

## Report From Cairo



A view of Cairo

### Baksheesh

Richard J. Margolis.

CAIRO, EGYPT—Our travel plans called for eight days in Egypt, hardly enough time to penetrate any mysteries that might be concealed among the Nile bulrushes. Still, our Israeli friends urged us to keep a sharp lookout. The questions that seemed to weigh most heavily on their minds were pretty much the two that Daphne, our hostess in Tel Aviv, posed on the eve of our departure for Cairo. She wanted to know, "What will the Egyptians do after we give them back the Sinai?" And, "Can we trust them?"

Dear Daphne,

We're safely home in Connecticut now; all that remain of our Egyptian trip are our notes and our dreams. Yes, to my surprise I continue to

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dream about Egypt. On such nights my sleep is shaped by shadowy camels, *felluccas* or ships in full sail, and smiling Bedouins—their faces the color of the Sahara—floating by in billowy *galabeas* or long gowns.

This Egypt of my dreams, I know full well, is not only insubstantial, it is largely fraudulent. Yet I suspect it typifies a certain hypnotic hold that Egypt has long exerted over the Western imagination. What the visitor carries home with him is less a set of solid recollections than a few misty metaphors of a sort that discourage analysis. The Nile, wrote Leigh Hunt in one such peroration,

... flows through old hushed Egypt and its sand

Like some grave, mighty thought threading a dream.

My notes, Daphne, contain no dreams and no mighty thoughts. You must draw your own conclusions.

#### The Hotel

To help ourselves get oriented to

Cairo, Diane and I have signed up with a tour that originated in Israel. All of us on the tour are lodged at the International Hotel, which our travel agency in Jerusalem describes as "deluxe." In fact, it is somewhere between tawdry and hopeless.

Last night the ceiling over our bed unaccountably sprang a leak. A call for help brought to our room five scornful bellboys dressed in gray. We pointed to the dripping ceiling. They did the same. We pointed to our wet pillowcases. They gave us dry ones.

"But they'll just get wet again," Diane told the bellboys. "You must fix the leak in the ceiling." They smiled and departed. The next day we changed rooms.

To judge from its clientele, the hotel lives up to its name. Our tour group includes Australians, South Africans, Germans and Dutch, as well as quite a few Israelis and Americans. Each morning and evening we eat *en famille* in the small, knot-pine dining room off the lobby. The



discovered we get the best service when we sit near the kitchen door, where the waiters can readily see us. From this I conclude that if one wishes to be remembered by the Egyptians, one must stay in their line of vision.

At a separate table sit seven handsome Asians identically attired in white shirts and dark jackets. A waiter tells us that they are Chinese pilots who have been sent to teach Egyptian pilots how to fly Soviet MIGs.

"How long have they been living here?" I ask.

The smiling waiter pretends not to understand my question. "More coffee?" he asks.

A spy for the CIA I'm not. Still, I am immensely curious about those Chinese pilots. Each time I walk by their table I try to make conversation. "Isn't it a beautiful day?" I inquire. Or, "I see we're having chicken again tonight." The pilots nod politely, but they do not speak.

It is our friend Mrs. Amsterdam who finally breaches the Great Wall. "Mrs. Amsterdam" is not the real name of this garrulous Dutch lady who boasts she is in her eighties—it is a nickname our group has conferred on her. "My name doesn't matter," she told Diane and me on the bus today. "You see, I've been married three times. Yes, three husbands. But they were all socialists. I would never marry a capitalist."

Mrs. Amsterdam dresses like a schoolgirl—short skirt, oxfords and knee socks. Her thin legs are as straight as tulip stems. I do not rule out the possibility that Mrs. Amsterdam is looking for a fourth socialist husband.

Tonight, while some of us linger in the dining room over Egyptian coffee, Mrs. Amsterdam waltzes in. "Look look look," she shouts dancing from table to table. She is waving a wind-up toy that she has just paid too much for at the hotel souvenir counter. It is a tiny plastic effigy of a sheep.

Mrs. Amsterdam shows her prize to the Chinese pilots. "I will make the leetle lamb dance for you," she says. Mrs. Amsterdam winds up her toy and sets it down on the pilots' table. In a tight, comic circle the little ewe

limps round and round. The pilots are overjoyed. They point. They grin.

"Baaaaaa baaaaaa," says Mrs. Amsterdam.

"Baaaaaaaaa baaaaaaaaa baaaaaaaaa," answer the Chinese pilots.

It is a meeting of East and West.

### The Police Station

Celia, our Israeli tour leader, has told Diane and me that if we intend to stay in Egypt longer than a week we must get our passports stamped. "It's very important that you tend to this," she says. "Otherwise, when you try to leave Egypt the authorities will fine you each forty Egyptian pounds."

And how does one obtain these stamps?

"It is quite simple. You just go to a police station and show them your passports."

After several false starts Diane and I are directed to a police station on Nawal Street, just a block west of the Nile. It is an old stone building surrounded by an iron fence.

