

**NAGUIB
MAHFOUZ**

*Alexandria for
the Egyptians*

Based on an interview
by Mohamed Salmawy

Alexandria in the twenties

was a European city, where Italian, French, Greek or English were heard far more often than Arabic. The city was beautiful, and so clean that one could have eaten off the streets. Anything from Europe could be found in Alexandria for half the price: cinemas, restaurants, dance halls... But all that was for the foreigners. We could only observe from the outside. The real inhabitants of Alexandria – the itinerant vendors, the shoe-shine boys – lived in the popular quarters, in Ramleh.

There used to be an open-air cinema on Saad Zaghoul Street which had a section reserved for Egyptians. A sign in French read: "for the natives" – meaning, for the real, national citizens. The cinema no longer exists.

This all took place during the period of the Capitulations, and Alexandria was the same until the 1936 Treaty, which subjected foreigners to the same law as Egyptians. Previously, even the policemen in Ramleh were foreign. I remember strolling in the streets of Alexandria, singing a song which was rather derogatory toward the police. My companions and I were stopped and taken to the police station by a policeman who thought we were making fun of him. Fortunately, the officer at the station was Egyptian. He understood our situation, but advised us to find some other song to sing...

Time marches on, and, as in our old song, "in the Sudan the policeman has taken off his *tarboush* and become a governor..."

When the Capitulations were abolished, foreigners in Alexandria were forced to change their attitude. They no longer

owned the country; we Egyptians were no longer second-class citizens. They realised that they and we would be appearing before the same magistrates, so we began to feel more at ease. The characteristics of European life in Alexandria were still very present; but once the Capitulations were abolished, they became accessible to us as well.

The waiters in the restaurants of first-class hotels used to be dressed in frock-coats, such as I had only seen the minister of foreign affairs wear. So I used to call the waiters "Tharwat," after the minister, Abdel-Khalek Tharwat Pasha. When the waiter brought me my *narghileh*, I used to tell my friends: "Here comes Tharwat Pasha with my *narghileh*!"

At times I would go to Athineos, which we had never frequented before, and have breakfast, which was the cheapest meal. Once I found myself sitting near a table full of notables, among them Osman Pasha Moharram. He was explaining to the well-known Wafdist minister, Mahmoud Ghaleb Pasha, the secret of his longevity and good health: "Eat fava beans for dinner," he said, and went on to advise him how best to prepare these beans, and how much oil and lemon to add, as though prescribing a medicine.

As for Ghaleb Pasha, he frequently spent the evening at the Chatby Casino, where the best foreign shows could be seen, with Sheikh Bishri, a well-known journalist and writer and the son of the Sheikh of Al-Azhar. The two of them would leave after the show, and as soon as we saw them passing through the Casino doors we would applaud them, wishing them and the Wafd a long life. Sheikh Bishri would then call out to us: "This is not the time, son, this is not the time!"

In short, Alexandria was a European city, but belonged to us – the Egyptians.

These remarks from the Nobel-winning author Naguib Mahfouz appeared in Al-Ahram Weekly in June 1996. Mohamed Salmawy is a playwright and the editor-in-chief of Al-Ahram Hebdo.