

## Our Phantoms of History

(Diaspora Sfaxien 2006, p212)

What a marvellous evocation was that of our friend Henri Calzarelli in his text "Trait d'union" (Diaspora Sfaxienne no. 39 of June 2005), and with what a extraordinary memory and literary talent!

I was a very young person in Picville at the time (between 5 and 9 years) and yet, many memories stayed with me regarding the picturesque district which one called the Ville Franque. It had neither the typical beauty of the Médina enclosed in its medieval walls, nor the majestic elegance of the European city, if one excludes at its extremities the theatre, the church and the village hall ("salle des fêtes).

The war touched Sfax in its heart: this saying, it is not a question only of the geographical center of the city, but also of a heart which beat in this cosmopolitan and deeply human place. This district, which was made for a peace between people that went beyond their differences, disappeared physically, but in its memories remain many images of scenes coloured with life formerly attached to these places.

To a lord, his honor. Or rather a *lady*<sup>1</sup> that of my maternal grandmother, the only grandmother whom I knew alive. Donna Tufana<sup>2</sup> as she was called, lived in Rue Pasteur before the war, within two steps of the House of the Maltese. With one of my brothers, I there went from time to time, more precisely after being mowed by the Jewish hairdresser, a double of Michel Simon, who had his living room at the ground floor of the building. My mother gave us a five franks coin to each one, while recommending to us: "You will tell Lalou to cut you the hair *à la zouave!*" the crew cut did not yet exist. The cut "à la Zouave" was the head almost shaved, with a small tuft on the front, as in Tintin. The haircut session at Lalou occurred in a religious silence. He and its associate did not communicate except by signs to use the scissors or the razor. That always intrigued me, because I never could know if these two men were crazy or not. What was sure, it is that following the example badly equipped shoe-maker, Lalou largely needed to be occupied with his own thick mop of hair. Like any grand-mom, my grandmother liked to spoil her grandchildren, sometimes beyond what her purse allowed her. In a shop of the street Rue Pasteur, my brother and I had directions to attend the fitting of a waistcoat unit and trousers of most beautiful black velvet, decorated with red trim, which gave us enthusiasm to play Zorro. During the fitting we created a

sensation. The passers by, especially the women were hustled on the front of the door to admire us. This success annoyed me more than it flattered me.

A little further, close to the beautiful church, my uncle Nunzio had a small shoe manufacture shop in which I liked to play. With a shoe-maker's hammer I planted small nails in the parquet floor. Uncle was so occupied with his work that he did not say anything to me. In a corner of the shop was a guitar of which he was proud. Tonton Nounou formed part of a cultural organization, Caprera, sponsored by the fascist party, which to him was worth the preventive internment that visited the majority of Italians<sup>3</sup>. My mother was accustomed to ordering the shoes of her children from her brother, who arranged a reduced price for her. They were manufactured to measure.

My uncle made me place my foot on a paper sheet, his pencil drew a contour of it, and the light tickling gave me an excited feeling, while anticipating the pride of wearing new shoes.

And the Rue de la Republic? Which Sfaxien of the time didn't know the Rue de la Republic?

At five or six years, I was taken along by my big brother Nicolas on the frame of his bicycle and we went in a pastry very close to the entry of the Médina to drink a glass of barley water in which we soaked a cake, and we ate also a *zlabia*.

The Rue de la Republic to me was also the unexpected visits with Donna Margherita, a friend of the family and highly skilled dressmaker to whom my sister went to learn how to sew. Always with my sister Marie, when the war exploded, I was to experience in this legendary street an immense fright. We found ourselves in a jewellery exhibition and my sister was buying me a knick-knack (of black and white puppies) to satisfy my childish whims, when the siren resounds and covered the street of a lugubrious sound. The jeweller endeavoured to reassure my sister but, actually, he wanted to reassure himself because he trembled like a sheet, especially with the noise of the first explosions which came from the station.

Immense and thick smoke rose in the beautiful blue sky of Tunisia. In a few minutes it was over. The afternoon, whereas we were in Picville, a new alarm resounds. I learned later that a bomb which had not exploded had fallen within 20 meters of the place where my sister and I had been that morning.

I cannot not describe the last moments (before the bombardments) in the Catholic church, filled with the odor of candles and incense and wrapped in a sacred atmosphere, at the hour of the grand mass and of Vespers. I will restrict myself nevertheless to recalling that

I already wrote, in the Diaspora Sfaxienne no. 36 of June 2002, an article in homage to Mr Lungo, the indefinable Maltese sexton. That article is particularly a question of the pre-war period.

