
The House of Dead Scents¹



The oldest scent in the Gedeon Volni collection is dated to the late 17th century, as Gedeon, or Geda for short, discovered after a long and patient study. It was one of those saturated oriental varieties and, alongside several similar blends that he owned, was an original from the Al Asnaf Ben Ghazara workshop. In its time, the Al Asnaf Ben Ghazara workshop was the best-known Alexandrian house of medicines, cosmetics and perfumes. It was founded as early as the Mameluke age, and lasted until the mid-19th century. It took Geda a long time to learn some basic things about his exhibits.

¹ An extract from Vida Ognjenović's *The House of Dead Scents*, translated by Mirka Janković. (Beograd: Dereta, 1998)

It is not easy to guess the age of a scent. One not only needs to be gifted in the study of scent compositions, which Geda was, it also requires a great deal of painstaking work to establish the scent's origin—the place and method of manufacture as well as the blend's author. As Geda said, he spent years training his sense of smell and gathering all kinds of knowledge, especially in history, botany and other natural sciences, to perform this exceptionally complicated task. And yet, he insists that he accomplished the most through first hand research, as nothing can replace experience. He visited warehouses of raw materials for big perfume factories, learnt the smells of various exotic plants, which he had previously only seen in atlases and books, sniffed their resins, semi-processed fats, base notes, oils and saps. He compounded meticulous lists and invented his own markings for rare shades and differences. He read and studied old apothecary prescriptions, catalogues, notes and instructions. He duly noted it all down and created his own documentation, which could arouse the envy of many an institute. It was all much easier in the case of European blends, which accounted for the major part of what he owned. Apart from the exhaustive literature, he was helped by numerous specialists, craftsmen, chemists, curators of factory museums and archives, and researchers in various institutes.

Above all, he had his dear sponsor, adviser and paragon, Doctor Gustav Heinemann from Cologne. Doctor Heinemann had underwritten hundreds of outstanding and unique compositions as the Cologne factory master blender of many years, some of which Geda included in his collection, although they ranked with younger scents. Heinemann had written several important books and manuals in that field. He had inherited the gift and affinity for this job from his father, Otto Heinemann, a chemist and the pillar of the Cologne company in his own time, a toilet water specialist and the founder of the factory museum, which, owing to the subsequent efforts of his son, grew first into a city and then a Westphalian museum. It is one of the best-equipped scent museums in the world.

Gustav Heinemann was recommended to Geda by the pharmacist Petrovitch from Starn Pazova, one of the many “cousins” of Heinemann’s father, who in his youth, was a *schulkamerad*¹ of the Cologne scientist at the Hamburg University. Surprisingly, the sullen maestro from Cologne remembered his colleague from their student days, and gladly supported his young relative, although this was not a feature of his usual behaviour.

¹ transl. schoolmate.

With his help and by way of his own painstaking analysis, Geda established that he had collected almost all the relevant proprietary scent combinations of the ancient masters, not only from the better-known European workshops but also from various smaller pharmacies, including the products of specialists such as Dorffer, Feret or Baum. He also discovered some valuable vestiges from clandestine alchemist laboratories, the excellent and stable scents that were sold under the names of other people.

He found, for instance, several early products developed by the Italian house of Dorini. They were the handiwork of master Franco Dorini himself. Geda even managed to lay his hand on some specimens from Dorini’s workshop from a later period after the police got wise to him and he had to move to France and work secretly in some remote village in Provence. Dorini’s blends were, by and large, based on lavender, laurel, nutmeg and lemon flower, with some twenty to thirty additives, and for the solution, he generally used sandal, coconut and almond oils, cypress resin and lanolin fats. Later, in France, he added to his base notes the lily of the valley, hibiscus, deer musk, coriander and flax oils. Geda also had different types of balsam base notes; many of them he found in Bohemia and Upper Austria, although the prescriptions must have been Turkish. He owned some Cologne solutions in citrus oils from the early period, with dashes of cinnamon, saffron and different magnolia varieties. He had specimens from the early days of the Guerlain manufacture-products, which were created by the famous master Bernier and dated as far back as 1825. At that time, Bernier mostly followed Egyptian models, and it is through his blends that the civet musk and Indian nard appear for the first time. Geda had collected a number of resinous blends. He even brought some sealing varieties from Cairo. He also kept several noted alcohol combinations from a more recent date, from a private shop in Varna, signed by Ivan Molhov.

