

## **Voyages En Tunisie 1900 (9 Avril)**

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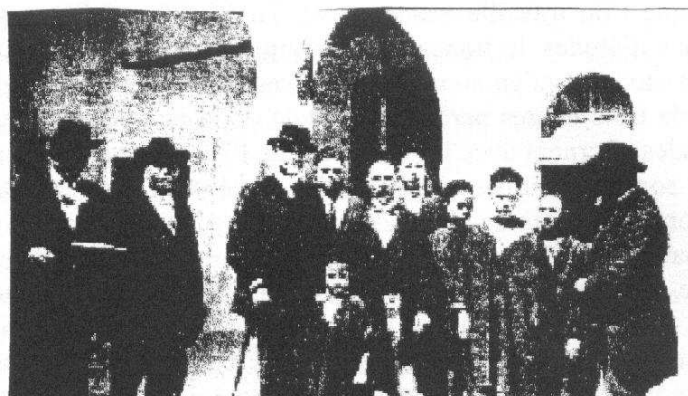
### **Voyage d'études en Tunisie : chapitre VII**

*19 avril 1900*

Sfax has had in recent years a rapid increase, particularly because of the reconstitution of its orchards of olive-trees. In 1853 it hardly had 13,000 inhabitants; six years ago, it had 35,000, and today it is reckoned to have nearly 50,000. It is the second city of Tunisia, and certainly one of those which have the most future, because of the considerable layers of the phosphates of Metlaoui, of which, thanks to the Gafsa railway line, Sfax will become the principal outlet for export. I am told that there are in Sfax 1,500 Italians and 1,200 French. As a whole, the city does not have the elegant fashions of Sousse, but the European district is a pleasant sight at the edge of the beach. Like Sousse, the city is surrounded by high and crenelated ramparts. At the close of the day, we will visit the cisterns which have a certain reputation. There are 636 of them; almost all having been arranged as the product of pious donations (1). It is enveloped by a thick wall the monitoring of which is entrusted to a gardien which has the role of protecting, at night, the large closed door so that nobody can enter. No beast of burden can pass through the entrance of the cisterns; water there is contained under vast flagstones and is drawn from sandstone gargoulettes which one lets down and which raises by means of cords. It is especially the natives who use the cisterns, but modern pipes bring the drinking water downtown, which one should use however only with moderation, because it is strongly impregnated with magnesia salt (2). After the visit to the cisterns, we are led, by car, to the "experimental garden" where, in spite of the unfavorable condition of the ground, we notice some welcome oils, aloes from the Kerkennah islands, acacias, eucalypti and specimens of fodder and food plants, such as wheat, barley, corn, sorghum, which thrive rather well in hot countries, in spite of the shortage of rain water (approximately 20 centimetres per annum). Nevertheless the garden is thin and needs much watering.

The evening is devoted to a visit to the Souks. The director of the native schools, Si Tahar, wants to serve us as 'cicerone' (guide) through these soaring lanes, bordered with shops, where many natives circulate wearing the green turban and yellow Turkish slippers. At a crossroads, an indigenous orchestra, where Jews and Moslems symphonize in a trio, welcomes us with the bright accents of the Marseillaise; and it is with a cup of Moorish coffee in hand which we complete this well filled day so as to take a little rest.

If the day before was mainly employed in on the spot study of questions of regional agriculture, April 19 is reserved especially for a visit to the Sfaxien schools. We start with the native school directed by Si Tahar (3). Let us visit initially the class of the beginners (children from twelve to thirteen years approximately). All read easily and indicate without any hesitation the various objects represented on the tables suspended from the walls of the class. It is the same for the school furniture available to them, tables, chairs, offices, hat stands (4), inkpots, feathers; their vocabulary is very complete and without any confusion. We are especially struck to see a young pupil who has studied French for two months to write normally under dictation and almost without spelling mistakes. With the elementary course (first division), the collective answers of the pupils are prompt, exact, and marked in the corner to the highest degree of grammatical accuracy. All fluently name the objects of daily use drawn in the table: a stove, coal, a furnace, water (they however hesitate to name in French a tap), a brush, a balance, a coffee machine, a coffee mill, etc. The pupil who gives to each item its French name, has learned our language only for fifteen months. Some make sentences such as "*le lion mange de la viande de gazelle*"; the majority read easily from a French text book, and make comments which indicate a sure and steady reasoning. In arithmetic, they have seen the first three rules and have begun division. The exercises of mental calculation attest much concentration and facility.



The higher course counts 12 pupils from thirteen to seventeen years. The majority have learned French for two years and half or three years; some even for four years, but they are weakest and the least intelligent. All read fluently, correctly, apart from some doubtful links. The exercises of recitation indicate much ease of memory and the tone always adapts to the piece; from time to time one can observe a confusion in the gender; they say "du soie" for "de la soie" (lit: *of silk*), because this word is masculine in Arabic. With most intelligent of the class one can have a conversation followed in French; they grasp the

questions immediately and answer with the greatest confidence. One gives to the one them this sentence to be written in the blackboard: "Nous sommes heureux de la visite de messieurs les inspecteurs. Nous n'oublierons pas leur bonté." (Lit: *We are glad of the visit of the inspectors. We will not forget their kindness*). At once the pupil takes chalk, he writes Messrs with only one S and will forget without E. One of his comrades at once corrects the faults by adding an S to Messrs and an E with will forget, because, says he, "the verb to forget is a first conjugation". Before leaving the class the Director of Teaching writes on the blackboard this sentence: "The inspectors congratulate the pupils at the school in Sfax on their work and their progress". The pupil writes without fault or pause. Various exercises show that they know in a satisfactory way the elements of French history, and that they understand the selected pieces which they have in their hands (5). An interesting question is put to them in connection with the professions which they wish to embrace when they leave school.

