

INTRODUCTION

Few buildings embody the waxing and waning of European influence in Egypt during the 19th and 20th centuries as profoundly as Shepheard's Hotel in Cairo. Prior to its total destruction during the infamous "Black Saturday" riots of January 1952, the building was a potent symbol of the problematic relationship between native and foreigner, Orient and Occident, colonized and colonizer. Located on the site previously occupied by Napoleon's headquarters during his ill-fated Egyptian campaign, the building, originally a humble lodge, was transformed over the following 150 years into one of the world's most glamorous and legendary hotels.

Given its historical, cultural and social importance, there has been surprisingly little scholarly work devoted to the lost building. This was because primary source material was thought to have disappeared. Research for the thesis – the prelude to this book – began by gathering as much visual material related to the building as possible. Because conclusive documentation as to the architect of the building did not exist, primary sources (floor plans, sections, drawings, etc.) were also unknown. To that end, photographs provided the initial leads. A significant set of glass negative prints (many of which have never been previously published) were generously provided by Edouard and Eveline Lambelet, the owners of Lehnert & Landrock bookstore in Cairo. These photos, taken by the photographer Rudolf Lehnert, can largely be dated to the 1920s, but no later than 1930, when he moved from Egypt to Tunisia.¹ Several individuals recommended searching the online auction website eBay (www.ebay.de) as a potential source for postcards, letters and memorabilia (ashtrays, luggage labels, brochures, etc.) from the hotel. Although initially treated with skepticism and perceived as

un-academic, searches on eBay resulted in the discovery of another set of images taken in 1948 by the Egyptian-Armenian photographer Kerop (Hagop Keropian). In 2013, Mr. Vahe Varjebedian purchased prints of the hotel from Mr. Keropian's son and sold them on eBay.² Mr. Varjebedian has kindly granted permission to use these prints in the study of the building.

It was a chance discovery on eBay that in fact resulted in the most spectacular breakthrough in the research on the hotel. In April 2014, an eBay seller auctioned a guide booklet published by Shepheard's Hotel in 1895, titled *Cairo and Egypt. A practical handbook for visitors to the land of the Pharaohs*. The work was probably written and distributed as a quick reference for hotel guests. Although an attempt to purchase or obtain a copy of the booklet online was unsuccessful,³ a surviving copy was obtained via inter-library loan from the Staatliche Landesbibliothek in Dresden. The booklet proved to be a primary source of inestimable value, since it described the layout and amenities of the hotel at the end of the 19th century.⁴ Most important, however, it disclosed the name of an architect and designer of the building, a certain "J. Rennebaum,"⁵ who had not appeared in any secondary literature on the hotel. Further online research revealed a reference to a German architect named Johann Adam Rennebaum, active in Cairo at the turn of the 20th century.⁶ The *Verzeichnis der Kartensammlungen in Deutschland* (Directory of Map Collections in Germany) noted that a large part of Rennebaum's estate had been donated to the Department of Islamic and Oriental Studies at the University of Tübingen by the Stromersche Stiftung (Stromer Foundation) housed at Grünsberg Castle in Altdorf by Nuremberg.⁷ Several departments in

1 Edouard Lambelet, e-mail message to author, March 16, 2014.

2 Vahe Varjebedian, e-mail message to author via eBay, March 17, 2014 and April 4, 2014.

3 eBay seller king-foster, e-mail message to author, April 9, 2014.

4 *Cairo and Egypt*, 9–22.

5 Ibid., 12.

6 "Ergebnisliste – Anfangsbuchstabe: R", Franken Gesucht & Gewusst – Baierpedia, accessed June 2, 2014, <https://www.frankenbaier.de/franken/R>.

7 Zögner/Maurer 1998, 5–6.

Tübingen denied having any material from Rennebaum's estate; the claim in the *Verzeichniss* was in all likelihood false. While the news in Tübingen seemed like a dead end, retracing the steps back to Grünsberg Castle and contacting the Stromer Foundation directly resulted in a breakthrough that far exceeded expectations.

