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FROM MIDDLE EUROPE TO EGYPT ANTONIO LASCIAC ARCHITECT (1856-1946)

Abstract - Antonio Lasciac, an architect in Egypt. Son of a Slovenian father and a Friulian mother, Antonio Lasciac (1856-1946) was born in Gorizia, at time Austro-Hungarian Empire, now in Italy. After graduating at the University of Vienna, he moved in Egypt to Alexandria in 1883, to contribute to the reconstruction of the city destroyed the previous year by the British fleet during the crushing of the anti-European revolt. After a period of collaboration with real estate companies, towards the end of the century he established himself as designer of buildings for the high society and became chief architect of the Court in 1907. He designed palaces in Cairo, Alexandria, Istanbul and Kavala in Macedonia, and it is in this period that he re-evaluates the importance of local architecture, as a member of the Commission for the Conservation of Arab Art, with a professional dichotomy which sees him from one side working as designer of large villas in eclectic style for the aristocratic class and well-to-do families, and on the other side as designer of buildings for special customers (eg Assicurazioni Generali), with a new language which interprets in a modern key the traditional Arabic architecture.

Keywords: Antonio Lasciac, Austrian Empire, Gorizia, Egypt, Cairo, Alexandria, Istanbul, Kavala, Commission for the Conservation of Arab Art, Assicurazioni Generali, Neo mamluck architectur

Antonio Lasciac was born on September 21st 1856, to Peter, a "tanner" and to Giuseppina Trampus, in the house of his mother's parents, which still exists today, at the corner of Via Veniero and Piazza San Rocco in Gorizia, which today is located in Italy, but which was then part of the of Austrian Empire.

The family of Peter Lasciac came from the Soča river Valley, today in Slovenia, and in the district of San Rocco, an enclave that spoke Friulian within an Italian-speaking town, they reached a certain comfort that enabled them to own a house and give their children an academic education.

In fact, according to Mario Ranieri Cossar, after attending his primary and secondary schools in Gorizia, Antonio enrolled in the Technical University of Vienna and as still a student, he married Maria Plesnizer, a Goritian woman coming from a Slovenian family, who gave him three children.

After an apprenticeship at the Building Office of the Municipality of Gorizia in 1876, and a period of practice in his hometown when he was twenty-six years old, he moved to Alexandria in Egypt, to participate in its reconstruction, after its destruction by British gunboats in July 1882, as a reaction to the uprising of Egyptian independence, culminating in the massacre of many Europeans who lived there (fig.1).

At that time, Alexandria was one of the main ports of the Mediterranean, a cosmopolitan metropolis devoted to business and very prosperous, competing with

Marseilles or Trieste. The opportunity was very good, because the city was to be totally rebuilt and soon from all over Europe a lot of builders, designers and contractors went to Egypt, thus definitively giving to Alexandria the unmistakable look of a European city of the second half of the Nineteenth Century, in an eclectic style similar to the one of Trieste and of its waterfront. Along the edge of the ancient Greek semicircular harbor, Alexandria, with its buildings surrounding it look very much like those on the Trieste shores, built in the same spirit of the Mediterranean port city (fig.2).

Lasciac's early works are some buildings for rental apartments (1883-1886), on the main street of the town, the rue Cherif, for the "Societé des Immeubles d'Egypte". Then he realized other commercial and residential buildings, as well as some public structures, such as the Ramleh urban rail-station (1883, fig.3), later replaced by a new building in the rationalist style, and the headquarters of the Jewish Community of Alexandria (1887).

His great professional opportunity occurs when in 1892 Abbas Hilmi II (1874-1944) took the Khedive throne (fig.4). Unlike his father Tewfik Pasha and his predecessors, Abbas Hilmi studied in Vienna, at the Theresianum, where he knew most of the young representatives of the nobility of the Habsburg Empire, and where he met his second wife, the Hungarian countess May Török von Szendrö (1877-1968), sister of one of his study fellows.

From the beginning young Khedivè tries to free Egypt from the UK "protection" to maintain the control of the Suez Canal, a strategically important way to the Indies. He rejects his predecessor's British advisors, and surrounds himself with Austrian and German experts - including his personal chemist and dentist - choosing, in 1907 as the chief architect of the royal palaces, the Austrian Antonio Lasciac, who attended his wife's friends belonging to Habsburg and Cairene families.

According to the Egyptian tradition, the court architect was a member of the Commission for the Preservation of Arabian Art , an important institution founded in 1881 and consisting of two committees, one for the inventory and the other one for the study and preservation of monuments, the major local and European scholars active in Egypt were part of (fig.5).

