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From cakes to mosaics

Achille Groppi was a Swiss coffee house owner in Cairo with an eye for both mouth-watering confectionery and sparkling Egyptian antiquities.

It all began in the 1880s when Giacomo Groppi, a young pastry chef and chocolate maker from a humble Lugano family, packed his bags and went in search of his fortune in up-and-coming Egypt.



He opened his first business in Alexandria in 1890 and had soon made enough money to retire in Switzerland, which is what he wanted to do.

However, the financial crash of 1907 wiped out most of his savings, so two years later he opened a new venture in Cairo, near the opera house, under the name "Maison Groppi". By the outbreak of the First World War this had become a favourite with the British Army.

Income from this, as well as from an exclusive ice cream factory and a royally patronised silver service catering business, allowed Groppi to expand and implement his sweet dreams.

In 1925 Giacomo and his son Achille opened the "J Groppi" shop and coffee house in the middle of Cairo.

J Groppi - J for Jacques - soon became a hub for Cairo's high society, who would sip their cinnamon-infused tea or rose blossom syrup and nibble on fruit and nut chocolates or cream cakes in Art Deco surroundings.

In 1928 Achille, who had studied economics in Switzerland but returned to Egypt to help his aging father, went to America in search of new ideas. He came back with two of his best: the first mass production of ice cream in Egypt and a chain of cheaper pastry and coffee shops "à l'Américaine" for the less flush members of Egyptian society.

The 1920s and 1930s were definitely the Groppi golden years. The Second World War didn't disrupt business too badly - British officers still had to have

cream teas - but in the 1950s the coffee house got caught up in the Egyptian Revolution. On January 26, 1952 - "Black Saturday" - riots broke out in Cairo targeting British interests and businesses. All Groppi's windows were shattered, but the J Groppi coffee house escaped more serious damage.

In a second lucky escape, on March 20 1954, a bomb was placed, reportedly on Nasser's orders, inside the coffee house. While the detonation caused widespread panic, no one was hurt.

The Groppi experience came to an end in 1981 when descendants decided to close the business for financial reasons, with the ice cream section being sold to Swiss multinational Nestlé. But Maison Groppi and parts of the Art Deco interior of the café have been preserved.

Achille Groppi's legacy lives on, however, in the form of his unique collection of ancient Egyptian artefacts from the Ptolemaic Period (330-30BC). Amulets, scarabs and bronze statues also caught his eye.

Groppi started collecting in the early 1920s - just for pleasure, but at some point he realised it was also a business that he could in future use for his family. A significant part of the collection was sold by Christie's in London in 1993 under a pseudonym.

Although some important pieces were sold, the Groppi collection is still an outstanding assortment of Egyptian small objects.

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