

When I was born,

in 1934, my parents lived in a flat in Bulkeley, a small district of Ramleh, a suburb that lies along the coast to the east of Alexandria at 14 rue Alderson, later changed to 17 Shari' Masjid al-Hadaya. They lived there for a long time, my father almost until his last days in 1975; my mother until 1992 when she finally quit what had been her home for more than sixty years. I dwelt with them until 1960 and then continued to visit annually.

I lived there long enough to remember the bends and idiosyncrasies of every street; the few villas that are still there and the many which vanished, victims of the urban explosion that expels the rich from the nearby resort to new ones further away. This drift went initially from the eastern coast of Alexandria, then to the west, to Agami, and now well beyond.

I remember the villas and gardens enclosed by brick walls with stains and cracks in the plaster, for nothing in Alexandria seemed unscathed by the erosion of salt and wet air; the scent of jasmine in the twilight of autumn dusk, and the many bougainvillaeas and the few jacarandas, all now victims of the urban boom. But the most enduring memory is dust; deep on the sidewalks, thin, discoloured layers on the foliage; minute particles perpetually mobile in the beam of every sunray.

The story of Bulkeley tells us something about the British presence in Egypt between the 1860s and the Second World War, and about the demographic changes that brought first the Syro-Lebanese and the Jews into a very English district, and later brought a much bigger wave of Egyptians who displaced everybody else. However, Egypt was always present in cosmopolitan Bulkeley. The foreign episode was a long but temporary phase of a process: the relentless advance of urban

settlers displacing nomads from desert lands around the towns.

In the first half of the nineteenth century the pashas and wealthy Europeans moved outside the walls to the countryside along the Mahmudiyya canal. They built there summer palaces and luxurious residences in what has been called the *quartier des princes*. In the 1870s, the search for resorts shifted to the east, towards Ramleh. The town had begun to crawl and besiege the Mahmudiyya canal's haven; the European immigrants were more attracted by desert and sea than by the flat and muddy banks of the canal; urban growth having exhausted the potential of an area swiftly moved towards another.

Some authors suggest that in the nineteenth century Ramleh referred to an area five miles east of Alexandria, i.e., that it began at Bulkeley.

In any case, Bulkeley was quintessential Ramleh. E. M. Forster described it as follows:

We are now in the heart of Ramleh ("Sand") the straggling suburb where the British and other foreigners reside. Lovely private gardens, the best in Egypt. Left of the sta. Is Stanley Bay, a fine bit of coast scenery and a favourite bathing place (also the Anglican Church of All Saints).

The establishment of a railway line in 1863 linked the suburb to Alexandria. In August 1860, a British company had been given the concession for the railway. In January 1863 the first horse-drawn train began to take passengers from Alexandria to roughly where Bulkeley is located now. The horses were soon replaced by a steam engine in August 1863, which in 1904 gave way to an electric tramway. Picturesque trains, some with double decks and spiral stairs leading to a small balcony on the top allowed one to enjoy the view and the fresh air.

The names given to the railway stations strewn along the line became the names of the Ramleh districts. One was named after a Captain Bulkeley, a member of the board of the railway company. A little drama was caused by the naming of the station. It ended the friendship of Capt. Bulkeley and Mr Fleming, a neighbour and a colleague on the board. The latter was away on holiday when the railway company decided to name stations after distinguished personalities (preferably its own members) who lived close by. Mr Fleming was incensed that Bulkeley, not

him, received the gift of a sign on a station. The gift was valuable to anybody concerned with immortality: the station and the district are still known as Bulkeley after more than one hundred years! Mr Fleming did not accept the explanation that his house was further away than Captain Bulkeley's. The company, in truly British fashion, found a compromise. It created a new station duly christened "Fleming" five hundred yards away. The friendship between Fleming and Bulkeley was never restored. Before the drama the two friends used to travel together in the same compartment every day. After the dispute each of them took to walking from their contiguous homes in opposite directions towards their respective stations and went to the office on the same train but in different compartments.

In Bulkeley, like everywhere else in Ramleh, the Corniche is only seven or eight minutes' walk away from the tramway line, but the landscape and flavour of the area along the sea and fifty yards south are entirely different. We used to say "*j'habite du côté du tram*" or "*j'habite près de la Corniche*" implying a very important geographical and sociological distinction. Those who lived on the southern side of the old Canopic road considered themselves genuine Bulkeley, the core, although the district developed much earlier in the area between the tramway and the sea.