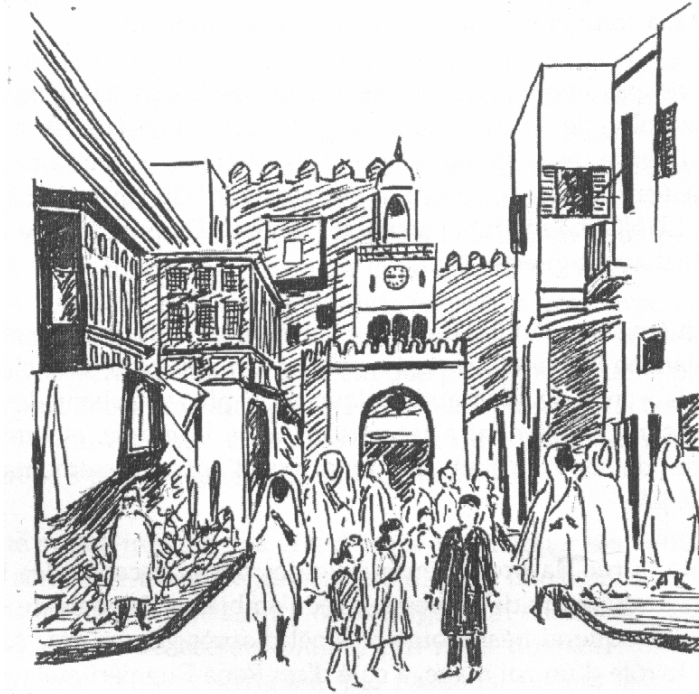
And what to say about the cinema Le Mondial, which made my little five year-old heart beat when taken along to see " Snow White and the seven dwarves?" A little later, it was the unforgettable "Tarzan finds a son" with the most authentic and loveable of the Tarzans, Johnny Weissmuller. As soon as his legendary cry resounded in the jungle, and the good savage came to the rescue of the Boy, there was a thunder of applause in the room, accompanied by cries of joy.

On the other side of the street, the prestigious village hall, a survivor of the bombardments, contains more memories of my youth, with the environment of the Saturday evening balls of my childhood. I will recall nevertheless this post-war Christmas with its live crib, in which I held the role of a Wise Man, beside a Rene Ruggieri metamorphosed in black and another comrade from catechism class whose name I do not remember.

Yes, the war had passed by there, with its civil victims and the heaps of ruins which one can see photographed in the Diaspora no. 39 of June 2005. Beside of the village hall there formerly existed a marabout, as one often saw in the countryside. This small cubic building, surmounted by a cupola, was not saved from the bombardments. Randomly dawdling, one occasion, I could see, for the first time, in what remained of the sacred masonry, a human skeleton, undoubtedly that of a venerated monk. Still in the same area, the cinema Le Mondial became, after the arrival of the allied troops, the restaurant Le Carillon, owned by Jean Mole and his wife Helene (née Oi). One summer evening, Helene, her sister and her niece Nanou took the fresh air on the pavement sitting on a chair, as was common with us. A group of English soldiers, a little overheated, thought that these Mediterranean people awaited customers. They had difficulty making it comprehensible to them, while laughing, that indeed they hoped for customers, but for the restaurant and nothing more.

The moment had come when the wounds had to be bandaged, that is to say, to clear the Quartier Franc of its debris, with the prisoners of Africa Korps, I spent time, sometimes, looking with the work these German, almost all fair, athletic and tanned bronze. One day an assembly of idlers formed. Obviously something unusual had occurred, which proved to be a drama, even if it involved the enemy. A young German had killed himself accidentally in the demolitions. His comrades cried like kids.

Over the months, the district changed. New streets were traced in the American style, on both sides of the new Avenue De La Republic. New buildings with arcades rose from the ground and a prestigious modern Theatre replaced that which the bombs had ruined. But in this block where the air and the sun now penetrate and circulate freely, the phantoms of history always walk. In a deafening silence, they are expressed in Arabic, Jewish, French, Sicilian, Maltese, Greek... And I don't know what else..



Drawing by Jean Mauro

Jean Mauro

(1) I always known my mother (just as her brothers and sisters) to address hers with the third person of courtesy: Vossia (your ladyship).

(2) Diminutive for Epifania.

(3) Later, in Hammam-Lif, the uncle was mortally injured by a fragment of shell duing an fierce artillery battle between the Germans and the Allies