

# Remembering My Mother's Alexandria

By [Diaa Hadid](#) Nov. 29, 2016

## Alexandria Journal

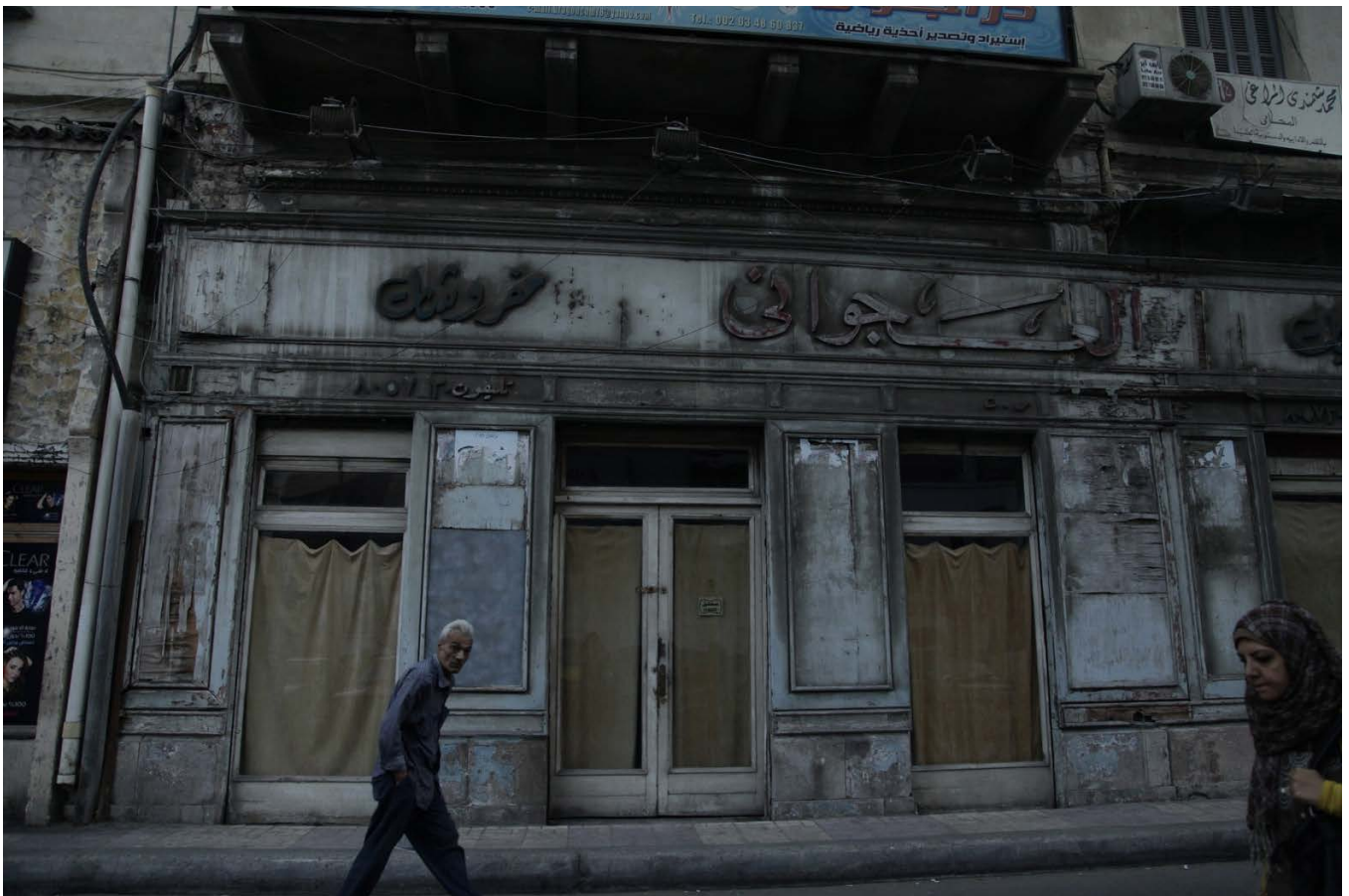


The wedding of my maternal grandparents in Alexandria, Egypt, in the 1940s.

ALEXANDRIA, Egypt — My mother spoke French with her Greek

neighbors in Alexandria, at the time Egypt's most cosmopolitan city. She skipped Catholic school to ride in a red convertible with a German girlfriend down broad boulevards. She water-skied in a swimsuit, enjoying the freedom of this city in the 1960s, when it was still a beacon of Mediterranean culture.

I returned this fall to a very different Alexandria, one as insular as my mother's was open, as full of despair as my mother's was full of hope and anticipation.



The now-shuttered Ajwani furniture shop in downtown Alexandria. Diaa Hadid for The New York Times

A congested coastal highway divided the city from its sea, and the smog burned my eyes. Young men hissed and catcalled at women as they passed. Rubbish piled up on crumbling streets that were once proudly scrubbed. Neoclassical buildings, once grand, looked dilapidated, and thick nests of high-rises had replaced villas with French doors and Arab arches.



