

# **‘The Royal Italian School in Cairo (Shubra): an Urban Intervention of the Fascist Italian Foreign Office Abroad with the Technical and Economic Support of the Istituto Nazionale delle Assicurazioni (INA)’**

## **1. Introduction**

The subject of the paper is the school built in the Cairo district of Shubra, Egypt, in the 1930s by the technical services of the Istituto Nazionale delle Assicurazioni (INA) on behalf of the Italian Foreign Office’ General Administration of Italian Schools Abroad. The construction project, funded by the INA via an economic agreement with the Ministry, fits squarely into the broader education and research of cultural hegemony policy led by the Fascist government of Italy against the French and British governments in the important north African country, economically vital as a natural conduit between Asia and Africa — through the Suez Canal, for example — and where the European powers had many and vast colonies. Egypt was independent, albeit as an ally of the UK. The INA entered the insurance industry in Egypt in 1919, through several general agencies.

Following a brief introduction to the two central relevant institutional parties, the INA and the Ministry, the paper revisits the first stages of the school in Shubra: the rapid construction process of the new scholastic building, designed by architect Clemente Busiri Vici, from 1934-1936; the immediate introduction of educational activities that continued until 1940; the sudden occupation of the premises by Egyptian troops following Mussolini’s declaration of war on June 10, 1940 (the INA’s insurance holdings were likewise seized); and finally, the long and protracted post-war negotiations between the INA, with the support of the Italian diplomatic channels, and the Egyptian authorities to regain possession of its building so as to be able to alienate it (1957).

The story represents a clear example of investment by a public entity acting according to political considerations in a third country, from which it was later banned as a consequence of the war.

## **2. The Istituto Nazionale delle Assicurazioni (the INA), 1912-1933**

The Istituto Nazionale delle Assicurazioni is legislated into being by the fourth Giolitti government under Royal Act 305 of April 4, 1912. The stated purpose of the INA, with legal personality and autonomous administration and operating under the watchful eye of the Ministry of Agriculture, Industry and Commerce, is to run life insurance policies in Italy under a monopoly system. The new body’s structure mimics those of private insurance companies with a general management (in this case state-run) and its subcontracted general agencies reaching every part of the country. In establishing it, the government sets up a new autonomous public corporation that, by collecting a percentage of private insurance savings thanks to a state-backed guarantee, on the one hand prevents capital outflow, while on the other creates a powerful financial tool under the control of the state. As set out in a legal provision, the INA’s reserves, and other assets are channelled first and foremost into state bonds.

From the moment it is founded, the leadership of the INA examines the challenge of expansion overseas of its insurance activity: under the microscope are those territories with large concentrations of Italian communities and colonies. After the First World War, representatives and general agencies are opened in colonies and third countries. These include Egypt, which operates under the so-called “capitulations” system, in which Western citizens and businesses are afforded certain privileges underwritten by international agreements. In 1919, the INA opens its general agency for Alexandria and Sudan, followed by the general agency for Cairo. The INA’s industrial production reaches noteworthy levels, especially in the context of difficult market conditions and fierce competition,

including from other Italian companies (Assicurazioni Generali and Riunione Adriatica di Sicurtà are already active in these markets).

By the time the binding regulations set out in the law that establishes the INA expire, the Italian political landscape has changed beyond recognition: the new government, under Mussolini, decides against approving the insurance monopoly. As a consequence, under Royal Act 966 of April 19, 1923, the regulations governing the insurance market are redrawn and the INA becomes the largest regulator, through the introduction of legal divestitures (a form of forced reinsurance). As a result, from this point on it becomes a competitor of the private companies; to this end, to enable the Institute to compete on an even footing, the new law affords it the right to participate in the foundation of non-life insurance subsidiaries so as to provide cover against all types of risk, like its competitors.

The new regulations also afford it a greater measure of freedom in investment in assets, putting new wind in the sails of this formerly secondary activity of the INA; real estate investments in particular, which in the first decade of the INA's life represented a miniscule part of its total work, increase exponentially over the following decade. To manage this side of the company, in 1924 the relevant ministries approve a new company for management and development, the Istituto Nazionale Immobiliare (INI), which is entrusted to the management of Gino Cipriani. The INA's real estate activity, carried out under the INI subsidiary, will spike from approximately 20 million to over 300 million from one decade to the next, with pre-existing buildings purchased and new ones directly constructed. By 1933, the company's 20-year anniversary, it has gained a high-level expertise in this field as well. Starting in 1929, the INA is led by its president, Giuseppe Bevione, and its CEO, Ignazio Giordani, the former a journalist and political appointee to the senate, the latter a product of the ranks of the public administration.

### **3. The Italian school abroad: the policy of the fascist Foreign Office**

During the Fascist period, the Italian Foreign Affairs' activities regarding schools abroad follows the path set out by previous governments: to provide the children of emigrants with a foundational education to ensure that the numerous communities of Italian workers spread around the globe retain their connection with their homeland and to avoid the risk of "denationalisation" of young Italians. Far from replacing the emphasis on exporting Italian culture as a symbol of the power of Mussolini's state, the schools only increase it, becoming a de facto instrument of foreign policy. In strategically important countries like Egypt (which, as well as the aforementioned Suez Canal, also offers an easy link to the Italian colonies in eastern Africa), this creates surface tensions over cultural supremacy and education between Italy, France and the United Kingdom. Within the historical context — the French colonial influence on Africa and Britain's superior economic strength — Italy is at a distinct disadvantage.

