

Sfax in Time of War

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At the declaration of war, in August 1939, go ask why! my father took fright and decided to put to us in the shelter, in Algeria, in Cattle more precisely, close to Mme. Damato and her family.

And we therefore left, all the three of us, mom, my brother and me.

I was 8 years old at that time and this departure was like a holiday. My father accompanied us to Tunis and put us on the train while telling us not to move away from Mother.

For us, upon reflection, the war it was what? At the time it was a voyage (2½ days at that time because of the war) without problem, except at Gardimaou where an alarm forced us to leave the train – stopped in open country – leaving all our luggage, and hiding ourselves in a ditch while the train moved away from us; undoubtedly a safety measure.

We had a small lodging, a large room and a large kitchen. For us nothing had changed; the same rhythm of life, calm, at the seaside. I still remember the sausage merchant who installed himself at the end of the street and that we waited impatiently for the "4 o'clock".

The mail, bringing news of Sfax to us, was regular, at the end of three weeks Mother decided to return and, with her logic which always made us smile, she concluded "at least if one sleeps to die one will die all together!" And, in Sfax, life took again its normal course as each one of us knows of this period.

In 1942 with the arrival of the occupation troops, the "Commandant" being installed in the Hotel Les Oliviers, which we could see from the windows of our balcony, my father started to worry and took to the countryside, frequently, to find a shelter to hide, just in case! It was quickly done! As of the first bombardment, in November 1942, we moved in the direction of Cite Lyon.

I was 11 years old and we - refugees - were lodged by the family Ricaud, who had yielded us a room and the washhouse, which we used as a kitchen. For the children, in any case for me, we were unconscious. I lived this change as if we were on holiday. Then once I was outside during an alarm...

One day while I played at the Serra house the sirens started their strident cries; "Quickly, quickly go to Marguerite's home?" M. Serra says to me. Only, as soon as I am outside I am surprised by the crash of the bombs and, thinking that it was a good solution, hid myself squatted against the hedge of spruce shouting to Mr Peronon, who arrived all slowly while leaning on his cane "Lie down, M. Peronon! Lie down!" And he answered me stoically. "Lie yourself down, child. Me, I am old and do not have anything to fear!"

Everyone, in the city, had dug a trench. My father had this "thing" in horror and never went down there.

He remained in the kitchen, the door ajar, to look at the sky. With grandmother (of my mother), I decided one day to remain with him to look at the sky. It was impressive this illuminated sky, glittering with a thousand fires, almost "as *giorno*" (daylight). In the naivety of my 11 years I found, and I still remember, that it was splendid. Less important to me then were the "little black spots" that accompanied the illuminations. With the passing of time, I think now "that God preserves us".

As I spoke Italian I was often used as interpreter when an Italian soldier was lost in the city. Thanks to that we had often bread distributed by an Italian, a baker for his countrymen, who on his part asked for cigarettes; my brother's, who did not smoke but who had just the necessary age to be able to, were used for the exchange.

He was nice, Antonio; a Calabrian, enlisted, unfortunately for him, in this funny war, he told us how he had survived in Libya while remaining 5 days in a bomb crater. He often arrived with his shirt full of rolls which he distributed to the children present, and God knows if there were any at that time in the Cité Lyon! You imagine that this bread was appreciated by all because, often, our taste was composed of the delicious Arab carrots; those enormous and tasty carrots called in Sicilian "vastunacchi" (phonetically: vastounaki), delicious in salad with *harissa* and *karvi*. But nothing was had the value, in this time of shortage, of the bread which this man distributed to us.

I am certain that he returned healthy and safe to his home, he had said to Mother, "the allies arrive! Tomorrow evening I will hide me in the *tabias* with my buddies and we will be allowed to be made prisoners." As my mother said "he is a son of a mother! A mother somewhere must worry about him!"

Everyone remembers the last days of April when several families perished under the bombs; the Taverna family, 3 people. Damato family, 5 people, and others.

In the nights of April 8 to 9 and April 9 to 10, everyone took care, in concern from what was going to happen.

George Ricaud was "the estafette", he came and went, inspected the neighbourhoods and reassured us, "Do not worry, it is calm!".

Intrepid George! God knows that it was it!. On April 10, at 6 o'clock early in the morning, he had the idea of climbing on the roof where it dominates the horizon! and his father, thrown into a panic, shouts to him "Get down! species of idiot, someone will take to you for an observer!" which made laugh everyone and relaxed the atmosphere.

At 8am the first jeeps made their entry into SFAX.

I keep, from this period, unforgettable memories, such as the queue in which it was necessary to stand for the foodstuffs, games with the children, Azzopardi, Orru, Barberis, Micheletti, Paoli, etc... and the memory of the almond tree in flowers in the garden of family Ricaud.

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