A coastal highway divides Stanley Beach from the city. Dina Hadid for The New York Times

As the country has plunged into a [downward spiral](#), Alexandria is even more diminished. Once Egypt's exuberant gateway to Europe, the city has been neglected for decades. The nationalist generals who ran Egypt after overthrowing King Farouk in 1952 eyed the city with suspicion. Alexandria was seen as too loyal to the monarchy, too European. Only under the waning years of the rule of President Hosni Mubarak did the city seem to perk up: A library was built. A seaside boulevard was paved.

But the changes were not enough. Alexandrians dug deeper into provincialism and their faith. In a city once famed for its European-style liberalism, the Muslim Brotherhood became a powerful force. The ultraconservative Salafi movement built its base. And on New Year's Day in 2011, the city became the scene of some of Egypt's [worst sectarian violence](#) between Muslims and Christians in modern history. The seeds of the Egyptian revolution were also planted here when, in June 2010, the police [beat to death](#) a 28-year-old, Khaled Said.

But shabby Alexandria, like the rest of Egypt, has seen little benefit from the revolution. The country is reeling under its latest repressive president and a tanking economy. The currency has lost half its value, and Alexandria has never felt so grim.

"I miss the old Alexandria," Mahmoud Ghamrawi, 68 and a retiree, said as he sat at the coast and watched the sea with his 2-year-old granddaughter. "People feel like strangers in the city."

My Alexandrian family is Muslim with Moroccan roots. My great-grandfather Abdul-Razak Mustafa was a senior customs official in a city built on port trading. My family says he had three chauffeur-driven vehicles when most people in the city had never set foot in a car. He studied in France and owned land in the old commercial district, a hunting lodge and a seaside villa.

This photograph shows my extended Alexandrian family in 1984 on the rooftop of our seaside villa at Agami beach, a once-upscale area just outside the city. My aunt Lola is at top left. She has her hand on my shoulder as I look down. Next to Lola is my grandmother Fayza.

Western literature romanticizes Alexandria's belle époque, which began in the late 19th century, when a mélange of Europeans, particularly Italians and Greeks, gave the city its cosmopolitan flair.

Lawrence Durrell, a British novelist and poet who wrote the "Alexandria Quartet" novels, captured how World War II began to bring the era to a close. By then, the time of foreigners in Alexandria was ending. Egyptian nationalism was growing, and Jews were viewed with suspicion as loyal to the country's enemy, Israel. Europeans were seen as part of a foreign presence that had kept Egyptians down, and most Alexandrians with European roots and Alexandrian Jews left the city by the early '60s.

Our fortunes faded with the city. My mother and all of her siblings, except

for one sister, Lola, left for Cairo or abroad. I was born in Alexandria because my mother wanted to have a child in her hometown, years after she migrated to Australia. Weeks after I was born, we left. We returned for visits a couple of times during my childhood, and beginning in 1998, I visited nearly every year.

After always feeling welcome in the city, I felt like an outsider this trip. At one point a bus driver sneered at me and my colleagues when he heard us speaking Arabic without the local accent. "You aren't from here," he said. "Go back to Cairo."

During this visit, I watched as couples strolled the pedestrian walkway by the seaside, known as the Corniche.

Bassam Abdu, 38, a fisherman, sat with his 4-year-old son. The sewage, garbage and overfishing were slowly choking his livelihood, he said, pointing at bags bobbing in the water.

Farther down the coast, a dead donkey had floated onto Stanley Beach, a small private city shore.

Two generations earlier, my mother and her siblings had sunbathed and water-skied here.

My relatives sold their last seaside villa in the 1990s; it was in the Agami, once the summer playground for the city's rich. It is now a sprawling quarter of Alexandria with unpaved narrow alleys that reek of sewage.

The city's residents, including my aunt Lola and my extended family, are now overwhelmingly conservative Muslims.

Lamenting the lost Alexandria is a favorite local pastime, and my aunt Lola, now 67, is as wistful as anyone. Her apartment is decked with gilded wallpaper and faded tapestries of picnicking European ladies, and when she steps outside she sighs that she no longer recognizes the city. (My

aunt requested that only her nickname be used because she wants to protect her children's privacy.)

Yet the city still has its pleasures, like sipping tea into the night in a high-ceilinged seaside cafe, or walking around the medieval citadel. On a recent evening, women in face veils clip-clopped past on horses, raising posies of balloons as they posed for photographs.

The seafood in Alexandria remains a delight, a medley of the cultures that once converged here. In a nameless alley cafe, a woman grilled barley-coated fish over an iron drum-turned-barbecue. A wealthy couple snacked on gandofli, clams, in the Greek Yacht Club of Alexandria, where the moneyed jostle for a table overlooking the glistening harbor.

There, old Alexandria still lingers. While having lunch, I noticed a table of French speakers in their 70s or 80s and asked where they were from.

"You are so ignorant," a woman snapped. "We are from Alexandria."

A sympathetic woman stood, identifying herself as Madam Zayat. She was of Greek and Syrian descent, she said, and a fourth-generation Alexandrian.

"I've been a member of Sporting for 52 years," she said, referring to the sports club where old money — including my own family — meets for tea and sends grandchildren for horseback riding lessons. "We love Alexandria," she said. "More than anything in the world."

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