

BEN SMIM SANATORIUM: A MEDICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL LEGACY.

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ABSTRACT

Ben Smim Sanatorium was the foremost medical facility treating patients with tuberculosis in Morocco. It opened its doors to patients in 1955 and offered state of the art medical care and recreational activities to convalescents. After the last patient left the sanatorium in 1975, this outstanding building, located in an idyllic geographical site could have been rehabilitated to serve other purposes. However, it has unfortunately been doomed by neglect to decay.

INTRODUCTION

Sanatoriums are specialized buildings for isolating and treating people with long-term illnesses - especially tuberculosis-, a kind of live-in hospitals, where patients could get plenty of fresh air, a healthy diet, and prescribed rest and exercise. Considered as the foremost medical facilities to treat tuberculosis before antibiotics existed, many sanatoriums were constructed throughout Europe and North America between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century [1].

In Morocco, the Ben Smim Sanatorium was one of the best medical facilities, built under French protectorate (1912-1956), and intended to provide a high quality medical care for patients with tuberculosis, in an idyllic landscape. However, it didn't last long, and its future became less glorious than predicted. The aim of the present article was to trace the history of this key institution in the colonial medical legacy on Moroccan land, and to highlight the factors responsible for its premature degradation.

In order to gather accurate historical information, we interviewed several document databases, both general and specialized in the history of medicine (google scholar, pubmed, scopus, and gallica). We consulted the Moroccan and French national libraries' catalogs, as well as blogs and forums about the history of Morocco under French protectorate, in addition to newspaper archives and magazines of the time. A visit to the site was also organized to assess and take pictures of the building's current status.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Building a sanatorium in Morocco was the idea of Ignes de Bourgogoin (1862-1953), spouse of the first French Resident-General "Hubert Luyauté", and especially known in Morocco as "la Marechale Luyaute". Back in 1918, while visiting the mountainous region of Azrou in the Middle Atlas, Mrs Luyaute raised the idea of building a Sanatorium there, because of the region's geographical and climatic characteristics that were perfect for patients suffering from respiratory diseases [2]. This idea was then discussed in the department of Hygiene and Public Health of the protectorate administration between 1918 and 1920. Even if the idea was appealing at first, it was finally dropped mainly because of the high costs of building material that needed to be transported to the mountains [2].

It wasn't until 1943 that the first Sanatorium to treat tuberculosis in Morocco was created, by transforming the old buildings of a former hotel in the city of Azrou [3]. It was known as the Sanatorium Hélios, that was ran by French staff including medical doctors, surgeons and nurses,

offering outstanding medical care to both French and Moroccan patients [4]. We also found the trace of a similar medical facility "sanatorium Mezgda" that was located near the town of Sefrou, and which would have opened to the public in 1946 [5]. The success of these sanatoriums in the treatment of tuberculosis, thanks to the optimal climate of the region and the dedication of their staff, convinced the French government to release the budget for the construction of a larger building in the same area, on the plateau of Ben Smim [2]. This new sanatorium was intended not only to treat local Moroccan population but also to offer French patients a new convalescence facility [2]. The building works lasted 10 years from 1945 to 1955 [2, 6].

PRESENTATION AND FUNCTIONING

Also called " Middle Atlas Sanatorium Centre ", Ben Smim sanatorium was assigned to three French architects who came up with an imposing 5-storey building, whose construction and development lasted for nearly a decade (between 1945 and 1955) [2, 6]. It was located on the village of Ben Smim, around 10 km from the city of Azrou, on an area of 35 hectares.

At its official opening in April 18th, 1955, the Sanatorium could house 370 patients within optimal conditions of comfort, in single bedrooms meeting the best standards of the time [2]. It was equipped with state of the art medical armamentarium, covering all diagnosis and therapeutic needs (radiology, laboratory, surgery, medication...etc.), and offered to its residents, in addition to medical care, the opportunity to practice various spiritual and recreational activities [2]. In the first years of its existence, the Ben Smim Sanatorium was considered as the icon of anti-tuberculosis fight in Morocco, and a national solidarity stamp illustrating the sanatorium was issued in 1958 (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Moroccan stamp illustrating the Ben Smim Sanatorium.

OUTCOME

20 years after its official opening, the Ben Smim Sanatorium closed its doors to patients in 1975 under the pretext of the high cost of maintenance, and especially because of the supposedly efficient antibiotics. Indeed, the large use of antibiotics helped rapidly decrease the prevalence of tuberculosis and its disappearance from many regions of the world, making sanatoriums very less useful in dealing with the disease [1]. However, instead of being rehabilitated and reconverted to serve another purpose (medical or touristic), this architectural heritage and valuable building was vandalized and doomed to decay by neglect and oblivion (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Ben Smim Sanatorim Building in 2014.

CONCLUSION

Ben Smim Sanatorium is one of the few historical medical buildings of our country that is still strong and exploitable. After 40 years of neglect, this architectural legacy deserves, now more than ever, to find its appropriate place in the memory of Morocco as well as in the life of Moroccans.

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