“This is a true odourarium of the past age,” Doctor Heinemann said enthusiastically when he first saw Geda’s collection.

Gedeon set off on his collector’s adventure before he was 19. He embarked on it with a secret thought, a desire and instinct to surprise the

world with the discovery of a scent, if not from Biblical times (although he believed that it had survived till now in one form or the other), then of an ancient oriental blend from the beginning of the millennium or earlier, of which he had heard and read a great deal. He was confident that they could still be plucked out in Smyrna, Cairo, Damascus, or even Istanbul; that all one needed was to search properly. But it was not in the cards for him, or anyone for that matter. He did not bring anything from his campaigns that warranted hullabaloo in those cities, and he did not keep much of what numerous dealers brought for him. Furthermore, what he kept was of mediocre interest. Surprisingly, the scents that he could not find in their native lands, he strove to discover in Europe. “A hundred devils keep a forgery in its entrails. Day and night, they forge things one cannot even dream of,” said Heinemann. “That’s where you look for things you think cannot be found anywhere else.” And indeed, it was precisely the search around some European towns which led Geda to several bottles of interesting scents. Their unusual ingredients and bold combinations made him conclude that they were Egyptian. The fact that they were in 18th-century Bohemian and Austrian glass implied that the samples were very old.

Geda worked to determine their age. He did not dare claim that they came from Al Asnaf Ben Ghazara’s workshop or, even better, that they were the product of the great master Al Asnaf himself. Al Asnaf Ben Ghazara was a legend whom Geda had heard of in the early days of his collector’s career. He wished, from the bottom of his heart, the scents were by Al Asnaf. And if luck would have it that these were his scents, it would mean that Geda would have moved one step closer to the ancient blends—something about which he never quite stopped dreaming.

The best-known maker of unparalleled apothecary marvels from the old Alexandrian workshop was Al Asnaf Ben Ghazara (1672-1748). He is considered, among experts, the founding father of modern perfumery or, as one might fatalistically term it, the art of the impossible. He succeeded in doing what outstanding perfumers have always been after: fully blending and fixing unstable mixtures. When it came to combinations, the sky was the limit for Al Asnaf. He made everything agree with anything; all he needed was the key substance that kept all the ingredients firmly together. Moreover, he was also a noted healer and unrivalled herbalist. The army and court physicians in Napoleon’s time paid in gold for Al Asnaf’s tinctures and balms, as his embrocations wiped out the deepest scars and cuts, healed the worst wounds, reabsorbed snake poisons, and cured household diseases and ailments. He made a balm of hyssop, a Biblical herb, which restored leprous skin in a week’s time; a solution to improve hearing; kohl that healed the sight even in cases of the worst eye infections. He treated swellings, chilblains, burns and bites. It is said that he had a cure for every visible illness. He was called ‘the Saint’s Hand’. Allegedly, he had perfected the skills of pharmacists, perfumers and healers to such a degree that he became unassailable. He recorded all his inventions in a book of prescriptions and instructions. It first appeared in his native city, before it spread to the rest of the world where it has since been translated into many languages.

According to a version relished by old pharmacists, Al Asnaf, drew on Shahrazades²² experience. Al Asnaf’s successors, who could never match his healing skills, wanted to gain possession of his knowledge and skill while he was still alive. However, Al Asnaf refused to initiate them because they lacked the gift and would only mar his name. He therefore

²² This may refer to an overarching narrative now popularly known as *One Thousand and One Nights*, in which Scheherazade or Shahrazad was the storyteller of tales over 1001 nights to King Shahryar, done in order to delay his execution of her. The collection of stories set over Central Asia was traced to as far back as 8th to 9th century with roots in India and the Middle East. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Thousand-and-One-Nights>.

decided to wait for a true successor who was worthy of his legacy, even if outside his own family. They forced him, however, under the threat of death, to write down all that he knew and pass it to them. He consented but asked to be given 10 years to do so. This would ensure enough time to verify, to the minutest detail, the power of the herbs he collected and the effect of new compounds he had yet to make. Under their watch, he worked, researched, experimented and demonstrated to his tormentors the validity of his new products. The story goes that he outwitted them in the end. He noted down the prescriptions in his own peculiar way—full of puzzles and secret signs. Only a person of exceptional gifts could read them. This was how he gained a few peaceful years while he worked and was how the world gained a valuable book, which has remained unfinished because he died two years before he could complete it. Still, there is hope for a man, blessed with special abilities, to continue where the great wizard stopped.

