ITALIAN INFLUENCE ON ALEXANDRIA'S ARCHITECTURE (1834-1985)

THE RISE OF "COSMOPOLITAN" ALEXANDRIA (1808-1958)

Since the early 19th century, Europeans mostly from Mediterranean countries began to settle in Egypt. This process of migration was promoted and encouraged by Egypt's rulers who, in their efforts to modernize Egypt, called on and depended on foreign experts to promote such modernization (or Occidentalization) trends. In the second half of the 19th century this process of European penetration was accelerated even further with Egypt's integration into the world economic system as a major cotton exporter, and because of their economic role Europeans settled mainly in Alexandria, the country's largest port and principal export and financial centre.

The status of Europeans living in Egypt was made favorable by capitulations, a system of special privileges granted to foreigners in the Ottoman provinces. The numbers of foreigners settling was on the rise all through the 19th century and up to the late 1930s. In 1927 the total figure of 140,736 Europeans compared with 432,327 Egyptians makes the foreign population of Alexandria as high as 32.5% approx. The Greeks forming the largest foreign community, together with the Italians (the second largest foreign community), French, British, Belgians, Russians, Maltese, Germans and Swiss, felt a common bond, and by virtue of confrontation with indigenous culture, lack of assimilation with the local population, identified themselves as "Europeans", an important precondition for the emergence of the so called "cosmopolitan culture". This residual culture resulting from the presence of an international community introduced Western ideas, capitalist modes of production and imitative consumption, reflected on the built environment has resulted in the dual morphology of its urban orders, a local indigenous versus a European imported or adapted order, characterizing the quality of the city's urban environment. Alongside the so called common European cosmopolitan culture, there also existed a powerful identification with cultural and ideological features of each individual community. Differences in race, customs, language, religion and culture characterized the different communities, who managed to retain much of the cultural characteristics of their own countries or ethnic origins. Each community developed its own schools, hospitals. public benefit foundations, social clubs and

religious institutions. The Greek circle "kinotis", for example, dates as early as 1843. The Italian welfare foundation from 1862, the Swiss from 1865 and the French (First aid Associations) from 1866. Most community projects were identified with participants from and within the same community. Ethnicity in architecture was expressed by revival, Neoclassic styles in the Greek community buildings, while the Italians were more identified with the adaptation of revival Neobaroque and Neo-gothic Italianate styles. The process of adaptation and of borrowing Western styles and the practices of European architects contributed to the Occidentalization of the urban scene. This was manifested in three directions. First there was a return to the past in the application of mostly eclectic revival styles during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These mostly Neorenaissance, Neogothic and Neoclassic styles corresponded to "la belle époque". Second, after World War I came the new decorative styles (Art Deco) which seem to have been most popular in Egypt, sometimes revealed within the context of revivalism. Third. in response to the new socio-economic and technological conditions of Modernism, for example, there was the rise of the new bourgeois society and its urbanization trends. This led to the discovery and wide application of new materials such as reinforced concrete, a movement developed which was manifested in the application of the New-Art "Early Modern", or "International" styles, applied as early as the 1930s up to the late 1950s.

The decline of Occidental influence and its repercussions on the urban environment must be seen as a consequence of the changing political processes, such as the abolition of the monarchy and elitism in Egypt, which had played an important role in introducing and fostering the Occidentalization of the built environment. The declining influence of a dominant cosmopolitan community, began with the rise of nationalism after War World I, and continued with the abolishment of capitulations in 1936. As far as the Italian community is concerned, the Second World War was a crucial circumstance accelerating their departure from Egypt. Finally, the decolonization measures of the Nasserite regime during the 1950s and early 1960s, the sequestration and nationalization of European property, led to the mass exodus of Europeans from Egypt.