No. 1. I was born in Sfax, my father is a notary, and I want to work with him later in the same profession.

No. 2. Son of a tradesman, I want to open a shop in the Souk like my father.

No.3 and No.4. Idem

No.5. Son of a police force employee, I want to become a civil servant. For that I work in order to obtain a bursary with the Sadiki college, in Tunis, and then continue my studies with the large mosque.

No.6. Notary.

No.7. Trading.

No.8 and No.9. Idem

No.10. I wish, like my father, to be a nomadic farmer.

No.11 Idem.

Well there one disentangles the very particular instinct which pushes the commercial professions with the Sfaxiens as with their Phoenician ancestors.

Mr. Bayet (6), very satisfied with the answers that he obtained and from the good progress of the studies, compliments the master and the pupils and says to them (which appears to flatter them enormously) that he will let them know in Paris that they work hard in

Tunisia. Actually, the results achieved after two or three years of studies of French are really surprising and we are astonished all the more by it in that, all things considered, the pupils of the local schools do not devote on average more than three hours per day to the study of the French language and grammar, since these studies alternate with the exercises of the Koranic school; that moreover, Friday and Sunday are more or less lost days, and that, during the month of Rhamadan (7), the courses are completely disorganized. We visit successively the girls' public school directed by a French teacher. The school is installed in a rented local house (8); it has 15 French pupils, 42 Italian, Spanish or Greek, and a ten year old Moslem girl. It is a unique fact to mention, because it is known that the small Muslim girls, locked up after the age of puberty, like their mothers, are raised in the greatest ignorance. The boys' school counts 115 children, including 90 Jews, and 30 Europeans, including 14 French (9). A school held by the religious sisters and luxuriously arranged in a new and roomy room (10) has 380 pupils and 8 mistresses. Sfax also has a higher boys' school which counts 42 pupils, including 12 on the higher course (11). We are struck by the good condition of the books, and we examine with interest the popular lending library exclusively made up of works of French literature, history, and especially contemporary novels. Thanks to an ingenious card system costing 50 centimes for each reader, the books lent outside return easily without it being necessary to claim them from the borrowers and without there being lost or mislaid volumes, as too often happens in our metropolitan libraries.

The impression that we carry of this rapid visit through the schools of Sfax is very favorable. We could judge the facility which the young Arabs show for the study of our language, of their aptitude of assimilation, their pronounced taste for study and of their spirit of submission and obedience towards their Masters. We are less astonished by the observation that the officers charged to inform the natives incorporated in the regiments of riflemen are almost unanimous in declaring that after a few months of stay in the regiment, they are much more advanced than the others in practice of the military exercises. The siren of the "Eugène Pereire" moored in the port brings us back to reality; it is already half past three and the boat leaves at 4 am for Sousse where we must arrive at dawn. It is necessary to hasten. We run to the port where the schoolmasters have already preceded us, who respectfully greet us by wishing us good crossing.

From the bridge of the liner, our view embraces the panorama of Sfax illuminated by the setting sun, and, an incomparable sight, the extent of its gardens with their white houses

aligning themselves over several kilometers. At our feet the crowd of Sfaxiens circulates on the pier, watching the boat as it slips towards the open sea. The port of Sfax has been open only since 1897. Before this work was carried out, it was necessary to traverse the channel on barges, to reach the coast, and not without danger especially when a stormy east wind blew. A long channel of 2 kilometers, with a depth of 6.50, was dug, which now make it possible the ocean liners to moor at the quay. This is one of the causes of the commercial growth that the city has experienced these last years. Two other narrower channels were opened for the boats and the small fishing vessels which come from the Kerkena islands, Sicily and even from the archipelago. But already the sun has disappeared over the horizon; the city barely appears like a white point in the half-light; broken with tiredness, I gain my berth, where a restoring nap will recondition me after the overwork of these last days.

Notes:

(1) The construction of the "nasrias" which are found in the north of the city, adjacent to the Tunis road and the Moslem cemetery.

(2) Water from SidiSalah.

(3) Its locality is not specified by it, but, according to the photograph, it was probably in the médina.

(4) Now one writes "portmanteaux" (coat hangers).

(5) did they write "our ancestors the Gauls"?

(6) Director of Primary education Teaching in France.

(7) Now one writes "Ramadan"

(8) Location not specified.

(9) Equally, if he does not say to us where it was, it was not to train good math students, because can he explain why  $90 + 30$  is equal to 115?

(10) From the reading of the article of Pierre SOUMILLE "Retrospective study on the history of the Catholic parish of Sfax" published in No. 27 (1993) of our Review, it resembles of the school which the Sisters of Saint Joseph occupied in Rue Massicault since 1898, and which they had to leave in July - August of 1905, following the decree of 7 August 1903 prohibiting any teaching in Regency by congregations not authorized in France.

(11) Every good Sfaxien knows where it was. After being enlarged it took, though much later, the name of 'Collège De Garçons' (Boys' School).

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*Transmitted by Christian ATTARD and Gerard BACQUET*