It was an important experience, which would lead Lasciac to change his architectural language, which had been until then a mere eclecticism, taking Jugendstil tones after the affirmation of this current, and that would decline in an Islamic style reinterpreted in a modern way and culminating in the designs for the "Palazzo delle Assicurazioni Generali" at Cairo in 1911 and for his house in Gorizia on the Rafut hill, completed in 1914 (fig.6).

Therefore he adopted a new architectural language, not particularly appreciated by the court of Cairo and by the rich Egyptian people who were often educated in Europe, Paris, London and other capitals. In fact for them he continued to build, always with great opulence of means, according to the usual stylistic European eclecticism often inspired by the Italian Renaissance, as he did in 1919 for the villa of Princess Fatma El Zahra, now the Museum of the Crown Jewels, in Alexandria of Egypt (fig.7).

After Sarajevo assassination, the First World War started with the Turkey allied with the Austro-Germans against the Triple Alliance, which Italy joined the following year.

Egypt was formally part of the Ottoman Empire, although completely independent from the Sublime Gate. But the title of Khedivè, given by the Sultan for the first time in 1867 and translatable as "viceroy", still meant some formal subjection, under whose pretext the British occupied Egypt, deposed the Sultan and transformed the country into a British protectorate.

Until then Antonio Lasciac had alternated long periods at Cairo with frequent

trips to Europe to visit the great fairs of the time, and purchase marbles and furniture for the palaces of his rich clients. Owing to his frequent stays in Gorizia, he lost his job at the Court of Abbas Hilmi, but above all he had to leave Egypt, because of his Austrian passport, being a citizen of an enemy state in time of war.

This was almost an irony for a person who had always expressed Italian feelings and who during the whole period of the First World War he settled in Rome, where he continued to design buildings and where he made the reconstruction plan for Gorizia, which was highly praised by the institutions then, but never seriously considered (fig.8).

After the war, the architect returned to his former life, alternating business trips to Egypt to periods of rest in Gorizia, designing buildings for the members of the Court but also other very important buildings in Cairo, such as the headquarters of the Misr Bank, built between 1922 and 1927 (fig.9), the main bank of Egypt, and the Midan Cairo station (fig.10), the railway station in Alexandria, just completed in 1946, after the end of The Second World War.

He usually spent his winters in Egypt and the summers in Gorizia, loofing for warm weather (fig.11).

On October 5th 1946, at the arrival of the first cold, he moved to Cairo, where she died on December 26th at the age of ninety.

He is buried at the Latin cemetery in Cairo (fig. 12).

THE GORITIAN DRAWINGS

The building production of Antonio Lasciac spans through a very long time that goes from 1876, when he was the practitioner at the Office Building of the Municipality of Gorizia directed by the engineer Joseph Bridiga, until his death in 1946 at 90 years old in Cairo shortly after having completed the railway station of Alexandria of Egypt.

During his activity, which lasted about seventy years, he produced a lot of designs of which, however, very little remains, while a great part of its most significant buildings in Cairo, Alexandria, Istanbul and Gorizia are still on place, although often in precarious conditions.

Concerning his archive, part of which had to be kept in Gorizia and part in Egypt, it consists of only about a hundred drawings, which were recovered about thirty years ago by Mercedes Volait, with really great merit, and kept today in her private archives in Paris. They are drawings which, as the note reads: "are signed and dated, coming, probably, from the archive of the Office of Architecture of the palaces of the Khedivè, purchased at an auction by a collector in Cairo, and found by chance."

When we think about the loss of the rich archive which Lasciac undoubtedly had, we have to remember that, until twenty-thirty years ago, in Gorizia there was the habit of storing all the things that were not used in the attics of all houses, both blocks of flats and detached houses.

Probably something of Lasciac's archive could have been recovered, if there had been a timely intervention before the demolition of the property where he lived, in via IX August no.7, where today there is a new block built in the Sixties, or in his parents' house, in via Parcar no.3, completely restored in 2002 (fig.13).

Maybe something could have been also found in the villa on Rafut, where Lasciac never lived but where he spent some holidays in the cold woods on the slopes of Panovitz.

The building, however, was bombed during the First World War (fig.14), and also hit during the Second and then was given on December 14th, 1939 to the "Istituto Nazionale

delle Assicurazioni" [National Institute of Insurance], in return for an annuity for himself and for his wife Maria Plesnicar. The building was then nationalized by the Yugoslav Republic on April 4th, 1959, and used as a chemical laboratory for health analysis.

The fact that his children were all emigrants and died abroad has certainly contributed to the dispersion of the archive of this relevant architect.