"LA COLONIA ITALIANA" (1834-1985)

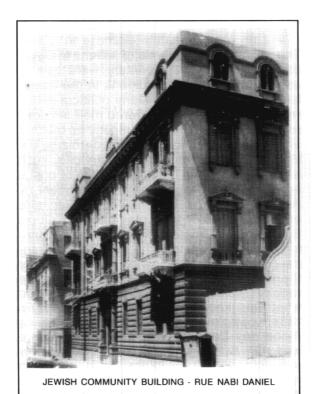
The migration movements of Italians to Egypt during the early 19th century were largely associated with the conditions in the homeland also within Egypt. Many political exiled refugees (500 in 1819)1 offered their services to Mohamed Ali (1805-48), mostly as officers and technicians engaged in modernizing the Egyptian military and public services, such as Lorenzo Masi in the organization of postal services (1820), the statistics department by Amici Bey in 1870, the "Intendance Sanitaire et Quarantenaire" 1831 presided by Colucci Bey and the "Ornato", the design and planning department, under the direction of Francesco Mancini, 1834, who, in his plans for the transformation of the city, designed the new extension of the Quartier Franc, round what was known as the Place d'Armes in 1834, completed by 1855 and known as Place des Consuls.² The elongated square was 420 m. long, 65 m. wide, completely surrounded with buildings most of which were designed by Mancini and owned by Ibrahim Pasha. These regular rectangular

blocks of residential buildings were two storeys high, with an (Italian-Oriental) aspect, in the manner of the Levant familiar in eastern Mediterranean cities, characterized by their simple European Classical mouldings, Venetian shutters and with yellow and pink as their dominant colours. Okelles were also common multi-use structures on the Grand Place, their ground floors were usually used for commercial and leisure activities, while their upper floors were reserved for offices and or residences. The square had a short marble obelisk in its center and a fountain in one of its extremities.3 On the Place des Consuls stood the Tossizza palace, also designed by Mancini,4 which was later transformed into the stock exchange (La Bourse). This building (together with the Ottoman Bank and the Church of St. Marc) was among the few buildings that survived the bombardment of the city in 1882.5 It was later demolished after being partly burned down and destroyed during the events of riots in 1977.

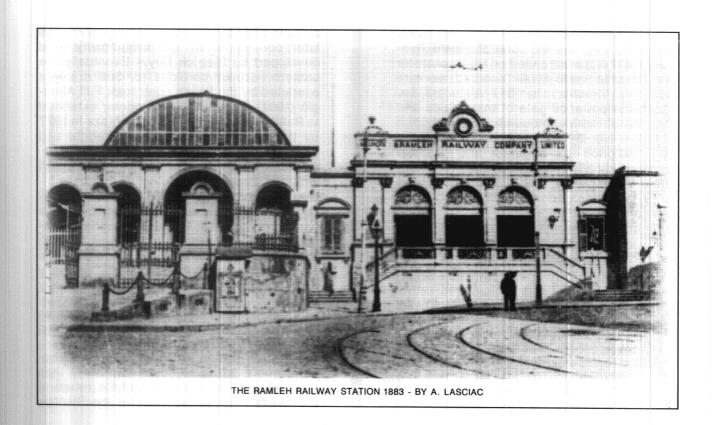
Among the most important palaces built by Mohamed Ali in Alexandria was the palace of

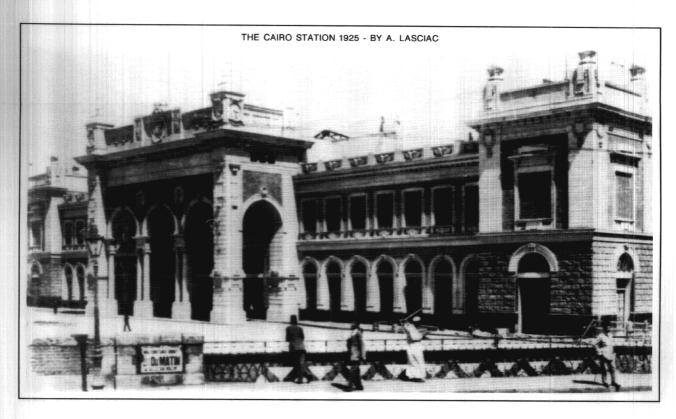












Ras El Tin, built round 1830 by Italian architects. In 1837 the services of Pietro Avoscani (1837-91) were called on to decorate its new Salamlek with three hundred workers under his direction. In 1847 Avoscani designed the entrance gate of that palace and also that of the Mahmoudieh Palace (known as Palais No. 3) in Italian marble. He was then assigned to decorate the Gabbari palace, originally designed by the French engineer M. de Cerisy. The palace was famous for its gardens (open to the public) and its six Avoscani decorative sculptures.

