The Café’s northern gate led directly down to the Christian Quarter as well as to the river-bound tramway line. We often passed through this gate on our way to the student club, which was located in one of the buildings of the Zuhuri Quarter in the French District. This district was the gateway to the densely inhabited neighborhoods of the city. The site for the club was chosen so as to be as close as possible to those areas whose residents were supposedly the raw material and the natural objects of our political work.

The club was on the second floor of a four-story building. The first two floors dated from the 1930s, while the upper floors had been built much later. This time lag was obvious from the difference in architectural styles. The first and second floors boasted high ceilings and balconies supported by chiseled stone buttresses. These had been sacrificed on the upper floors
and replaced with reinforced concrete. The graceful French doors of the older floors had given way to narrow, unembellished windows. The same building exhibited an amalgam of succeeding periods and different architectural interests. One entered through a wide door flanked by pillars, at the top of which hung a marble slab engraved with the year in which the building had been completed as well as the name of the original owner, and crowned by a pair of interlaced roses. In the 1920s and ’30s, the dates were almost always inscribed above the doors of buildings, usually in Roman rather than Arabic numerals. Many of these buildings—and others in the seaport and the interlaced alleys of the old city—went as far back as the 1890s. The dates made it possible to map out the spread of modern architectural styles both inside the city and outside its traditional perimeters; a single coherent city, undisturbed by the proliferation of its parts. Whether they lived in its north or south, in its alleys or on its boulevards, on its coast or in its interior, the people of the city were intimately connected to one another. In this we believed passionately and we refused to distinguish between neighborhoods. Our ideas and our slogans would shake the city’s order—this city, which had struggled long and hard to defend its unity and preserve its vigor.

On the way to the club, the buildings that most fascinated me were those that had managed to preserve