Rue de l'Eglise Anglaise was the only street not named after a family or a person but an institution, "the Anglican Church of All Saints," built there for the convenience of British worshippers living in Ramleh. The church is still there, but now seems to stand uncomfortably on a small plot of land. A significant part of the big and always well-kept garden was sold to developers in the 1960s or the 1970s.

Rue Alderson was the souk that served Bulkeley. There you found Gom'a the milkman whose son Helmi made the dairy famous for its delicious yoghurt (*zabadi*). On the other side of the street, the bakery of Tanachi (Athanasios) and his brother Yorgi (George), the butcher, Andrea the grocer, Ali the greengrocer, a plumber and a cafe. Next to the dairy, a carpenter, the grocery of Sa'id Bayumi, and under an arcade Mahmud, the tall and ascetic Nubian who sold blocks of ice and cold bottles of *eau gazeuse* (*azuza*), inevitably Spathis. Under the same arcade, Ibrahim Bayumi, Sa'id's brother, stocked wood and kerosene and in his

shop a few yards away, charcoal. Next to him was Sayyid the *'alaf*, the grain and animal feed merchant. One or two *makwagis*, who ironed shirts and suits impeccably for a few piastres.

Round the corner, was the *mubbayid* or *nahhas* (tinsmith), who covered copper kitchenware with a protective layer of tin. My mother used to tell him sternly every time he came to collect our pans and other utensils: "tin, not lead"; nobody ever died from lead poisoning in the neighbourhood. In this small area there were a number of important institutions. The All Saints' Church, the convent of the Sisters of St Claire, *les Clarisses*, a contemplative catholic order, and a Russian orthodox church in a very small, white villa. The priest had an extraordinary long beard, reddish, and parted in two! The French school for girls, the Institution Française Girard was founded in 1890 by Mr Aimé-Antonin Girard, born in Nimes in 1834. He founded a school in Marseille, fought the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-1871 as *chirurgien aide-major*, migrated to Beirut in 1874 where he taught in various schools, then came to Alexandria where he bought land in Bulkeley and started his school. The school is still there at the corner of Borchgrevink and rue Stanley Bay, run by nuns since 1953-1954.

Opposite in Borchgrevink, the administration of Alexandria University found in 1942 a home in a villa lost in a big garden with beautiful palm trees. The most important public institution in Bulkeley was the *wizara*, two big, white, nondescript office blocks between the Victoria tramway line and the main avenue where the ministers and their close aides camped during the summer. Before the construction of these buildings, the cabinet used the San Stefano hotel, close to the Khedive's palace in the district aptly named Palais.

Bulkeley has two poles, the tramway station and the famous beach of Stanley bay. The station is a junction: there the Victoria and Bacos trains from Alexandria separate. The Bacos line serves the hinterland of Ramleh and the Victoria line carries on closer to the sea. The station is an island between the two sets of tracks with a waiting room adorned by a clock which had given up marking the passage of time many decades ago. "*Tout est vieux en Égypte*" used to say my friend Diab. "Yes, *vieux*, but time has never ceased to bring changes and transform the shape and colour of the old fabric" was my futile reply. "You are right, but these

changes make the old fabric look more worn out, ever and ever older." I would continue to argue: "Time is always on the move. Whether it rejuvenates or ages Egypt is not the point. Clocks should tell the time. They betray us when they indicate that we are at a standstill. We are not." "You don't understand," he inevitably replied. *Tout est vieux en Égypte*. The clock is old like everything else. It has stopped working. 'Atlana like any old thing. That's all. But, mind you, we have an ambiguous relationship with what is old, what is *qadim* in Egypt. Old things have a magical content and this is why we neither preserve nor destroy them. The clock that doesn't work will stay there and be left to its own fate."

George, the owner of a little pâtisserie on the road along the northern side of the station, took care of our insatiable appetite for gâteaux. The pâtisserie was called Piccadilly because George used to say "there were four hundred British families in Bulkeley before the war, and all bought gâteaux for tea." He used to be a waiter at Trianon and bought all his gâteaux from his former employer. The daily delivery was around 1.30 or 2.00 pm to ensure freshness for the afternoon tea. The shop was small with, on the left as you entered, glass cases where the meringues, the eclairs, the babas, the racist *baisers de nègre* and the delicious *cœurs de chocolat* were displayed and protected; on the right side four tables with four chairs each, and in the back the big counter with a marble top and shelves against the wall with bottles – sirops and liqueurs.

