



## **Groppi 1924**

Once a magnet for Egypt's high society when it was considered the world's Ritziest tea room, Groppi, set in Cairo's Talaat Harb Square, still retains its original mystique although its interior is somewhat faded. Groppi's, the creation of Swiss pastry maker Giacomo Groppi, has been featured in countless films and extensively written-about.

Groppi stands as a living legend and is still a magnet for visitors to Cairo today. It symbolizes a never to return era; a time of great wealth and ostentation; the days of the Egypt's kings, princes, pashas, beys and cotton magnets when the Egyptian pound was worth more than either sterling or the dollar.

It was once a place of political intrigue, a venue where historic deals were done and a beloved haunt of authors, journalists, artists, movie stars and socialites eager to be seen. Those who remember that glittering era first hand are dwindling. The few who still remember wax lyrical about those good old days.

Architect Chafik Nakhla, recalls what Groppi once symbolised for him.

"Oh how I loved Groppi," he said with a far-away look in his eyes. Throughout the 1950s, when we lived in Assiut, we regularly spent our summers in Alexandria . En route, we would usually stop for a week at the Shepherd's Hotel in Cairo .

"We children were not allowed outside the hotel without our governess but we would persuade Abdou, the family retainer, to go to the Groppi Garden each morning so as to bring back freshly-baked croissants for breakfast. I can still taste them now."

Now steeped in memories of a gentler era, Chafik enthused over Groppi's Petit Suisse (sweet fromage frais) and its marrons glacés "better than any in Paris ". It was then his wife Marian, an English-language teacher at the American University of Cairo , joined him on his trip down memory lane.

## **Cairo's answer to Fortnum and Mason's**

"My parents would often take me to the garden for ice-cream soda with strawberry syrup," she said. "Christmas and Easter were special times when there were always fabulous displays, a giant Christmas tree, stockings filled with sweets and goodies, life-sized Santas or huge Easter bunnies. You could say that Groppi's was Cairo 's answer to London 's Fortnum and Mason's."

Leon Wahba, who once lived near the Groppi Tea-room on Suleiman Pasha Street , now a citizen of the US , shares that memory. "I was only 13 years when we left Egypt ," he says, but what I recall best was Groppi's ice-cream, sold off bicycles with coolers. Those ice-cream vendors would often park right outside my school. It was a wonderful treat on those hot Cairo days."

Adel Toppozada, former Deputy Minister of Information and grandson of former Egyptian Prime Minister Hussein Pasha Rushdy, describes the area around Talat Harb during his youth, as "extraordinary".

“Those streets boasted the best coffee shops and tea-rooms but none could compete with Groppi’s. It was normal in those days to see the aristocracy stepping out of a Rolls or a



Cadillac for a hairdressing appointment at Socrate or George or Climatianos, which sold exquisite men’s hats and ties. Those were the days when the shops were stocked with anything you could possibly want from Paris , Rome or London .” “In my student days, we often went to Groppi’s or Locke’s, dressed up to the nines. These were real occasions and people always looked as though they were going to a party, the women in long evening dresses and fur stoles. Groppi’s tea room was the place to people watch and be seen.”

“Kamel Shenawi the journalist and poet had his own table and I often spotted the author Taufik Al-Hakim, who had a reputation for being a misogynist”.

“During WWII, Groppi’s on Adly Pasha Street (a second branch of Groppi’s) was frequented by members of Britain’s Eighth Army and was a favourite of General Montgomery, who came to enjoy jazz evenings in the garden,” says Toppozada.

## German prisoners

Indeed, Colonel David Sutherland, who was characterised by Dirk Bogarde in the WWII movie “They who Dare”, recounts in his memoirs how he treated two German prisoners to tea at Groppi’s before turning them over to British interrogators.

How cruel was that? Oh how those men must have suffered during their incarceration longing for those delicious flavours and refined ambience that encapsulated Groppi’s of the day.

A biography of Admiral Sir Horace Law, a descendant of Horatio Nelson, describes how guests at Law’s wedding party marvelled at a cake made by Groppi’s, the like of which hadn’t been seen in London for years.

But the British weren’t the only ones milling around Groppi’s during the war.

According to a statement signed by a Fascist spy Theodore John William Schurch, a Swiss national who was incarcerated by the British, Groppi’s was the venue for meetings with his Italian recruiter.

And according to SS archived microfilm, Hitler’s right-hand man Adolph Eichmann visited Cairo in 1937, where he met with a member of the Haganah on October 10 and 11 at Groppi’s – a meeting that some chroniclers of history would prefer to erase.