Other important works designed by Avoscani in Alexandria was the Zizinia theatre in 1863, inspired by the Teatro Lirico di Milano,8 much criticized for its weak foundations and inadequate fire protection.9 This theatre was demolished in 1916. Commissioned by the Khedive Ismail, Avoscani designed the International Cotton Market or the Bourse of Minet El Bassal. Other projects in the city designed by him included the Italian schools, and the "circle international". His plans for the city extensions, included such projects as the coastal road linking the palace of Ras El Tin

and the district of Ramleh. This project was later considered by the Municipality, and developed by Dietrich Bey. 10 Eventually the eastern harbour corniche (c. 500 m.) was executed by the Italian contractor F. Ili Almagià (1907). The corniche was later extended to Ramleh and completed to Montaza in 1927 by the Italian contractors Cartareggia and Dentamaro. 11

Avoscani's long professional career in Egypt included among many activities, land and industrial developments. He introduced new building materials such as terracotta bricks (used, for example, in the Zizinia theatre facades imported from the Fabbrica Andrea Boni di Milano), and also in his extensive use and application of Italian marble specially from Carrara. His career, like that of many other architects beginning in Alexandria, was extended to Cairo, with such plans as the Westernization of the capital promoted by the Khedive Ismail (1863-79).

Italian immigration to Egypt after 1860s became more linked to economic rather than political conditions, in spite of the return of Italians to their homeland after the Risorgi-



mento yet the number of immigrants continued to rise up to the early 1930s.13

ITALIAN COMMUNITY (POPULATION STATISTICS)

	Egypt	Cairo	Alexandria
1871	13906	3367	7539
1882	14251	4969	11579
1897	24454	8670	11743
1907	34926	13296	16669
1917	40198	15655	17860
1927	52462	18571	24280
1937	47706	16443	22881

see: Volait, op. cit.

Sources:

Regny: Statistique sur l'Egypte Sanmarco: Gli Italiani in Egitto 1937 Briani: Italiani in Egitto 1982

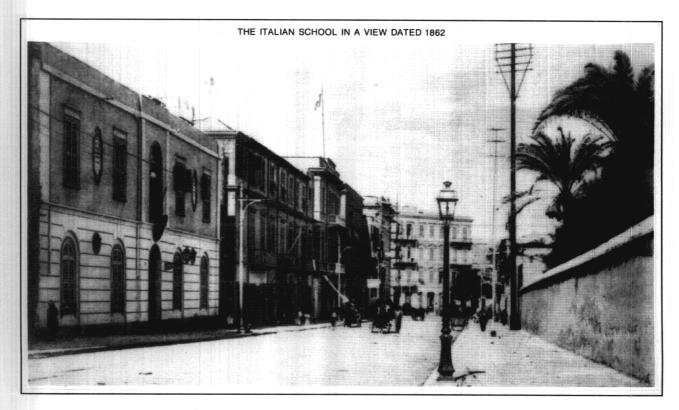
Statistics of 1882

Balboni recounts that 75% of the Italian population in 1904 was working class:14 "Riche en savoir faire plutôt qu'en capitaux," as described by Mercedes Volait.15 Sanmarco recounts that the wealth of the Italian community at the end of the 19th century was rather modest and that its remittances to Italy were quite insignificant.16

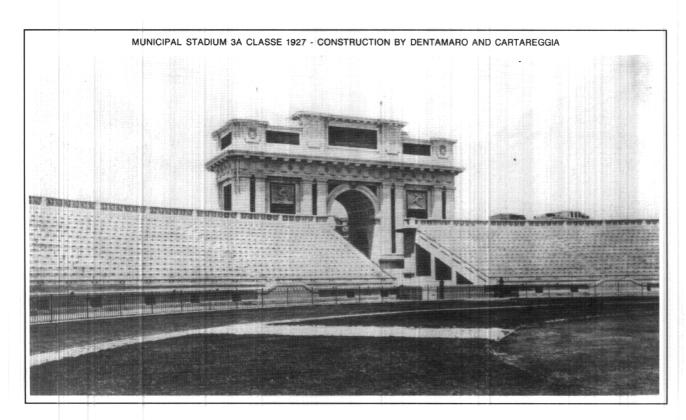
Under the Khedive Ismail the Italians were also in charge of the organization of the police