Heinemann believed that, if the story was true, Al Asnaf had penned down his inventions only to protect his authorship from a flood of false products being sold under his name. It is common knowledge that the merchandise from that famous House commanded the highest price on the market for the last two centuries. To sustain and secure the painstakingly earned reputation, Al Asnaf must have compiled a list of his varieties of scents and other pharmaceutical innovations that thus marked his discoveries. The House enjoyed unassailable prestige among the craftsmen, and houses of commerce flooded it with orders. No wonder that forgers from all over were after that name. Several major glasshouses in Europe worked only for them. They made bottles, boxes, jars and other containers for the preparations of these scents, which were then shipped to all corners of the world for decades. This went on until the mid-19th century, when perfumery was taken over by industry, and it ceased to be an art and became the commercial production of merchandise. The production of flimsy, fast, cheap, volatile and short-lived blends was set in motion and their consumption was commensurable with their inconstancy. This mass-produced wish-wash, the composition of which changed easily and flippantly to suit the public taste and fashion of the day, significantly imperilled the serious, steady and saturated complex blends of the East, which shortly after were pronounced by the unsparing competitive propaganda as heavy, ugly and outdated. As a result, Al Asnaf's workshop in Alexandria waned sometime in the middle of the last century; its products slowly disappeared from the market. That said, partisans of cosmetics still tried to make some of Al Asnaf's inventions in minor apothecary kitchens, but these tiny shops could not withstand the assault of the industrial avalanche, and perished in no time.

According to some stories, when Egypt became a French protectorate, Al Asnaf's book was brought to Europe sometime towards the end of the 18th century. Protected by seven locks, it nevertheless passed, through espionage channels, from one pair of hands to the next. It was translated first into French and then into German, and got as far as the Georgian capital, Tbilisi. From then on, good imitations of Al Asnaf's scents proliferated for quite some time.

Heinemann had a book with Al Asnaf's prescriptions in German, *Die Welt Duftet Angenehm*, but he affirmed that it was not the original. The prescriptions were confused and incomplete, the names of vegetable ingredients were largely invented for the (would-be) translator who would not be manifestly conversant with botany. Most suspicious of all

were the quantities and ratios of ingredients. Dosages were provided in different units, from Arabic to Greek, Turkish and even Chinese. It all served more to confound than to instruct. Some people argued that these anomalies are proof that the book was indeed the translation of the original. It affirmed that the artist had deliberately obfuscated his prescriptions in order to leave room for his chosen successors to add to them and devise their own prescriptions. This book calls for a different reading, not a literal one, they argued.

Concurring with Doctor Heinemann, Geda tried to find its French version. He ingratiated himself with bookshop owners, smugglers, and antiquarians; he even rummaged through shops until he finally managed to obtain a copy through the Rott brothers in Amsterdam. However, they ascertained that the contents were the same as the book they already had in German. "Both are a swindle," Heinemann said bitterly. Geda realised then that he had to find Al Asnaf's original in Arabic or, if it was non-existent, give up trying to establish the authorship and age of the scents he owned. He was already tired and disappointed with it all.

Doctor Jelitch, a family friend and a physician by profession, though more of the Thomas Rendall kind, and an impassioned collector of rare books, first edition texts and manuscripts, came to Geda's rescue. Across the "wide world" (his expression), he had a network of dealers and agents who searched, spied, made down payments, exchanged duplicates, attended auctions, studied the market and, from time to time, bought several thousand rarities for Doctor Jelitch's collection, numbering several thousands of choice specimens, three quarters of them unique museum pieces.

"Nobody will find it for you, if Vasil doesn't," Doctor Jelitch told Geda. Vasileos Palikarev, or Vasil for short, was his man in whom he had great confidence. Born in Aegean Macedonia, Palikarev was a former guerrilla for Markos, and was then a national of many countries (judging by his numerous passports and languages he spoke). According to Doctor Jelitch, nothing could daunt him. A consummate provider, remarkable tradesman and something of a bibliophile, Palikarev travelled regularly between Stockholm and Istanbul and, as he often boasted, purchased the most valuable things aboard a train. "The wagon-lit is my office and purchasing point," he joked. Through him, Doctor Jelitch established contact with Idriz Birnet, an antiquarian in Istanbul who had obtained for him, almost all the first edition texts by the Armenian Monastery printing house in Vienna, which is why the Slavonic scientific elite from the world over travel to see him to this day.