We walk through the gate past armed soldiers squatting behind sandbags. We enter the building hesitantly. Now we are in a dark, narrow corridor smelling of urine. In dimly lit rooms behind half-closed doors we see clumps of people standing in lines. They are clutching documents.

Diane and I hold our own documents, our passports, before us like shields. We keep asking for directions but no one seems to speak English. ("Where does an alien go to register?" Bob Hope used to quip. But why was that funny?) Finally, a friendly policeman in a swivel chair looks at our passports and points upstairs.

We climb a staircase that is yellow with an unnamed slime. On the next floor we find more people waiting in more lines. The lines do not stir. The people do not speak. The only sound comes from workmen atop stepladders who are diligently chipping off the ceiling. Paint and plaster dust fall onto the people waiting in line.

Diane and I look at each other. We have a single thought: *Let's get the hell out of here.*

Back at the hotel we make a little scene for the benefit of the manager. What kind of a country is this, we

demand to know, where a civilized tourist has to get his clothes and sensibilities sullied in a sleazy backwater police station? The manager, who looks like an Arabic Mickey Rooney, is amazed that we tried to negotiate the police bureaucracy all by our ingenious American selves. "Give me your passports," he says. "I will take them to the police for you. I will get them stamped. Whatever you need, please come to me next time. I am the manager. I am your best friend."

### Baksheesh

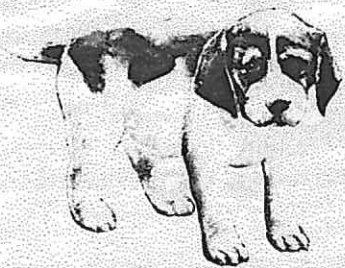
It is our final day in Egypt, and we have hired a driver to take us to the airport. The arrangements have been typically Egyptian, requiring the services of a hotel doorman and two other go-betweens, all of whom get a percentage of the take.

As he helps us into the taxi, the doorman instructs us to pay the driver "no fee—only *baksheesh*." "Baksheesh" is a gift or a tip. It's the first word a tourist hears in Egypt, and also the last.

Before catching our plane for Tel Aviv we have time to make one or two sentimental visits. First we go to Giza for a last look at the Great Pyramid and the Great Sphinx. We are partial to the Sphinx, who seems somewhat the worse for wear. Desert sands have rubbed away a portion of its neck; Arab vandals have shot off its nose. Withal, the Sphinx smiles benignly at us from its sandy pit. Like Egypt itself, it seems battered but cheerful—a grateful survivor of many mishaps.

From Giza, Diane and I wish to cross the Nile and head east towards the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier,

PLEASE HELP THEM TO HELP US.



Many of us are lost and injured, hungry and thirsty, but most of all lonesome. The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals is our only hope.

MAKE CHECKS PAYABLE TO: S.P.C.A. Israel  
MAIL TO: Salame Street 30,  
Jaffa-Tel Aviv, Israel





Cairo: A view of felluccas (coastal vessels) loaded with Egyptian pottery as they lay at anchor in the Nile River.

where Anwar Sadat is also buried. But our driver wants first to take us to some souvenir shops. All week we have been asking Egyptians to show us Sadat's grave, and all week they have been changing the subject. Could it be that they have mixed feelings about their fallen president?

Now, free at last of the bazaars, we are approaching the scene of last October Sixth's bloody drama. On our right is the reviewing stand where Sadat stood, an easy target. Across the vast, empty square is his grave.

Diane and I get out of the taxi and look around. The barren space seems ideal for assassination. "Impossible to protect," we were told earlier in the week by an official at the American Embassy in Cairo. "Besides, Sadat insisted that the whole ceremony be rehearsed again and again, with Sadat always standing in the

same place. Anyone with murder on his mind could have planned it down to the split second. It was as if Sadat were *inviting* it."

We walk across the square to the grave, which is guarded by a few Egyptian soldiers carrying rifles. One of the soldiers, a tall young man with long sideburns, translates part of the Arabic inscription on the stone: "It says he died for peace and principles."

It turns out that this soldier was present the day Sadat was killed. There is genuine grief in his voice as he remembers. "I heard shots. I saw blood. Everybody started running and shouting. I felt sick."

The soldier is grateful for our questions. He says not many people come. To me he pays a special compliment: "You have a very good wife."

The airport is not far. In less than

ten minutes we can see the hangar down the road. But now our driver surprises us. He stops the taxi. "Baksheesh now," he shouts, his hand extended, "or no airport."

We are still at least a mile from the terminal and we have three large bags in the trunk. "Nonsense!" I shout back at the driver, and motion him forward. But the man holds his ground.

"Baksheesh now. No airport."

I am beginning to feel alarmed and am also beginning to see an analogy: Sinai now or no peace.

I put my hand on the driver's shoulder and say as firmly as I can, "Baksheesh. Airport now, baksheesh later."

The driver relents. He takes us the rest of the way without cavil. Sure, dear Daphne, are the rewards of patient diplomacy in Egypt. □