services. Their dominance in public administration continued to be the case up to the British occupation in 1882, when their position was somewhat weakened, with such public functions being increasingly occupied and taken over by British administrators. Even so, their role remains hegemonic up to the late 1930s in such services as the organization of health and first-aid, archaeological excavations, the setting up and direction of the Alexandria Greco-Roman museum 1892 and the development of the arts and music. The role of Italians regarding the building up of industry and its affiliated professions, however, may be regarded as monopolistic.

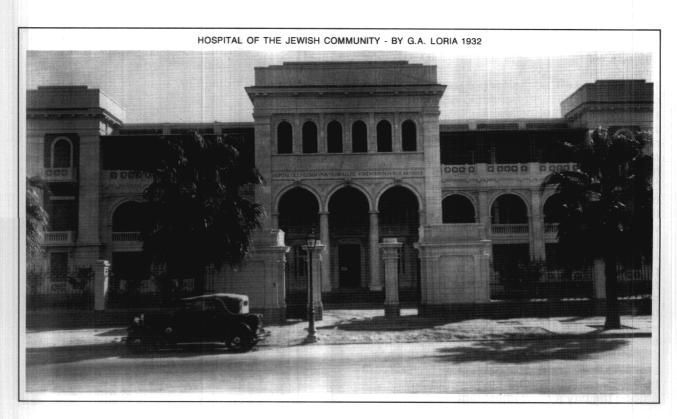
Italian contractors played a leading role in public construction projects such as the cases of Almagià, Cartareggia and Dentamaro building the Corniche, and the Montaza palace by De Faro. Giovanni Pagano (1883-1930) specialized in pile foundations; among his important works is the foundations of the College des Frères of Saint Marc in Chatby (1925-27) and the Marine hospital in Chatby (1932). In the private housing market the example of the renovation of the villa Pinto in











Bulkeley-Alexandria by the architect Mario Avena in 1927 is a clear example of Italian dominance and monopoly of the Alexandrian building market, when some ten contracting Italian firms within a total of 16 contractors and suppliers were assigned to the job, with only a single recorded Egyptian partici-

pant.19

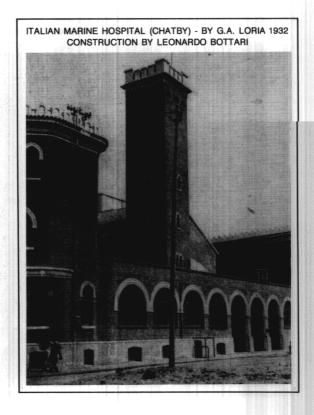
The Italian involvement in the introduction of new building techniques and procedures can be attributed to contractors such as Nicola Marciano in 1863, the first to use reinforced concrete, while commercializing the Hennebique system from 1895 onwards. In 1900 the contractor De Faro was becoming expert in using compressor foundations, permitting high rise construction in low quality soil. Meanwhile, the engineer G. Sacci promoted procedures regarding the use of reinforced concrete which became more frequently applied after 1900. In the field of manufacturing of building products, the Sornaga factories for the manufacturing of bricks and ceramics established in 1905 employed over 1,400 workers by 1930.20 At the same time, numerous small Italian artisans in their accustomed spirit of individual ventures constituted an important bulk of the building and crafts manufacturing sector. Particularly important is the development of Islamic crafts, in the ateliers of Giuseppe Parvis and G. Furino in 1867, also G. Jacovelli in 1884 decorator of the elegant Islamic styled salon of the Villa Mazloum Pasha designed by A. Lasciad.21

The second half of the 19th century is characterized in Alexandrian socio-economic history as the period of stabilization of wealth and the rise of an elitist society composed mainly of merchants, bankers and landowners. In 1875 Filippo Pini Bey is said to have initiated the development of the "Rosette" quarter which developed into one of the city's most elegant addresses.22 On the rue Rosette stood the residences of the wealthiest Italian families, the Pini house (presently the Spanish consulate), the villa Aghion (presently the deep sea-fishing company), and among other important elegant residences those of Sursock, Menasce, Zogheb, Benbaki and A. Bassili. Other important buildings which stood on the same road were the prestigious Zizinia theatre, the museum (before it moved in 1892 to its present premises), the Municipality, the local tribunal and the Khedievial club.