The few documents held in the archives of Gorizia, thus, have a particular importance for outlining his work, witnessing a transition from his original drawing style, generically eclectic, to a mature one, elaborated during his stay in Cairo, in order to afford the theme of neo-Islamic architecture, derived from the Mamluk architecture of the medieval period and very well translated, ça va sans dire, in the palace of the "Assicurazioni Generali" in Cairo in 1911 (fig.15) and in his house on Rafut in 1914.

In Gorizia, Lasciac's documents are kept in the "Archivio Storico del Comune di Gorizia" [Historical Archive of the Municipality of Gorizia], in the "Archivio di Stato di Gorizia" [State Archive of Gorizia], in the "Musei Provinciali di Gorizia" [Provincial Museums of Gorizia], in the "Archivio Storico Provinciale di Gorizia" [Historical Provincial Archive of Gorizia] and in the "Fototeca dei Musei Provinciali" [Photo Library of the Provincial Museums]; some other documents are located in the "Fondi Speciali della Biblioteca Statale Isontina" [Special Funds of the Isontina State Library] and finally in the "Archivio della Fondazione Coronini" [Archives of the Coronini Foundation], which is also kept at the "Archivio di Stato di Gorizia" [State Archives of Gorizia].

In the "Archivio della Fondazione Coronini" together with a couple of autograph letters, there is an interesting autograph drawing by Lasciac, realized in 1944, a heliography, concerning a musical composition written on the occasion of the death of Charles Coronini Cronberg, entitled Ave Madonna di Monte Santo and accompanied by celebratory images (fig.16).

At the "Biblioteca Statale Isontina", in addition to his apologetic text Come l'impronta del Leon di S. Marco si trova sul Castello di Gorizia [How the mark of the St. Mark Lion is on the Castle of Gorizia], printed in 1916 in Rome by the Danesi typography (fig.17), there are two large heliographies, one for the plan and the other one, still unpublished, containing executive details, about a project drawn in Cairo in 1938, for the adaptation of Piazza Vittoria [Victoria Square] in Gorizia as a fascist Forum (fig.18), with flagpoles, grandstand and the "Rostro for Speakers".

At the "Archivio Storico Provinciale", fortuitously discovered in recent years, there is a very important copy, the only one known today, of the, (fig.19), known before only for a photographic reproduction, included in the album of 86 photographs by the photographer Aristide Del Vecchio in Cairo, and donated in 1929 by Antonio Lasciac to the Accademia di San Luca in Rome, during the celebration of his nomination as a member of that association .

From the analysis of the photography by Del Vecchio many details of this plan, generally dated 1905, could not have been fully analyzed; the analysis of the original drawing, cm 165 x 100 height has subsequently revealed a new date later than 1912, that is the date of completion of the Minor Seminary (fig.20), drawn with great precision, where today is located the Degree Courses in Architecture of the University of Trieste.

In addition to the project for the Master Plan, between 1917 and 1918, Lasciac designed some well-drawn projects which are stored at the "Musei Provinciali", representing, with some almost executive details, the different types of buildings for the various areas of expansion that had planned for Gorizia. They are six small sheets, some of

them containing depictions also on the back, for a total number of eleven drawings (fig.21).

In the "Fototeca dei Musei Provinciali" then, there is a series of images – photographs and postcards – of the immediate postwar period, which describe the appalling conditions of villa Lasciac on Rafut, partially destroyed by the war, which are included in this exhibition for the particular interest, although they are not drawings.

One of these, which seems to be unpublished, is a postcard recently catalogued showing the villa in 1934, after its post-war reconstruction, allowing us to highlight the changes on the original building, such as a more stretched dome of the minaret, a different parapet of the terrace above the loggia and a crowning changed in the central part of the main entrance façade (fig.22).

The "Archivio Storico del Comune di Gorizia", located at the "Archivio di Stato", is the most interesting part of what is shown.

The projects of the architect's maturity kept are here: namely, the fountain for Piazza San Rocco (fig.23, 1908); the Villa on Rafut, later demolished by bombing during the conquest of the town by the Italian army in 1916 (fig.23); the parents' house (fig.24, 1903), which will be made with a different project by the architect Luzzato; the drawings for the post-war reconstruction of his house at no. 32 of Riva Castello (1919) – also demolished by cannons in 1916 – in a style that recalls certain affinities with some works realized in Istanbul by Raimondo D'Aronco . The house design, never rebuilt, presents on the main street façade, a reproduction of the St. Mark's Lion, that is the theme of his 1916 pamphlet, concerning the Castle of Gorizia (fig.25).