The General Administration of Italian Schools Abroad led by journalist and diplomat Piero Parini, a product of the Fascist ranks, is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' team responsible for the network of schools outside the country at every age group and stage: from assessing sites to selecting the teaching staff. Unable to directly finance the construction of all the Italian schools abroad, they seek economic partners. The INA, for its real estate expertise, its economic resources and finally its knowledge of Egyptian environment, is identified as one such partner for the construction of new Italian schools in Egypt, where the general situation of the Italian schools' network is not perceived to be reaching the heights of its contemporaries elsewhere. In an internal Italian Foreign Office memo entitled "problems with the Italian schools in Egypt" from July 26, 1929, two examples are offered in support of this state of affairs: almost half of young Italians are attending non-Italian schools and the Italian language is losing ground year on year, especially in the higher grades where the school is unable to make its

presence felt. The following year, Parini speaks to the consul, Liberati, and asks him for a specific investigation of the situation of the Italian schools in Egypt. The key findings that emerge are that the Italian schools in the north African country have zero impact within local and foreign circles. Worse still, many Italians are turning their backs on the national schools, primarily because of a shortage of them.

#### 4. The construction of the Italian school in Cairo, 1933-1936

The financial agreements between the INA and the General Administration of Italian Schools Abroad are based on the provision by the Istituto of the initial costs for purchasing the land and the construction of the building. The INA is to receive the profits on the sum invested in the form of the lease on the site, until the property will be redeemed. This financial operation is not among those explicitly approved for the INA within its regulatory framework, but adopting the view that it is a matter of particular importance for the Italian propaganda efforts abroad and that it is a new and highly anticipated building by the Italian authorities in Egypt and the large Italian community in Cairo, the INA receives approval for the project from the Ministry of Corporations — tasked with overseeing the state's insurance body — and the Ministry of Finance. The latter even underlines how, until the asset is redeemed, it can cover the reserves of the insurance contracts agreed by the INA in Egypt.

A suitable plot of land is chosen and appraised by Cipriani. The plans for the new schools are drawn up by Busiri Vici, an architect chosen by the Ministry. Vici, who had already designed the Italian schools in Alexandria, receives a personal message from Parini outlining the desired character of the new project: “The school [in Shubra] must have popular appeal, which means an aesthetically pleasing and comfortable appearance but without any expensive embellishments. Maximum simplicity and practicality at minimum cost.”

Following the high-level agreements between the Ministry and the INA, work begins on the construction of the new building. The first step is to hire contractors, the most important of which is De Farro & Co, a firm of builders and contractors, piledriving & foundation specialists. Even before the cornerstone has been laid, Parini announces that the new school will be named: *Regia Scuola Italiana 28 Ottobre* (“October 28 Royal Italian School”). The name, a reference to the date on which Mussolini's famous March on Rome reached the outskirts of the capital, was deliberately chosen to highlight the close connection between fascism and education.

Architect Rodolfo Rustichelli is put in charge of supervising the work, which began on May 10, 1934, and is wrapped up within 10 months, albeit with a few teething troubles. In line with INA processes, three local technicians are commissioned to carry out the inspections (the same ones who had inspected the Italian school in Alexandria). The overall cost of the construction reaches around three million, higher than the initial proposal (£2.500.000) because of the purchase of a further bordering area, the additional work required for the foundations, the construction of spaces for a nursery, the demand to double the size of the swimming pool, a sports' field, clearing up the garden, a telephone system, and electronic clocks.

After the works are completed on March 30, 1936, the new school complex is officially inaugurated, in the presence of Italian diplomatic representatives. The building is formally handed over to the royal consul to Cairo; the 1936 school year is ready to begin in the new classrooms of a building with space for up to a thousand students. In the contract to formalise the hand-over, the building is described as follows:

The building is intended for use as a school, located in the [Shubra] district. It has a magnificent U shape, with a facade and entry gate to the [Shubra] road, at number 108. It includes: the primary schools with all their classrooms, the nursery,

refectory and kitchen, indoor pool, indoor gymnasium with bathrooms, a sports' field, an expansive garden [...]. Overlooking the building from one of the central corners is a tower, an observatory, with a clock and flagpole. Together with the open-air staircase, these form an impressive decorative element.

An imposing building indeed, located in the working-class Shubra neighbourhood where the less-well-off Italian community lives, standing out from the rickety roofs of the surrounding houses, almost hemmed in by the road in front; near a mosque and in a highly favourable location overlooking the main road that all traffic coming from Lower Egypt, including Alexandria, had to drive through to reach Cairo. The October 28 Royal Italian School carried out the purpose for which it was constructed for four years. A memo referred to it as:

one of the central foundations on which the walls of the Italian schools in Egypt were built and through the doors of which thousands of students passed, without distinction of class, nationality or religion, and the reason why Italian is widely heard as a spoken language in Egypt.