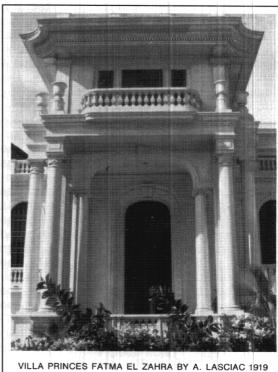
In 1868 prince Omar Toussoun mentions among the city's most important gardens two

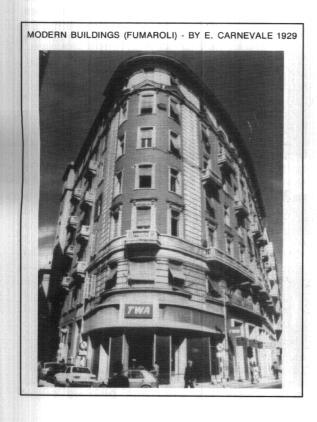
developed by Italian notables: "le jardin de M. Ciccolani" in the "quartier des Soeurs" and the "jardin Rossetti" on the Mahmoudieh in Nouzha, famous for its kiosk covered by a Lantana Camara covering an area of 300 sq. m.²³

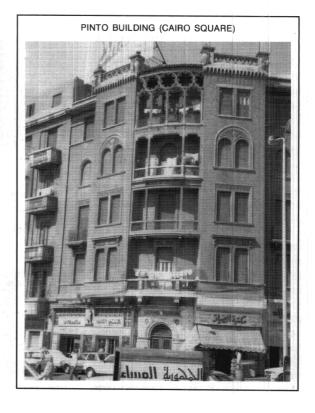
The bombardment of the city on the 11th July 1882 by the British and the events of the days that followed left the European centre in complete ruins, but the indemnities and compensations paid by the Egyptian government amounting to an exorbitant amount of 4,200,000. L.E. helped stimulate and finance the rebuilding of the city and its new extensions.²⁴ A genuine building boom followed, described by Breccia as "unfounded prosperity."25 The rebuilding covered the Place Mohamed Aly (previously Place des Consuls). The new buildings may be noted for their remarkable Italian participation and influence, such as the Mixed Tribunals 1886 by Alfonso Manescalco and the Okale Monferrato (1885-87) by Lugi Piattoli and the Passage Menasce (1883-85) developed for the Societé des Immeubles d'Egypte by A. Lasciac, conceived and modelled on the tradition of the Milanese Galleria.26











Lasciac's historicist, eclectic architecture, says Mercedes Volait, was influenced by his formation in Vienna by Heinrich von Ferstel (1828-33) who, like other Viennese architects, had a strong preference for Italianate Renaissance. Equally influential are the ideas of a "free renaissance" preached by Otto Wagner and experienced in the imperial architecture of the Ringstrasse Vienna (1860-90). On a reduced scale such influences appear in Lasciac's work in Alexandria in the Rue Sherif complex of apartment buildings (1883-86) developed for the Societé des Immeubles d'Egypte, which Politis describes as "les premiers immeubles d'Alexandria possedant tout le confort moderne."27 For the same society of notables Lasciac designed two apartment buildings for the Karam brothers (1884-85) and Primi's (1887), the latter situated on the Place Mohamed Ali, also another block of flats adjacent to the Synagogue on the Rue Nabi-Daniel for the Jewish community. The villa Laurens (1887) in Ramleh and the palazzina Aghion (1887) (presently the Ahram building on Rue Rossette, Fouad later). For the Egyptian aristocratic clientele of Alexandria, Lasciac

designed in Ramleh the palace of princess Fatma El Zahra (1919) (presently the Crown Jewels Museum)²⁸ and the residence of Mazloum Pasha (1895) in Glymenopoulo.²⁹ Among Lasciac's most important public works are the first Ramleh Railway station (1883) and the facades of the Cairo Station (1925), the latter in collaboration with the Greek engineer L. Iconomopoulos.³⁰

