

GOOD FRIDAY IN ALEXANDRIA

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The spring twilight illuminated the white buildings of the City in soft rose and purple tones. Thousands of people were lining both sides of the streets near the Patriarchate and the old Orthodox Cathedral of Saint Sabba (Ἁγίος Σάββας). Almost the entire Greek Community of Alexandria, young and old, were there. Together with their friends, the Egyptians, the Syrians, the Armenians, the Italians, the Maltese, the French and the other nationalities who lived and worked in the cosmopolitan City, they were waiting for The Procession of the Holy Epitaph*. (Ἡ περιφορά τοῦ Ἐπιταφίου) to pass by.

From the early hours of the afternoon all traffic had been diverted in the area and vehicles were not allowed on Rue Nebi Daniel (Prophet Daniel), Rue Rosette and Rue de l'Hopital Grecque - a privilege granted to the Patriarch of Alexandria a very long time ago. Egyptian policemen, in smart black uniforms, studded with glittering brass buttons, were posted at regular intervals along the pavements. Their flat-topped conical red caps (the ubiquitous fez with its black tassels) formed a colourful colonnade as far as the eye could see along the ancient Canopic Street of the Great Ptolemaic era, the famous Rue Rosette of modern times. People talked to each other in whispers as if they were afraid to disturb the serenity of the evening air. They were all gathered to pay their respects to The Saviour, The Son of God Who was tortured and died for their redemption. This was Christianity's great hour. Dusk was descending slowly and the lights outside the shops were switched on exceptionally early for the occasion.

Soon the first notes of Chopin's funeral march could be heard at a distance. The Greek Philharmonic Band of Alexandria, its musicians in blue uniform and white gloves, headed the procession. The beat of the drums merged with the heartbeat of the people. The sounds of the

solemn music reverberated in the silent evening air. The Cross followed, the crown of thorns, the inscription INBI (Ἰησοῦς Ναζωραῖος Βασιλεὺς Ἰουδαίων); the two thousand year old drama was unfolding again on this soil of Egypt. This was the same land which in their hour of need offered shelter to the Holy Family and saved the infant Jesus from the wrath of Herod.

A chorus of cantors, in long black robes, was followed by the priests in white garments. Then came the imposing figure of the ageing Patriarch, in his gold embroidered vestments, wearing the golden, diamond-studded mitre of the ancient throne of Saint Mark, surrounded by high ranking members of the clergy, Metropolitans and Bishops. In his hand he held a silver oil-flask containing rose perfume. There were lanterns, lighted candles and the sweet smell of incense. Four prominent members of the Greek community of Alexandria were carrying the Holy Epitaph. Behind followed the ranks of Greek and Egyptian dignitaries, among them the Greek Consul General, the Governor of Alexandria and the Chief of Police. Girl Guides, in elegant uniforms, and Scouts closed the main procession. Then came hundreds of people, visibly moved, many in tears.

As the music changed from Chopin's solemn march to the well-known music of the 'Encomia' (Ἐγκώμια = praises), the cantors chanted, "All generations offer a hymn for your burial O Christ", and "They sprinkled the tomb with fragrance, the women bearing perfume, having come very early in the morning". At this moment, the most moving scene unfolded - young girls and women gathered in the balconies above, stretched their arms to release handfuls of rose petals. As the petals descended slowly, like thousands of butterflies in the gentle breeze, the emotional poetry of the Encomia went on: "Oh light of my eyes, my sweetest child, that the tomb has now covered".

The procession had now turned into the Rue Saint Sabba moving slowly towards the Church, already full of people waiting to pay homage to the body of Christ lying in a tomb decorated with flowers. "You The Life, in a tomb you were buried O Christ, to the wonderment of armies of

Angels"... "O sweet spring, my sweetest child, where has your beauty faded" ... and the chanting continued. The adoration lasted until midnight.

Slowly the crowds begin to disperse. The great feast of Easter is approaching. Resurrection can already be felt in their hearts. Soon they will be able to share the joy of Easter with their families and their friends. The Eternal Light of Life will be passed on by the hand of the Patriarch to thousands of Orthodox Christians at midnight on Saturday.

The lighted candles, like a luminous stream, will gradually spread in the streets around the church. The Holy Light ("Άγιον Φῶς) will illuminate the streets of Alexandria. The midnight air will reverberate with the peals of bells. CHRIST HAS RISEN! ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ ΑΝΕΣΤΗ!

*Epitaph: literally, words inscribed on a tomb (Τάφος) or spoken beside the tomb. In the Greek Orthodox Church, Lamentation at the Tomb (Έπιταφιος Θρήνος) is the name given to the Great Service held on Good Friday. A shrine, symbolizing the tomb of Christ, decorated with a canopy of flowers, is known as the 'Epitaph' among Orthodox Christians, and is placed in front of the Sanctuary. The events that preceded the crucifixion, the last supper, the prayer at Gethsemane, the kiss of Judas in the garden beyond the brook Cedron, the interrogation by the high priest, the trial by Pontius Pilate, the "*multitudes crying aloud*", the painful ascent to Golgotha, the death on the cross, and the burial in the sepulchre "*wherein was never man yet laid*", are remembered through readings from the Gospels and singing of moving hymns of impressive poetic quality. "*And when Joseph (of Arimathea) had taken the body he wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out in the rock; and he rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulchre and departed. And there was Mary Magdalen, and the other Mary, sitting over against the sepulchre.... (St Matthew 27, 59-61)*". At this moment the priest removes the body of Christ from the cross, wraps it in a cloth and places it in the shrine under the canopy of flowers. The rose petals and rose perfume, sprinkled from a silver oil-flask held by the priest,

commemorate the coming to the sepulchre of 'the women bearing perfumed oils' (μυροφόροι) to anoint the body of Christ. *"And when the sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, had bought sweet spices, that they might come and anoint him ..."* (St Mark 16, 1). *"And the women also, which came with him from Galilee, followed after, and beheld the sepulchre, and how his body was laid. And they returned, and prepared spices and ointments..."* (St Luke 23, 55-56). *"And there came also Nicodemus, which at the first came to Jesus by night, and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about one pound weight. Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices..."* (St John 19, 39-40). At the conclusion of the service, all those attending go towards the shrine in adoration (προσκύνησις) and take a flower from the sepulchre to carry home.

Historical note:

The Greek Community of Alexandria, in its modern form, was established around 1830. Changing political and social circumstances led to the departure of the majority of the Greek people in the early 1960s. For almost a century and a half the Community with its Churches, schools and hospitals was a bastion of the Orthodox Faith and a stronghold of the Hellenic spirit abroad. In spite of the small number of Greeks who live in Alexandria today, the Procession of the Holy Epitaph still takes place on Good Friday - a tribute both to the strength of Orthodox tradition and to the Egyptian spirit of religious tolerance. Of course, Alexandria as a Greek City is best known for its contribution to Western civilization during the rule of the Ptolemies (330 BC - 30 BC). During that period, and the following few centuries, the celebrated Museum with its associated Library was a centre of learning and scholarship, which could be considered as the first University in the world. Christianity, according to tradition, was introduced to the City by St Mark, and the throne of the Orthodox Patriarch of Alexandria is named after the Saint.

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