The beach of Stanley bay was the favourite beach before the well-to-do began to move to Sidi Bishr, then Montazah and Ma'moura in the far east and Agami in the west. Stanley was a proper bay below a steep cliff. For Bulkeley, between Borchgrevink and the Corniche is on a hill that rises steeply over a short distance and then falls almost vertically down to the sea. The hill causes the difference in climate between the coast and the area only fifty yards inland.

The cliff accommodated rows of cabins on a semi-circle on three levels. A throw of submerged rocks divided the beach in two parts, a small and shallow one on the west side known as the *petite baie* where children bathed, sometimes attracting paedophiles, and the rest constituted the *grande baie*. Another small bend of the coastline in the east formed the rocky and wild

baie des amoureux which owed its name to its relative isolation from the crowds that preferred the main sandy beach.

In 1945 the Municipality built a nightclub, on the eastern promontory, in the form of a ship and, of course, named it "the Ship," later Côte d'Azur. It was, with the Auberge Bleue, in Soter, one of King Farouk's haunts. Near the Ship, a big cafe pretentiously called Deauville with La Grenouille, a night-club on the ground floor. The most famous hotel in Bulkeley was Le Méditerranée. Its great attraction was the Romance, a night-club inaugurated in the 1940s, part indoors and in the summer extending into the garden. Jean Lacouture mentioned it in his book *L'Égypte en Mouvement* when relating the events preceding the 23 July 1952 revolution:

A 22 heures, tout Alexandrie dîne en papotant sur les terrasses, dans la brise... A minuit la princesse Faiza, la plus belle des sœurs du Roi entre au « Romance » en compagnie de M. Simpson, secrétaire de l'Ambassadeur des États-Unis... A 1 heure 30, la princesse danse sous les yeux d'un cercle de journalistes fascinés... A quatre heures Faiza et son cavalier quittent le cabaret...

Le jour se leve sur la mer, devant le « Romance » où les journalistes ont surveillé le départ de la princesse et du diplomate. Mais aucun ne se résigne a rentrer...

Une étrange tension tient chacun éveillé...

Romance was not, however, what life in Bulkeley was all about. The images imparted by Durrell and others on the western mind do not capture the faces and lives of hundreds of thousand of Alexandrians. Bulkeley was a world of unromantic businessmen, lawyers, doctors and civil servants, men and women who bore no resemblance to Nessim or Justine. Most of them were settled in a routine of work and caught up in a conformist social life. Gossip as in every other place, and to enliven it all, the occasional scandal. *Il est l'amant de Madame une telle*. The charity balls and the consular Cocktail parties were the most sought after *mondanités*. But what dramas behind the villas' walls when somebody was not invited, or when invited the lady discovered that some acquaintance would be wearing a dress resembling her own cherished one bought for the occasion.

Bulkeley was also the world of Mahmud the newspaperman; Mahmud, the Nubian, and Yasin the fat man from Aswan, so

heavy that he rarely walked, both quenchers of our thirst with cold Spathis in pre-Coca-Cola days. The world of Tanachi, the baker, rushing on his bicycle to deliver bread before breakfast and Helmi the *labban* rising even earlier for the milk tour on his bicycle carrying gallons in tin containers on the sides behind the saddle. Helmi who used to tell my mother when she became old, "What has happened to you? You were beautiful when you were young!"; Andrea the grocer, short and stout, who made more money from selling *tafia* than cheese; the austere Mademoiselle Girard and the nun from the convent, *la sœur tourière*, the only one allowed out because somebody had to provide for the bodies of those who forgot them contemplating God. And Mahmud, the barber, staunch supporter of Mustafa al-Nahas Basha in his youth, later reconciled with the Revolution. Mahmud never gossiped but always liked to be first with good news. In 1952, he persuaded one of his cronies, an employee of the University administration a few streets away, to find the results of my first year exams before their publication. Ah, the pleasure on his face when he came running to our house to reveal the marks and convey his congratulations.

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Robert Mabro is an engineer, philosopher and economist, and has been a fellow of St. Antony's College, Oxford, since 1969. This text is extracted from a longer manuscript.