#### 4.1 **The WW2 and the fate of the INA's building in Shubra, 1940-1957**

On June 10, 1940, Mussolini declares war on France and Britain; in response, Egypt, which signed an alliance with Britain in 1936, breaks off diplomatic relations with Italy. The day of the declaration of war, the October 28 Royal Italian School is occupied by an Egyptian military force that stays there until September 30, 1940. On October 1, the building is leased by the administration that had sequestered it to a British school, Victoria College. In Samir Raafat's book, *Victoria College — Educating the Elite, 1902 — 1956*, the circumstances of the Italian community in Egypt and the British appreciation for the Italian building are described briefly but succinctly:

The ad hoc Cairo Branch [of Victoria College] occupied the newly built premises of the Italian School in Shubra, confiscated the day Italy declared war on the Allies. Overnight, 100,000 Italian civilians living in Egypt had become enemy aliens, and their property sequestered. The new Italian school had excellent facilities. Built along neo-Fascist lines, it included an indoor swimming pool, a gymnasium, a science lab and a small theater. The adjoining four-and-a-half feddans were also cleared to make way for additional sports and playing fields.

The lease is set at a modest sum of 840 Egyptian lire.

At the end of the war, to ward off the threat of a potential forfeiture by the Egyptian authorities, a representative from the INA orders an appraisal of the building: this is carried out by the architect Arnold Zarb, who estimates the value of the building. On September 30, 1948, Victoria College's tenancy expires under the sequestration and the board of the British college requests an extension for a further 15 or 18 months. Moreover, the Italian authorities in Egypt are no longer interested in pursuing the INA's Shubra building as an educational institution, favouring instead the construction of schools in the Bulaq district for their location and for technical and financial reasons.

Despite the advanced negotiations and an offer by the British college for a new appraisal of the building, the INA is unable to evade the tacit renewal of the contract under the same conditions for a further two years, until October 1, 1950. All things considered, the lease is seen as protection in the face of the Egyptian government's attempts to requisition of all available space to meet the need for the local school-age population.

Before the natural expiration of the tacitly renewed contract with the Victoria, a requisition order by the Egyptian government for the Shubra building comes across the desk of the INA's new representative in Egypt. He alerts the diplomatic authorities, and the Italian Ministry immediately puts in an animated protest to the Egyptian government. As the Ina's representative sees it, the only way to protect the interests of the INA appears to be opening negotiations with the Egyptian government for the sale of the facility at market prices.

On September 30, 1950, Victoria College hand the Shubra building back to the INA. In the

relevant paperwork, it is noted that the buildings have been maintained “in a praiseworthy manner” by its British occupants. Handover complete, a delegation from the Egyptian government arrives to take possession of the facility, as decreed in the requisition order: despite Ina representative’s refusal and the written protests coordinated with the Italian diplomatic authorities in a way that make clear the oppressive nature of the operation, the representatives of the Egyptian government proceed with the requisition, with the date set for October 1. A university is established within the building.

Following the intervention of the Italian embassy and the work of Antonio Pennetta, the advisor at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, initial talks take place for the purchase of the building by the Egyptian government at market rates; an agreement is reached with the Egyptian authorities at an “extraordinarily favourable” price — almost double what the INA were prepared to hand it over for, a total of 125,000 Egyptian lire.

Despite the positive conclusion to the negotiations, the story does not end there. Important matters of internal politics get in the way with the 1952 Egyptian Revolution, as a result of which King Farouk I is deposed, and the constitutional monarchy is abolished in favour of a republican system. The ripple effect of these events impacts the sale and purchase of the INA building. The draft agreement remains suspended, despite constant and repeated appeals, creating a paradoxical situation in which the authorities have all but purchased the building, and indeed hold it, without transferring the sum agreed.

In 1954, Nasser’s government even seemed to want to reopen discussions around the agreements and the agreed valuation, leaving the option of expropriation on the table. The local authorities are even solicited to issue appeals regarding the INA’s ownership of the land. It is only through the intervention of the Italian diplomatic authorities and a reduction of the sale price to 10,000 Egyptian lire that the purchase/sale contract is finally undersigned, on March 8, 1956. The matter is conclusively finalised on January 5, 1957, when the arrears on the lease are paid.

## **5. Documentary sources**

This paper is based primarily on archival records, initially on an analysis of documentation preserved in the Rome section of the Assicurazioni Generali Historical Archives: The Historical Archive of INA Assitalia, which stores the documentation produced by the Istituto Nazionale delle Assicurazioni and its affiliates (Le Assicurazioni d’Italia, Fiume, Praevidentia and Fiumeter) from 1912 to 2013. The crucial sources were in the collection of the minutes of the INA’s Board of Directors, the historic real estate collection and its appendices, the colonial collection, and the collection of the INA international and colonial representatives.

Further research was carried out at the diplomatic archives of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Central State Archive (Clemente Busiri Vici collection), to all of whom we are deeply grateful for their support. I would also like to thank my supervisor, Roberta Spada, and my colleague, Andrea Mazzetti, for their help in editing the finished paper.