Baron and Baroness von Stromer-Baumbauer are the owners and caretakers of the foundation and confirmed that numerous documents related to the legendary hotel (including floor plans, photographs, sketches and correspondence) were preserved at Grünsberg Castle. Baroness von Stromer-Baumbauer is in fact the great-granddaughter of Johann Adam Rennebaum, whose estate passed through her grandmother (i.e., Rennebaum's daughter) into the Stromer Foundation. Through the extraordinary generosity of the Baron and the Baroness, in June 2014, I was first able to see and digitize the enormous corpus of material and artifacts which, to date, remains the sole known surviving documentation related to the art, architecture and decor of the lost building.

Of paramount importance is the set of floor plans on a metric scale of 1:500. These plans provide proof of the architect of the hotel, documentation of the interior of the building, the sequence and location of rooms, plumbing, sanitation and egress. Furthermore, the archives in the Stromer Foundation contain selected correspondence, a number of photographs of the hotel's interior, as well as countless drawings, rough sketches and watercolors from the hand of Johann Adam Rennebaum, which cover a broad array of "oriental" subjects: landscapes with pyramids, palm groves, camels, egyptianizing motifs and patterns, and a separate portfolio titled *Ornamente und Formen des Islam* (Ornaments and Forms of Islam). This was a kind of pattern book wherein Rennebaum compiled drawings, charcoal rubbings, and photographs of Islamic monuments in Cairo, further afield in Spain, and photographs of "Moorish" buildings in Europe. This collection of images almost certainly provided the inspiration for much of the "oriental" style decoration in the hotel.

The Stromer Foundation in Grünsberg also preserves pieces of furniture, mirrors, carpets, appliqué textiles and *Kunstgegenstände* made for the hotel. These objects remain in all likelihood the only surviving artifacts from the building. In various states of preservation, these works should be restored as

quickly as possible, reassembled, and presented together as a reconstructed "period room" of one of the hotel spaces as it may have appeared around 1900.

Several months after the visit to Grünsberg, Baroness von Stromer-Baumbauer was able to facilitate an introduction to and meeting with Mrs. Eva Stahlmann (née Rennebaum) in Berlin, a surviving granddaughter of the architect. Mrs. Stahlmann is in possession of a smaller, but no less fascinating cache of documents (including letters, obituaries, newspaper clippings, contracts, family photographs and a smattering of drawings) passed down to her from her father, i.e., Rennebaum's only son, which give insight into his private life, his career working for the Khedival authorities and his commissions from private clients. In an excellent state of preservation, these documents could be catalogued and digitized. Along with the main group of documents at Grünsberg, they form the foundation for a more comprehensive monograph of Rennebaum's oeuvre in Egypt.

At the outset of my research, there was concern that the material available on the building would not suffice for a thesis, much less for a book. With the discovery of Rennebaum's estates in Altdorf and Berlin, the opposite occurred. To that end, drawings, floor plans, correspondence and other primary source documents have been carefully selected from the two caches for their relevance to the architecture and decor of the hotel.

Following a brief overview of the history of the hotel and Rennebaum's career, the book turns to a systematic documentation of the hotel's component parts: urban setting, façade, public and private spaces. These descriptions of the building and the changes it underwent provide the foundation upon which to consider and trace the motifs and prototypes Rennebaum employed in the design of the building; the Pharaonic Lobby and Arab Lounge best embody these. These evocative, theatrical and fantastic spaces are then considered in relation to Western representations of Egypt in the late 19th century, in particular to the world's fairs and to museums of ancient Egyptian art. Finally, the book briefly considers the reception of the building through the eyes of hotel guests from 1891 until 1952 in relation to the nebulous, fickle and ever-changing nature of taste. The fantasy architecture of Shephard's is briefly considered and compared to later themed hotel architecture (in particular Las Vegas) and to the 20th century notion of the hyperreal.