Other Italian architects working again for the same elite clientel round 1900 include, for example, A. Marelli who designed two of the most elegant villas in Alexandria. The first is villa Binder Nagel on the colline Eleusis in Carlton (presently Roushdi-Ramleh), owned presently by the Cordahi family, in Neoclassic style, modelled as a replica of the Corfou's Achilleion, a villa owned by the Kaiser William II 1912; the second is the villa Karam (presently the Sacred Heart's Girl's College).31 Among Marelli's other works are community projects such as the Prussian hospital of Diaconesses (the Anglo-Suisse after 1918) and the police headquarters at Kom El Diek, Caracol Bab Sharki with its. famous clock tower together with a few villas behind, including the residence of Becker



Pasha, the British police commissioner, thereby confirming the dominance of Italian architects on private and public development projects in Alexandria and confirming Fraser's impressions that "the Alexandria of 1880-1930 was largely built by Italian architects and engineers." 32.

In 1904 Balboni mentions 11 leading Italian architectural and engineering firms among a total of 37 European firms practicing in the city, 33 while Bonola Bey in 1906 mentions 14 Italian engineers and architects in Alexandria

as compared to 28 in Cairo.34

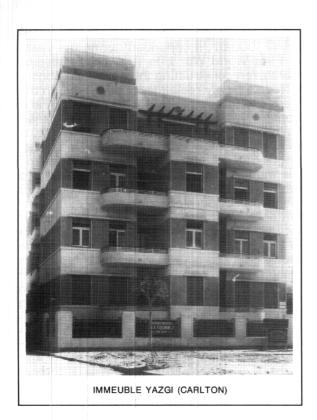
By the end of the 19th century Alexandria was affirming its credibility as Egypt's economic capital with the presence of the Stock Exchange, the cotton Bourse, at Minet El Bassal, the branches of the main banks, financial institutions and the headquarters of the most important export/import houses of Egypt. The elegant premises of the Banco di Roma on Rue Sherif and Toussoun designed by Henry Gorra in 1905, inspired by the Palazzo Farnese in Rome, 35 remains still the most elegant building in the city centre. While the work of G. Loria on the Bank Misr in 1925, though conceived in a local revival Neo-Islamic style, reflects in character a strong Italian influence expressed in its excessive ornamentation, coloured bricks and mosaic facades.

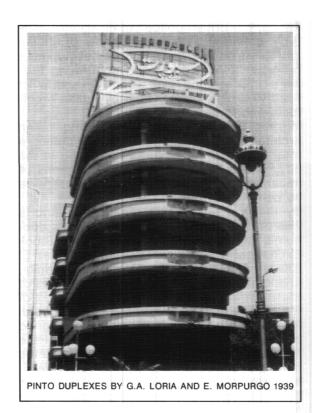
Italian architects constituted at least 50% of the technical personnel of the nascent Municipality of Alexandria.36 In about 1906 the planning office included such prominent staff members as engineer G. Ramacciotti, described by F. Bonola Bey as "ingegnere di prima classe". Favoured by the Egyptian royal family and its aristocracy, Italian architects occupied prominent positions, such as A. Lasciac (1856-1946), chief architect of the royal palaces under Abbas Hilmy, a tradition continued with E. Verrucci Bey (1875-1945) during the reign of Fouad.37 This king was himself influenced by Italy, where he was educated and continued to have an intimate relation with "the house of Savoia," its ruling family. Verrucci remodelled in Italian Baroque revival style the Palace of Ras El Tin and designed the new Haramlek palace in Montaza in 1927.38 In other government public official posts, the case of Mario Rossi in the design office of the Ministry of Waqfs cannot pass unnoticed. Rossi designed the two most important mosques in the city, namely Abou El Abbas El Moursi (1925-38) and the Ibrahim mosque (1949-51).