Then, there are, among the "Atti Presidiali del Comune di Gorizia", always kept at the "Archivio di Stato", four projects of 1906, with the Lasciac's letters to the Municipality of Gorizia proposing the town planning of the area in front of the "Transalpina" railway station, a project only partly considered then, which are now very important, if we think that the "Transalpina" line is not only the connection between Gorizia and Trieste, but above all the one between the Mediterranean, the Egypt and the Suez Channel, with Central Europe and Vienna, which was the capital of the Habsburg Empire and Central Europe (fig.26a,b,c,d).

All the drawings are already known, together with the unbuilt project for the Riekertzen House in via Vaccano (fig.27, 1882), in a lovely watercolor on paper. In this case, when the design was presented to the Municipality to be approved, the Building Office obliged "to exclude the collocation of the statues inside the niches drawn in the façade, allowing to locate some others after presenting the drawings to this Office."

The early projects presented here are, instead, completely unknown, and turn out to be the result of a systematic research at the "Fondo del Comune di Gorizia", concerning the years 1876-1883, from the activity of apprenticeship at the "Ufficio Tecnico Municipale" [Municipal Technical Office], to the year of his departure to Egypt.

A complex research, which is still the ongoing survey for the year 1877, in course of verification.

The result was unexpected, with the discovery of 21 building practices signed by Antonio Lasciac that were completely unknown.

The first is dated 1876, and was commissioned by Andrea Covacig, for the construction of a roof of small size in San Rocco (fig.28), when Lasciac was just twenty years old; another one is dated 1879, and about other twenty building we can attribute to Lasciac are distributed between 1881 and 1882.

This is a relevant number, if we consider that the Office Building analyzed about thirty practices annually, distributed among all the professionals of Gorizia, in a town of

twenty-one thousand inhabitants.

"Ant.o Lasciac m.p." is the signature that is usually marked on the drawings, where "m.p." means "manu propria" ["by his hand"] in a sort of self-certification of authenticity, which was in use in that period. Some other times, he used simply "Ant.o Lasciac". In one case, the signature "Ant.o Lasciac elaborated" for the Zoratti project (1879); in another one he wrote "Ant.o Lasciac for surveillance and work direction", for Alfredo Lenassi (1882). Then "Ant.o Lasciac c.m.m.", in the project for the house of Mattia Bressan (1881), where "c.m.m." means "mason master builder", there is never a title before his name, even in the cases of the drawings that are stamped in blue ink, but just "Antonio Lasciac Gorizia".

The stylistic diversity of the graphic representation of the drawings, suggests that in many cases Lasciac assumed the only role of project manager, as evidenced in the Luttmann House (1882) for which on the application for construction, Lasciac specifies that "the technical direction will be done by the signed person", regarding the drawing of someone else, who remained unknown, because at that time there was the obligation of notification of the technical direction but not the one of the designer.

In fact, curiously enough, it can be seen that on the projects Lasciac designed for their own houses, the one on Rafut and the one on Riva Castello, the signature of the architect Girolamo Luzzatto appears, while for the house of his father in San Rocco, the one of the engineer Emilio Luzzato.

At the time there was a municipal register of building responsibles, where the Mason Master Builder's name was entered after assessing his professional ability, which was usually acquired after a period of training, only residents could be work directors, while there was no mention of the project activity. In fact, only sometimes do we find a designer's signature, as in the case of Lasciac for the Zoratti House (fig.29).

In the notes of the Registry Office of the Municipality of Gorizia, Lasciac's departure for Egypt is not recorded, he traveled there for the first time in 1883, in order to contribute to the rebuilding of the city of Alexandria, bombed by the English in July 1882. Actually, Lasciac was resident with his family in Gorizia in Riva Castello from 1880 until 1918, when he moved to via Parcar 3.

He is said to have gone to Egypt for the difficulties he had in working as a designer in Gorizia, because of his "irredentist" character, which must have made him unpopular with much of the population of Gorizia, which was instead "loyalist" to the Habsburg Crown. Such assumptions were given as to be true also in the international literature, but are now contradicted by the discovery of these early projects, which prove that during the years immediately preceding his stay in Alexandria he was one of the most active architects in Gorizia, although he very often designed buildings of modest importance.

The reason for his moving overseas should therefore be attributed to the ambition of the young designer, who was conscious of his experience and his professional capacities, and ready to seize the opportunity – as in fact happens in Egypt – of obtaining the highest title of Court architect (fig.30).