FROM NAPOLEON TO NASSER:

THE HOTEL AS THE EMBODIMENT OF EUROPEAN INVOLVEMENT IN EGYPT

Few places in Egypt reflected the profound social, cultural and political changes in Egypt in the 19th century, as did Shepherd's Hotel. For nearly a hundred years it was the meeting place of the world's well-heeled elite, including politicians, members of the nobility, industrialists, high-ranking military personnel, as well as countless prominent social and artistic figures. Although this book focuses on the art and architecture of the hotel, some of the prominent guests may be named, such as Edward VII, Prince of Wales (later the Duke of Windsor); Sultan Muhammad Shah (Aga Khan III); Ferdinand von Zeppelin; Saad Zaghlul; T. E. Lawrence ("Lawrence of Arabia"); Mark Twain; George Bernard Shaw; Josephine Baker; Henry Morton Stanley; Prince Hubertus of Prussia; Theodore Roosevelt; General Charles George Gordon; King Leopold of Belgium; Haile Selassie; the Maharajah of Jodhpur; Winston Churchill; King Fuad and King Farouk of Egypt.⁸ This list represents only a tiny fraction of the notable guests. A comprehensive list of illustrious visitors would have been contained in the hotel's "Golden Books" which were lost in the fire that destroyed the building in 1952. Although the books initially survived in the manager's cast-iron floor safe, insufficient time was allowed for the safe to cool down, and the sudden influx of oxygen when the safe was finally opened caused the books to combust.⁹

At the start of the 19th century, the site where the hotel would eventually be erected was located on the outskirts of Cairo, by the shores of the *Birkat al-Azbakiyya* (Azbakiyya Lake, later to become the Azbakiyya Gardens). Beginning in the Mamluk Period (1382–1517 CE), the lake – named after Emir Azbak, commander-in-chief of the armies of Sultan Qa'it Bey – became the site of prominent estates and palaces for Cairo's elite who wanted a retreat from the congestion and squalor of the medieval city.¹⁰ Napoleon

Bonaparte chose the palace of Alfi Bey, head of the Egyptian Mamluks, as the headquarters of the French military command during his disastrous campaign in Egypt and Syria from 1798 until 1801 (Fig. 1). After Napoleon's furtive departure back to France in 1799, he left control of Egypt in the hands of General Kléber, who in 1800 was murdered adjacent to the palace while strolling in the lakeside gardens.¹¹ Following the expulsion of the French, Muhammad Ali used the building as a school for languages.¹²

In 1849, permission to use the palace as a lodging for travellers was granted to the Englishman Samuel Shepherd (1816–1866) by Abbas Pasha, *Khedive* (Viceroy) of Egypt (1813–1854). The more socially conservative Abbas – generally wary of European influence – had abolished the language school several years before; the building had since been left unused. Shepherd had arrived in Egypt in 1842 as a junior captain on a P&O mail ship, but was fired and forced to disembark at the port of Suez after taking the crew's side during a mutiny.¹³ He made his way to Cairo, where he eventually found favor with Khedive Abbas who, like Shepherd, had a passion for hunting. In 1849, Shepherd wrote to his cousins: "I have to tell you that his Highness, Abbas Pasha ... has given me a grant of a large college to build an Hotel on the site ... This he did when he was out at one of my post houses on the desert ... where he was much pleased with the arrangements made for his reception and also delighted with the speed of my greyhounds with the gazelle hunting."¹⁴ Shepherd gave these greyhounds to Abbas as a gift that gained him favor: not only did the Khedive hand over the palace and its grounds, but Abbas was also ready to help him financially in establishing the hotel.¹⁵

The former language school-turned-hotel, the first incarnation of Shepherd's, opened its doors to

8 Nelson 1974, 4, 105; Humphreys 2011, 80, 94.

9 Humphreys 2011, 98.

10 Behrens-Abouseif 1985, 20–25.

11 Humphreys 2011, 76.

12 Bird 1957, 47.

13 Humphreys 2011, 76.

14 Bird 1957, 46.

15 Ibid., 47.