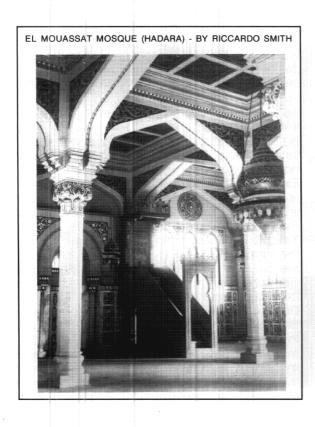
While building and land speculation were

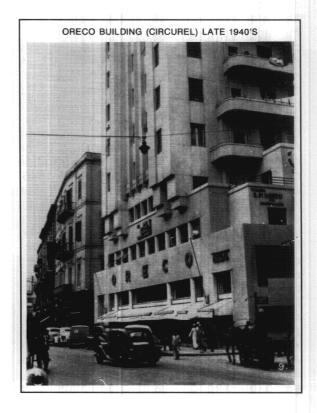
shortly interrupted during the economic crisis of 1906-07, it continued during the years of First World War I. In 1915-17 the Italians were even constructing their own new consulate on a newly reclaimed plot of land on the Corniche (promenade de la Reine Nazli), and constructed by the Italian contractors Lanari Company.39 With the prosperity of the 1920s, the Italians were expressing their most distinguished architecture in the city, receiving the municipal prize for facades awarded to the Italianate architecture of G.A. Loria40 for his design of Corniche and the Gare de Ramleh apartment blocks 1928, famous for their mosaics brought from Venice. Born in 1879 in Egypt, at Mansoura, Loria worked for the Municipality as a draftsman. Talented as he was, he was encouraged by Stross, chief municipal architect, to study architecture in Turin. He returned to Egypt without obtaining his degree and established himself as a professional architect, a condition not uncommon in Egypt. Loria's work carries a strong Italian influence. Among his projects in Alexandria are the Cecil hotel (1929), the Pinto block of flats (rue Fouad), the Campos building (rue Neroutsous), presently Ibrahim Pasha Abdel Sayed, another Pinto block of flats on the Cairo square, the Mansour Kelada building (rue de la Gare du Caire), the villa Viterbo at Rond Point and the villa Zalzal in Sporting. His public buildings include the first-aid post in Kom El Dick 1932 the Italian Hospital (Benito Mussolini in Hadara) the Jewish Hospital (Fondation Behor Menasce) in Sporting and the Marine hospital in Chatby. The Pinto duplex flats in Bulkeley was his only modern building in collaboration with Emilio Morpurgo. In 1932 he presented his work to the University of Rome and was listed among Italian architects to receive an honorary degree.41

Expressing the same strong Italian influence is the work of Riccardo Smith, identifiable with strong articulation of form in contrast to the simple and plain facades of Loria. Among Smith's Italianate buildings in Alexandria are the immeuble Fikal (rue Chambre de Commerce), the Mouassat building 1929 on the Corniche, the immeuble Abou Keir 1932 and the villa Awad in Glymenopoulo. The Art-Deco style, which is more associated with Smith's work in Cairo, in Alexandria is seen in the immeuble Afifi 1931, immeuble Dentamaro 1930, while shifting to more clear early modern style in the villa Yazgi in Carlton and the immeuble L. Camilleri in Mansheih. In the Mouassat mosque (Hadara), Smith's simple









plain exterior strongly contrasts with its heavily ornamented Islamic interiors.

The Italians were building extensively during the 1920s and 1930s. Among their most important community buildings are the ophthalmological hospital sponsored by I. Adah, and designed by Gaston Aghion. The Italian school of 1931 (presently the Faculty of Agriculture at Alexandria University) by Clemente Busiri-Vici is rational, early modern architecture. Strongly in contrast is the architecture of the Ismail memorial, presently the monument of the unknown soldier, a gift to the city of Alexandria by its Italian community, designed by E. Verrucci and inspired by the Vittorio Emanuele II monument in Rome. In suburban developments, Italian participation was limited to the Smouha project proposed by A. Lasciac 192542 and G. Loria's participation in the development of the suburb of King-Mariout for the Baron de Menasce.

