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Clash of Cultures

By [CLASH OF CULTURES \](#)

07/31/2015 08:56

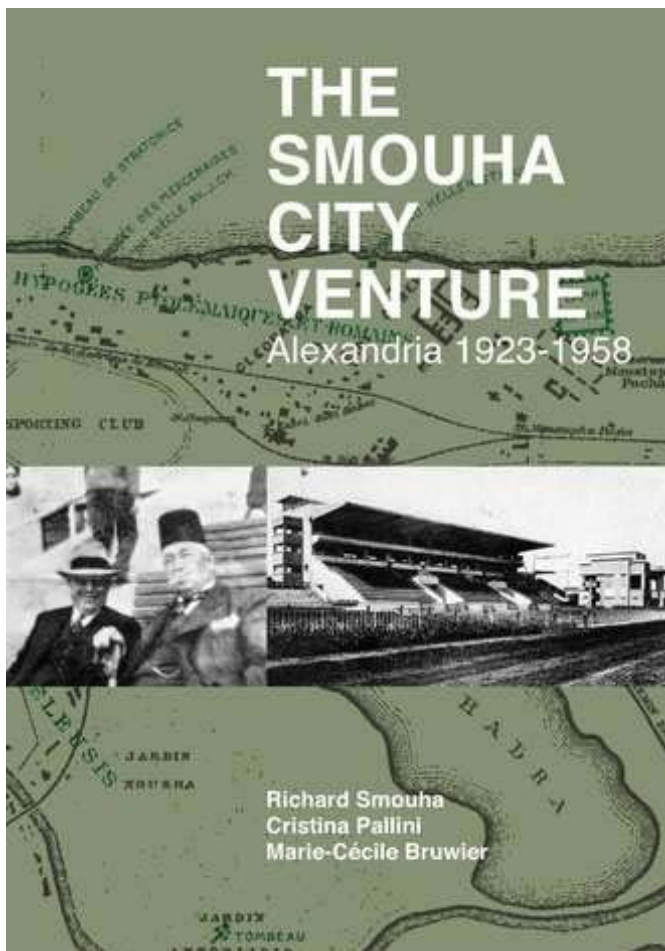


Joseph Smouha's legacy lives on in Egypt

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The Smouha City Venture: Alexandria 1923 - 1958 by R Smouha, C Pallini and M-C Bruwier (2014)

Book Review by Lyn Julius



"He was the only foreigner who came to the country, brought his own money and did good to the country." So said the exiled Egyptian King Fuad on the death of an Iraqi-Jewish cotton trader from Manchester named Joseph Smouha.

In a city where the Jewish community today is down to five Jews, Smouha's legacy is, ironically, perpetuated in a residential suburb of Alexandria called Smouha City. The story of how Joseph Smouha came to buy, build, and eventually lose Smouha City to the Egyptian state, is told by his grandson Richard (Dicky) Smouha as a piece of living history. *The Smouha City Venture: Alexandria 1923 -1958* (2014) is peppered with architectural drawings, plans, newspaper cuttings and vintage photos. Chapters by Cristina Pallini and Marie-Cecile Bruwier cast light on the technical aspects of the architectural venture and the archeological findings of this ancient Greek city site.

It was on a train journey from Cairo to Alexandria in 1919 that the visiting businessman Joseph Smouha spotted the potential to be gained from the draining of Lake Hadra, one-sixth of Alexandria and a mere four kilometers from the centre. He moved his wife and eight children to Egypt to embark on the adventure of his life. The family's culture shock, on arrival in this poverty-stricken and disease-ridden country, was considerable. Among Richard Smouha's amusing and quirky family vignettes, is the story of a lady who sent her chauffeur to fetch her shopping while she read a book in her car. He returned to find the car propped up on bricks and the wheels stolen.

Dicky's grandfather Joseph Smouha refused a knighthood. He wanted to call the new garden city after King Fuad I. The king insisted that it be called Smouha City. Some 75 *feddans* of land (one *feddan* is 4,200 sq m) was effectively given to Smouha in 1923 on condition he bore the lion's share of the expense of drainage and tunnel building.

In 1925, Smouha launched a competition that drew submissions from Europe's leading architects. A residential complex of villas built in modernist style was modelled on Welwyn Garden City and Heliopolis, the upmarket Cairo suburb. As the water table was so high, no cellars could be built. The cost of a villa's supporting concrete platform was nearly as high as the villa itself. Some of the streets had no names. (The villa belonging to Dicky's aunt, Betty Nagger, was missed out of the numbering in her street. Thereafter her address was 0, rue Mahmoud Gaber.) The cream of Egyptian aristocracy and even exiled kings bought villas: for instance, Victor-Emmanuel of Italy, who died in 1947.

Smouha City comprised a sports club, golf course and racecourse. The established Alexandria Sporting Club did not take too kindly to its new horse-racing rival, and its snooty Jewish aristocrats excluded Smouha. "If they don't want me, they will come to me," he declared, defiantly.

Soon Smouha City, which was run by Joseph, his sons and his Aden-born general manager Daniel Delbourgo ('he spoke a number of languages, all badly,' Dicky tells us), assembled all the features of a town: post office, police post, schools, dispensaries. The Ford Motor Company set up shop in an industrial zone of workshops and warehouses.

Of Joseph Smouha, a picture emerges of a modest, upright and generous man who paid for the building of a handsome mosque to add to the garden city's churches and synagogue.

A British patriot to the core, Joseph Smouha paid for two RAF spitfires during WW2: his three sons and a daughter joined the RAF. In 1940 he learned that he was No. 1 on the wanted list to be executed if the Germans conquered Cairo. Smouha fled for a few months to South Africa.

After the war came the officers' coup, Suez and Nasser's mass nationalisation of British, French and Jewish property. Smouha City was sequestered. In 1957, along with 25 percent of the Jewish community, Armenians, Greeks and members of the Egyptian and Coptic aristocracy, the family was expelled from Egypt, moving to England and Switzerland. Its income plummeted to £6 a week.

Smouha filed the largest of Jewish claims for compensation: £12 and 1/2 million. Six years later, he was awarded £3 million, the Egyptian government producing tax receipts to suggest that Smouha City was 'agricultural' land.

But the Smouha family home, with its furniture, rare carpets and jewellery - a seaside mansion fit for successive Egyptian presidents - had never been sequestered. In 1986, Egypt passed a ruling that owners of properties that had not been sold could reclaim them. In 2000, Dicky and his brother Brian engaged an Egyptian lawyer to fight the case for restitution in court. The case dragged on to 2007: embarrassed to be in confrontation with the President himself, the Court's officials threw all sorts of delays and obstacles in Dicky and Brian's path. It was argued that compensation had already been paid, that the brothers did not have the correct documentation (even the Public Records Office at Kew refused to release archives), that the grandchildren were not entitled to inherit, that the case was bound by a statute of limitations. Soon after the brothers decided to give up, President Mubarak was deposed. "We are back in the fray," writes Dicky.

This book stands as a monument to one of the great Jewish modernisers of 1930s Alexandria, the 'pearl of the Mediterranean'. Even if Egypt will not acknowledge its debt to Joseph Smouha, his memory will, thanks to his grandson's lively and well-researched record, live on.

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