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АРХИТЕКТОР АНТОНИО ЛАЗЬЯК ОТ ЕВРОПЫ ДО ЕГИПТА (1856-1946)

Абстракт - Сын отца-словенца и матери-фриуланки, Antonio Lasciac (1856-1946) родился в Гориции, относящейся в то время к Австро-Венгерской империи (в настоящее время город принадлежит Италии). После окончания Венского университета, в 1883 году молодой архитектор переехал в Египет для участия в реконструкционных работах в Александрии - городе разрушенном английским флотом в 1882 году во время разгрома анти-европейского восстания. Сотрудничая с реэлторскими компаниями Antonio Lasciac специализируется на проектах зданий, предназначенных для высшего общества. В 1907 он становится главным придворным архитектором; его проекты - дворцы в Каире, Александрии, Стамбуле и Кавала в Македонии. В качестве члена Комиссии по сохранению арабского искусства, Antonio Lasciac поддерживает значимость местной архитектуры. Для него характерна профессиональная дихотомия: с одной стороны как дизайнер крупных жилых зданий для аристократического класса и хорошо обеспеченных семей Lasciac работает в стиле эклектики, с другой стороны – в проектах для особых клиентов (например, таких как Assicurazioni Generali) использует новый язык архитектуры, интерпретируя в современном ключе традиционный арабский дизайн зданий.

Ключевые слова: Antonio Lasciac, Австрийская Империя, Гориция, египет, Каир, александрия, Истамбул, Кавала, Комиссия по сохранению арабского искусства, Assicurazioni Generali, нео-мамлюкская архитектура







Fig.1 The ruins of Alexandria, after the fire of 1882 Fig.2 Alexandria of Egypt during the '50 Fig.3 Alexandria, Ramleh tram station, 188



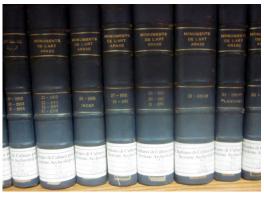




Fig. 4 the Kedivè Abbas Hilmi II Fig. 5 Acts of the Commission for the preservation of Arabian art Fig. 6 The villa of Lasciac, for himself, on the hill of Rafut, 1909-1912







Fig.7 Palace for the princess Fatma El Zahra, 1919 Fig.8 Urbanistic regolation plan for Gorizia, around 1912 Fig.9 Bank Misr, headquartiers, 1927







Fig. 10. Alexandria of Egypt, the Midan Cairo station, 1925-1945 Fig.11. Antonio Lasciac, in a donating portrait to Argia Bombi, dated 29 september, 1931 Fig.12. The tomb of Romeo, son of Antonio Lasciac. Father is together







Fig.13 The house of Lasciac parents, to day Fig.14 Villa Lasciac on Rafut hill, after the bombed of 1916 Fig.15 The "Assicurazioni Generali" building in Cairo, 1911



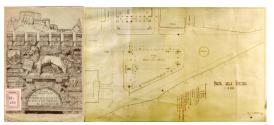


Fig.16 Musical composition, for the death of Charles Coronini Cromberg, 1944 Fig.17 How the mark of the St. Mark Lion is on the Castle of Gorizia, 1916 Fig.18 Victoria Square in Gorizia, as a fascist Forum, 1938







Fig.19 Master Plan for Gorizia, around 1912 Fig.20 The Minor Seminary. Today Courses in Architecture of Trieste University, 1912 Fig.21 Exemple of suburbian villa, by Antonio Lasciac, 1918







Fig.22 The villa on Rafut in 1934, after its post-war reconstruction Fig.23 The fountain for Piazza San Rocco, 1908 Fig.24 the project for the parents' house, 1903



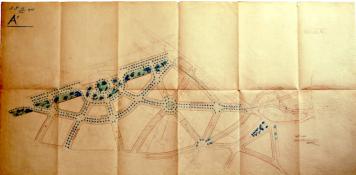


Fig.25. Cover of the pamphlet of Antonio Lasciac, concerning the Castle of Gorizia, 1916 Fig.26. Transalpina railway station, 4 solutions to find the city: a, b, c, d, 1905





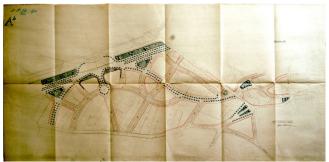




Fig.27. Riekertzen House, 1882



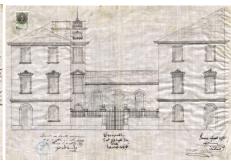




Fig.28 The first project of Lasciac, for a roof in San Rocco when he was twenty years old Fig.29 Don Francesco Zoratti House, 1878 Fig.30 The Royal Abdine Palace, Cairo, renovated by Lasciac between 1909 and 1911