Italian architects and engineers in 1933 practicing in the city listed by the "Annuario degli italiani d'Egitto" were in the order of 18 offices compared to 24 in Cairo, and 38 Italian contractors as opposed to 32 in Cairo. Their numbers sharply decline after 1945 with the "I'Annuaire du Bâtiment" in 1948 listing only 9 Italian architects in Alexandria within a total of 86 Egyptian and foreign consulting firms (approximately 10%), 18 Italian engineers within a total of 98, and 21 Italian contractors within a total number of 93 firms. 44

After Sadat's "open door" policy 1973, Italians in the late 1970s and 1980s were once again engaged for industrial developments (for example, the Sumed Alexandria-Suez pipeline), also with the development of the city's most important office block, the Cotton Palace 1984 in the city centre by Volani-Architettura and Ital-Group contractors. The building still unoccupied to the present day because of its exorbitant costs, was also highly criticized because of its monolithic scale disturbing the city's urban character and for the quality of its architecture, a glass block belonging to an out-dated, early modern international style.

At present with an Italian population in Alexandria between 700-800 persons⁴⁵ the presence of Italian influence is minute. Their impact on the building industry only exists in the form of petty contracting still functioning as small individual ventures (for example, Sampieri in paint works and Nuzzolese in glass works).

Mohamed Fouad Awad

¹ Volait, Mercedes, "La communauté italienne et ses ediles," *Alexandrie entre deux mondes*

Alexandria ad Aegyptum, Alexandria,

³ Wiet Gaston, *Mohamed Ali et les Beaux-Arts*, Cairo, [1948?].

⁴Breccia, op. cit.
⁵ See Jondet M., *Atlas historique de la ville et des ports d'Alexandrie*, Cairo, 1921, also Toussoun O., *The 11th of July 1882*, Alexandria, 1934.

⁶ Wiet, op. cit.

Wiet, op. cit., also Bonola F., Gl'Italiani nella civilità Egiziana del secolo XIX, Alexandria, 1906.

8 "Le Theatre à Alexandrie", Alexandrie, Reine de la Mediterranee, Syndicat d'initiative de la ville d'Alexandrie, July, 1928.

9 See Bonola, op. cit., on P. Avoscani.

10 Ibid.

¹¹ See Cartareggia and Dentamaro in *Annuario degli italiani d'Egitto*, Alexandria, 1933.

12 See Bonola, op. cit., on P. Avoscani.

¹³ See Volait, op. cit.

14 Ibid.15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

L'Egitto All'Alba del XX Secolo, Alexandria, 1901.
 See Annuario degli italiani d'Egitto on Giovanni Pa-

gano.

20 Ibid.

See Bonola, op. cit., on Jacovelli.

See L'Egitto all'Alba del XX Secolo on F. Pini Bey.
 Toussoun O., Alexandrie en 1868, Alexandria, 1933.

²⁴ El Raffei A., *The period of Ismail*, Cairo, 1982.

25 Breccia, op. cit.

²⁶ Volait, op. cit.

²⁷ Ibid.

 $^{\rm 28}$ Information obtained from Mr. Rateb, relative to princess Fatma El Zahra.

²⁹ Mentioned by Bonola, op. cit., see Jacovelli.

³⁰ Information obtained from the drawing of the station no. 2667 B., Cairo, 1922, and on A. Lasciac in Volait, op. cit.

³¹ Information obtained with the assistance of J. Toweig from the son of Mr. Marelli a list of whose works was provided for the author's use.

³² Fraser Peter, "Alexandria from Mohamed Ali to Gammal Abdel Nasser", Alexandrien Kulturbegegnungen dreier Jahrstan sende im Schmelztiegel einer mediterranen Grosstadt, Mayenne, 1981, p. 67 ff.

³³ Balboni A., Gli italiani nella civiltà egiziana del XIX Secolo, Alexandria, 1906.

34 Bonola, op. cit., see Scultura e Architettura.

35 Breccia, op. cit.

36 Volait, op. cit.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Italian consulate records.

⁴⁰ Meeting with Marta Loria, London, 1986.

41 Ibid.

42 Architettura e Arti Decorative, VI, 1926, p. 132.

43 Annuario degli italiani d'Egitto, Alexandria, 1933.

44 Annuaire du Bâtiment Alexandria, Alexandria, 1948.

45 Consular Statistics, 1990.