When he heard about the task, Palikarev did not make any promises. "It will be hard," he said. He took the French version as a sample and began his search.

Slightly more than a year passed before Palikarev turned up again, this time with a precious little parcel and a quaint story. Idriz had managed to find him the original, but, having considered the matter thoroughly, he realised the value of the treasure that was in his possession; he requested a price that even the Getty Museum in Los Angeles would not be able to afford. "And then," Palikarev told them, "that inimitable Levantine haggling began." It was a true musical performance with tears and curses, hugs and moans, insults, sporadic fisticuffs and separations two or three times over. Idriz swore by his children (although Palikarev knew he was a bachelor) that the precious book did not belong to him.

Where would he find the money for something like that? He claimed that he was only the go-between, was doing this out of friendship for Palikarev. He had it coming. All that down payment he'd given; he would lose whether he sold it the book or not, seeing that he could have turned this money three times over by now. What could he do, fool that he was and mindful of friends! "I wish I was a rotten hypocrite," he wailed. At long last, they met somewhere in the middle. Idriz permitted Palikarev to copy a few pages so that the buyers could see what they were about to purchase before making a decision. The price of the copy would cover the cost of the down payment, and the mortal fear he suffered at the thought of the owner discovering him was the price of his goodness and weakness for Palikarev and Doctor Jelitch. They had a deal, with this copy Palikarev now brought as his great commercial trophy.

When Geda opened the little parcel, it was an eyeful. There were five or six pages of oblong hard paper filled with intricate strokes, snails and diverse dots of the Arabic alphabet. Needless to say, he could make neither head nor tail of it. He paid the Markos' man the amount he had asked for and inferred from it that the original would have cost as much as the Louvre *Mona Lisa*. Now that Geda had a copy of the text, he set in pursuit of someone who could interpret those signs and translate them into a language he could understand. Eventually, he found that someone. People know all sorts of things, as his father would say. It turned out that those pages were a slipshod translation of the French version Palikarev had borrowed from him. Identical mistakes, identical confusion of measurements and the sentences in places where the book was slightly frayed or blotted, coolly ignored. Who knows which one of the two smart merchants had thought of ordering this 'original' book. Perhaps both. They had cleverly thought of baiting the client with five or six pages. There was, however, one thing they had overlooked: in this case, the book was not a rare object, but an important text.

Doctor Jelitch threatened to sever all relations with Palikarev and warned that he would inform all his other customers of his fraud. Palikarev tried to vindicate himself by saying that he "sold only what he'd bought," that he had not made anything of it, and that his hands were clean in this matter. He never mentioned his conscience, as he probably did not know what it was.

Geda's search for the collection of prescriptions began to slacken. He sought comfort in the fact that he already knew enough about the scents in his possession. It was clear that they were very old, came from the Orient and had been blended by a consummate expert. It could be inferred that they were made by Al Asnaf himself because the ingredients could be likened to those in the German and French versions of the book attributed to him. He had already established the origin and date of manufacture of the glassware and in this Doctor Hlubnik's expertise was of great help.

He was increasingly confident that Al Asnaf's celebrated book never existed. Heinemann had told him that, even if the book did exist, it would be the muddled notes of his successors who traded in false recipes, as they could no longer make balms and scents invented by the master who had stayed silent about his formulas.

Geda was losing hope that he would ever be able to establish the origin and age of his scents and began to reconcile himself to fate, just as he

had long ago buried the beautiful thought of discovering an ancient odoriferous mixture, as a reward for all his big collector's sacrifices. "I am getting old," he said, "I should rouse myself from the dreams of my youth."



He used to say that he dreamt of scents. He even said that he dreamt of some of them first and only after he encountered them in their natural forms, such as castoreum (beaver fat) for instance. He affirmed that our sense of smell was active even when we slept, and that Man could easily be awakened by a smell just as some of them lulled one to sleep. Here is his recorded dream:

In my dream, the first record of it appears in the notebook number four, I am at the door of a curious building. It appears to be a wine cellar although it does not smell like one. I inspect its wide gate. There is no lock, bolt or inscription on it. I look down and lo, on the doorstep, under my feet, reads *ILLAT OTTON*. "Oh God," I think to myself, "please, don't let me wake up just now." Just then, the gate opens slightly, and a small old man, with bright eyes and a trimmed beard, peeps from behind it. He stands in the doorway and looks at me as a reddish smoke curls upward behind him. I inhale and think, "why, it's liriodendron." "True," says the old man, "you've guessed it. Come in." His voice is soft but it reverberates. I walk inside after him, through that gate that is still ajar, and find myself in a spacious hall. All around, there are numerous narrow passages branching off in different directions. Inscriptions over the doorways mark all the entrances but the letters are illegible to me. They somehow dissolve and fuse together before my eyes as soon as I look at them. I take a step into one of the passages because I think that the old man has gone down it. I had barely taken the second step before I was immersed in a fragrant bliss, unlike anything I have ever felt before in my life. I inhale lovely, subtly warm peace. It enters my nostrils, luxuriates, but I cannot recollect all of its contents. I recognise citrus oil, enfolded, I think, in camphor, immortelle and peach flower, but I am by no means certain. It slips away, my breath cannot encompass it. I breathe, grope the scent with my nose, and suddenly, through all that haze, it comes to me simultaneously through my nostrils and my mind—cananga, the flower of flowers. So, this is that marvel. "Blessed be the hour when I dreamt this," I whisper. "Oh Lord, don't let me wake up abruptly before I remember the smell of cananga. When shall I have the opportunity to sense it again?" I inhale and float forward, before remembering that that must have been the inscription above the entrance to the passage. I decide to go back and verify this but I cannot move. I try to support myself against the wall but it dissolves under my touch like vapour, and the smell becomes even stronger. I start walking back, I know I did not get far, only a few steps, for then I began to be unable to raise my foot. I float in the air, no weight, no support, as if I was smoke. "Aaah," I cry out "where am I? Aaah, heeelp!"

Old grey-haired emerges again and in his hands is a small, pear-shaped vessel. "Was that the smell of cananga?" I ask him in a faint, almost inaudible voice. "It was," the old man says, "you've guessed it again. And now, sniff this." He uncovers the vessel and brings it close to my face. I inhale twice. It is something I know well, but my mind refuses to tell me its name. The smell fills my nostrils, assaults every pore, flows through me, crawls through my blood vessels, beats in my heart, but I can't say what it is. I sniff again, breathe it in deep, but nothing. I smile helplessly. I feel good and I don't know why. "This is a smell from your collection," the old timer says, but I think that he's pulling my leg. "You keep it in that bottle of Syrian turquoise, on the middle shelf in the cabinet to the left of the door. The scent is from Smyrna, its base notes are wild damask rose, heather and grenade flower. You can figure out the rest for yourself." "No," I wailed, "no, no, no. I don't have a bottle like that despite my looking for it for a long time. I don't have Smyrna damask rose either and I don't know its scent. I have read about it, but I have never smelt it in my life." The old fellow titters and waves his head as wisps of mist coil around his cheeks and his smile. "And who are you?" I ask, catching him by surprise. With a start, it flashed before my eyes almost instantly, that it must be him! This must be his path; it was his name over the passage. "I salute you, Master Ben Ghazara!" I shout at the top of my voice. "I salute you!" At that moment, my own voice wakes me up. As I awake, I see the patch of mist disperse and his eyes glimmer through it like two restive fireflies.

I lay in my bed awake and silent, overwhelmed by the scents I dreamt and tried to commit to memory, but happy about that beautiful encounter. Although I knew that I did not have the bottle, I dreamt about it even in a wakeful state. I got up to check if, by some magic, it found its place on the shelf as the old man had mentioned. Still half-asleep I fumbled with my fingers to switch on the lights. I looked, my nose against the glass of the cabinet, but it wasn't there. How could it be? Fully awake, I sat at my desk and tried to recapture the dreamt cananga smell, but to no avail. "Why did I wake up?" I asked myself angrily.

Reality is so empty and vapid.

The records of the dream do not differ much. In the second dream (there were three altogether), which is recorded in notebook number six, when he woke and went to see if the bottle which the strange old man mentioned was there, he found a small empty space, as if there had been a bottle which disappeared. In the third, recorded in notebook number nine, the order of scents, which he encountered, was reversed. The little old man brought cananga or the flower of flowers in a vessel shaped like a rose. He was aroused from sleep not by his voice but the shame that he could not identify the famous scent in the presence of the master, and this had never happened before in his life.

By the time Vladislav Letitch compiled all those manuscripts and deciphered the notes—in particular, the copy of the one about the dream, which Letitch liked very much and had also sent to Milan in Canada—Gedeon Volni had fallen asleep forever and had moved to his realm of forever-dreamt scents, from which he would never wake up again.