexandria. A search of the archives located my grandparent's marriage registration – once again written in Latin in a beautiful copper plate script. We requested a copy for our family history files.

The remainder of our time in Alexandria was spent in visiting landmarks such as Montazah, Fort Qayetbay, St. Mark, walking down the Corniche and roaming the old city streets during day and night enjoying the people, the buildings, the restaurants, the markets, the narrow lanes and views. We will never forget the warm 'Welcome to Egypt' greetings and the friendliness of the people.

For me returning to Alexandria was an emotional journey of loss and longing but also one of putting the past to rest and gaining new experiences and memories. I actually went to Egypt mainly to see what I hadn't experienced before, that being Cairo and the antiquities down along the Nile. I devoted only two nights and the best of three days to Alexandria and yet it will remain a highlight for as long as I have the capacity for memory. I now have fresh memories of the smells and sights and sounds of the city where I spent my first five years. I have seen the altar where my parents stood trembling as they were pronounced man and wife and the font where they later held me as I was baptized. I have seen the grave sites of the Aunt and Uncle who loved me as a son and had my grandparents come alive in the recording of their marriage. I have walked happily down narrow lanes and streets where my parents and relatives were too afraid to walk due to fear of the Arabs or Russians, seen the Mediterranean lap against the skirt of the city, watched the sun set behind tall minarets and eaten the best falafel ever tasted at Mohamed Ahmed restaurant. I left Alexandria feeling complete and knowing it would not matter if I never returned."