A member of the US 98 Bomb Group recounts an evening spent at the Groppi garden in the 40s. “Well into the evening, the musicians stopped playing and all dancers left the dance floor, which was then hydraulically raised two feet to become a stage for the floor show. There were some very accomplished performers...I think they were the best floor show acts I have ever seen.”

In 1952, due to its British army clientele, Groppi’s tea room narrowly escaped destruction. An anonymous eyewitness recounts the day Egyptian protestors almost burned it down.

“First was the sound of shattering glass of Groppi’s windows. Some of the mob went inside and escorted the employees safely outside. Some climbed for the Groppi’s sign and dismantled the Royal emblem (Confiserie de la Maison Royale) from it. They then proceeded systematically to smash everything in the place.”

But Groppi’s swiftly recovered and in later years during the 50s” it was fashionable to take breakfast at Groppi’s side-by-side with pashas, famous politicians, artists, writers and editors, such as Ali Amin, Mustapha Amin and Mohammed Al-Tabei,” says Topozada. Former UNESCO official and Secretary-General of the Aga Khan Foundation Said Zulficar, who lives in France, has rather less pleasant memories of breakfast at Groppi’s.

“In 1960/61 when I was doing research in Cairo for my PhD thesis, I lived across the street from Groppi’s at the Tulip hotel, which cost EG 1 per night. And so I used to have breakfast every day at Groppi’s, which was the “in place” in Cairo and often sat with other habitués, who assisted me with my research. These included journalists, historians, an ambassador and several members of the French commercial delegation (there was no French embassy since the 1956 Suez War).”



“These daily breakfast meetings went on for some three months after which I fell ill with hepatitis and went to convalesce in my grandmother’s Alexandria flat. I give this detail because my absence from Cairo saved me from a terrible fate.”

“One morning, the Secret Police raided Groppi and arrested the whole crowd under the accusation (totally trumped up) that the French team was plotting with their

Egyptian breakfast colleagues to overthrow the regime. They were imprisoned for over six months but in the end they were all released as there was no proof of any such conspiracy”. “I never resumed my daily breakfasts at Groppi’s, nor have I ever returned to the Tulip Hotel, which is still there”, says Zulficar.

## **Leftist conspirators and secret police**

In his book “Cairo: the City Victorious” Max Rodenbeck describes the ambience of Groppi’s Tea Rooms and the nearby Café Riche, which both had its share of “leftist conspirators and secret police...”.

In 1981, Groppi was sold to Abdul-Aziz Lokma, founder of the Lokma Group, its present owners, explains Khalim A. El-Khadem, Groppi’s current General Manager. It was then that the bar was closed down and the sale of alcohol banned.

El-Khadem told me that Giacomo Groppi was the first to introduce Egypt to crème-chantilly and ice-cream and his chocolates were of such fine quality they received world-wide renown.

King Farouk was so impressed with the excellence of Groppi’s chocolates that during WWII he sent 100 kilograms as a present to King George for his daughters the princesses Elizabeth and Margaret.

These, says El-Khadem, were put on a ship which avoided German submarines by taking a circuitous route from Egypt to London via West Africa , Spain , France , Belgium and Scotland . Incredibly, they arrived intact.



The patisserie, the chocolates, the marrons glacés and the jams were made in Groppi's factory which still stands today complete with original machines.

"The manufacturing processes were kept strictly secret," says El-Khadem.

"No single employee was allowed to know every ingredient contained in the final product. There were always two or three chefs employed; each responsible for only one manufacturing phase."

"The recipes were all in French, which the employees didn't understand, so when Groppi eventually hired a Swiss-German to run his factory, he was given French lessons to enable him to read them."

El-Khadem admits that not all of Groppi's products today are made according to the original recipes because consumer demands have changed.

Ibrahim Mohammed Fadel, Groppi's longest-serving employee, has worked for the company for 60 years. He worked closely with not only Giacomo Groppi but also his son and "Mr.

Bianchi, who become a partner in the 1940s."

## **Naguib Mahfouz**

He recalls the days when the former head of Egypt's Wafd Party Fouad Serageldin was a regular of the Adly Pasha branch, and remembers how the Nobel Prize recipient author Naguib Mahfouz would frequently stop by Groppi's tea house to read the newspapers. It's a pity that walls can't talk. Groppi's encapsulates almost 100 years of Egypt's history and an elegant, sophisticated milieu that no longer exists; except, that is, in the fading memories of those who were privileged to have been part of that glittering and exciting world.

