

The End of the Maltese House (Diaspora Sfaxienne, 2000, p257)

It was beautiful an December afternoon; not a hint of cloud in the clear blue of the sky, the sun was still high; it must be around 4pm.

I descended the Rue Général Chanzy and, arriving at the street of the Republic, I notice, a few meters from there, a Tunisian snack vendor, face to face with grocer Calafatis.

In spite of the preceding bombardments the city persisted in living: many people in the street, with which some Italian and German soldiers had mixed upon the onset of occupation. The merchant had just given me the snack when the sirens are put up a howl. Instinctively I raised my head: away up there the planes, the bombs in chains; on the ground the first explosions. With my snack in hand I enter the bar Fantasio (1), full to bursting with people thrown into a panic; beside me, in the embrasure, a young German soldier holding in his hand a package of dried figs, explosions everywhere, the apocalypse. All of a sudden an infernal din, cries, dust everywhere, panic, death: a bomb which does not explode is lying behind the counter... everyone for save himself!...

Yes, but outside it is hell, a ceaseless rain of bombs; I run and then change my mind, at once I take refuge in a hairdressing salon on the place. A hilarious spectacle: the hairdresser, standing, unruffled, razor still in his hand, considers, confused, amazed, his customers, all German, flattened flat belly, huddled against the walls of the shop. Yes, but they know since El Alamein that one can save his skin while being crushed into the ground.

I do not remember any more if I ate this snack? I do not know, simply I take my legs with my neck and run towards the house. Oh no, no! The church has taken a blow. I enter there in spite of the risks. Everywhere rubble, up there, dome and vaults broken; even desolation in the street! A haggard woman seizes me in passing: "You did not see Erald?" while she questions me I am unaware that sister Dorothée is dead or dying up there, within a few meters of me, in the house of the sisters.

I try to reassure this lady and I continue. Aïe! Wretched piazzetta! Farewell to the Place Lavigerie! Ruins, its intimacies exposed, even the reinforced concrete of the Gigli building could not save it from destruction. I climb the staircases four at a time, will I find my grandmother alive? and my sister? and the old neighbor Marietta? and the laccono family? God be praised! The house is intact, its inhabitants alive.

That same evening we left, my grandmother, my sister and I, in the company of the Scotto family: Donna Pépina, Mastro Giovannino, Saverio, Mélina, Pauline, Helene; we all are going to take refuge in the villa of François and Margot Espanol, on the Maharsa road, which skirts wadi Agareb behind the park.

That evening, history rang the knell of what had been the Sfax of our youths.

Henri Calzarelli

(1) The bar "Fantasio" was located on the ground floor of "the house of the Maltese."