Sadly there is little doubt that one day all that will remain of Egypt 's Belle Époque and Groppi's glory days will be found on celluloid or deep within the pages of novels and biographies.

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# **THE STORY OF GROPPi**

GROPPi, once the most celebrated tearoom on the South side of the Mediterranean was the creation of Giacomo Groppi (1863-1947) a native of Lugano, Switzerland.

In time Maison Groppi became chief purveyor of chocolate to monarchs and pashas throughout the MidEast. Whenever pashas, beys and president-foreigners traveled to Europe they took with them cartons filled with Groppi chocolates.



During WWII King Farouk air freighted via Khartoum, Entebbe, Dakar, Lisbon, Dublin a lacquered box emblazoned with the royal arms of Egypt and Great Britain. Inside, to the delight of the then-princesses Elizabeth and Margaret of England, were 100 kilos of Groppi chocolates.

After a short apprenticeship with an uncle in Lugano and a brief employment in Provence, south of France, Giacomo Groppi arrived in Egypt in the 1880s to take up employment at Maison Gianola, a popular Swiss pastry and teashop on Bawaki Street, Cairo.

In 1890, Giacomo Groppi, now aged 27, bought out Gianola's interests in its Alexandria's Rue de France branch and decided to open his own pastry and dairy shop.

By 1900 Groppi was running a successful enterprise annually exporting 100,000 cartons of chocolate eggs to the United Kingdom.

At Maison Groppi's second Alexandrine branch, on Cherif Street, Giacomo introduced creme chantilly for the first time in Egypt. This was a new technological feat which he acquired while touring the Exposition Universelle in Paris. Groppi was also the first chocolatier in Egypt to employ female staff. In 1906, he sold his company to a Frenchman, Auguste Baudrot, and retired.

For the next 60 years, Baudrot was regarded first amongst equals whenever compared to Alexandria's other famous tea rooms: Pastroudis, Trianon and Athineos. All three were run by Greeks.

Having lost his entire savings during the economic depression of 1907 Giacomo Groppi was obliged to return to what he knew best: making chocolates, pastries and dairy products.

But out of deference to Baudrot, Groppi moved his activities to Cairo's al-Maghrabi Street (later, Adly Pasha Street). With only "La Marquise de Sevigne" and "Maison Mathieu" (renamed Sault) as competition, Maison Groppi was ensured success in the nation's capital.

The formal opening took place on 23 December 1909. By the time WW-I broke out, Groppi's Tea Garden had become a favorite with the British Army of Occupation. A deli was added enhancing Groppi's image as the purveyor of quality food products.

In 1922 Maison Groppi inaugurated its own cold storage company-Industrie du Froid-employing over 120 workers and producing a daily output of 2,400 blocs of ice.

In 1928, Giacomo Groppi's son, Achille, launched his famous ice cream, a technology he imported from the United States. The names of his delicious specialties were as exceptional as they tasted: Sfogliatella, Morocco, Mau Mau, Peche Melba, Maruska, Comtesse Marie, Surprise Neapolitaine.

Cairenes were grateful to Achille for yet another creation: the Groppi tearoom situated on Midan Soliman Pasha (now, Talaat Harb).

Decades later, Groppi of Cairo would open a terrace cafe in Heliopolis overlooking Avenue des Pyramides and the legendary Heliopolis Palace Hotel (now, Uruba Presidential Palace).

To accommodate the less privileged Maison Groppi launched a chain of pastry and coffee shops "A l'Americaine".

Thankfully Groppi's two main branches miraculously escaped complete destruction during the anti-British Black Saturday riots of January 1952 which ended with the burning of Cairo.

In March 1954 Egypt's emerging strongman Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser ordered the placing of a bomb in Groppi's patisserie. While the detonation caused widespread panic, thankfully no one was hurt.

The objective of Nasser's macabre exercise was to promote a feeling of public insecurity. The power struggle among the Free Officers had reached a new climax and the vicious smear campaign against Egypt's first president General Mohammed Naguib had somehow made its way inside Groppi.

Forty years later, the legend of Groppi exists in name only. The rot and decay of the socialist 1960s when imports of luxury goods were restricted had taken their heavy toll. By the time Egypt returned to the ways of an open economy, Groppi's descendants had already abandoned the trade and left Egypt.

The rest is history.