

SOME PHOTOGRAPHS THAT I WAS NOT ABLE TO TAKE: EGYPT AND THE RED SEA

by Ed Emory

Red Sea - December 1982

It's seven in the evening on board the m/a Sindibad, registered in Jeddah and heading south from Suez, down the Red Sea, to Aqaba. The sun has just gone down in a blaze of colour behind the hills. I won't try to describe it to you because in fact I was asleep when it happened—but if it was anything like the setting sun on the road from Cairo last night, it must have been spectacular. The last I saw of it was as I looked back through the window of the 7-seater Peugeot taxi and saw four Egyptian army tanks returning, line astern, from their evening maneuvers. They sent up billows of sand behind them, and were silhouetted against the globe of the sun as it sat red on the horizon. When the sun goes down, there's a short period of orange glow. A fine sight.

When I was in London I spent a month trying to find out if there are ships on this route. Well, there are. At least one a day. But the reason that you don't hear about them is because they're only engaged in carrying workers, not tourists. One way that Egypt solves its unemployment problem is by exporting labour—and this ship is a floating transporter of labour. Out of a population of something like 46 million, about 5 million emigrate to find work all over the Arab world; from Iraq to Saudi and beyond. It's strange, this ship, because at other times in the year it does carry American tourists (on cruises), it's a little bit luxurious—but now it's got 750 passengers, none of whom speak more than a few words of English. (We batter away at it, and slowly I'm learning Arabic). And out of those 750, I have seen only 2 women, 748 men. And an all-male crew (Greeks, Sri Lankans, all sorts). And even the moon outside is male (unlike most European languages, in Arabic, they tell me, the moon is male and the sun is female).

Traveling Workers

I've been trying to figure out where the people come from, and where they are going. A group of five men from Cairo are going to Baghdad for work. They have families in Cairo. They expect to be away for 10 months. They don't have particular trades. Will turn their hands to anything. Another group, of four, are also going to Iraq, to work in the oil industry. One is a driver. Another group, of two, are Palestinians, living in Jordan (one driven out in '48 and the other in '67). They are truck drivers, carrying fruit on a Mercedes truck all over the Arab world, from Lebanon to Saudi.

The bar is full of people. From behind the counter Arab tea and cheese rolls are sold, and a few soft drinks. No alcohol. The air is thick with cigarette smoke. Most people are dressed in Arab dress - varieties of headscarves, long robes. You can tell

by looking at faces and hands that many of them are farmers, country people. The same poor sods who spent last night out on the pavements next to the mosque and custom house of Port Tawfiq. The same people who are pushed and shouted at by the lowest police constable. The same people who wait - wait their turn, wait in line, wait in huddled groups, wait looking through the gaps in the dock gates, wait for some official to deign to notice their existence. Always waiting. The people of the earth. Their faces and their clothes are the colour of the earth. Dark and brown. On board ship it's as if they've been plucked from their element. Blue and white foaming sea-water is not their element. The ships engines pound beneath them. Most of these country people are travelling deck class. A classic scene of migrants of any era—except, these are all men. They squat on the rear deck, under a canopy ringed by ridiculous coloured fairy lights, sitting on mats or blankets. As night comes on, they pull on more layers of clothing, wrapping themselves in blankets and winding long scarves round their head and face to keep off the following sea breeze. Their luggage is battered suitcases, splitting at the seams. Or plastic hold-alls. Zips sometimes broken. Held together with rope. Some have no baggage at all. When they lie down to sleep they take off their plastic sandals and use them as a pillow. Others have plastic bags with eggs and bread for the journey. Periodically one or two get up and move to the port side of the boat. They take off their scarves and spread them on the deck. Then, facing Mecca (which is getting closer all the time) they begin their prayers. But this is only one or two, from what I've seen. The rest talk among themselves. Or stare out into the black night. Some also read. And on the far shore a brilliant red glow shows an oil well flaring off gases. Fore and aft ships pass us in the night. And overhead the stars are clear, clear, clear.

The two Palestinians, as I say, are truck drivers. They have been driven out of their homes by the Israelis. Driven out by economic necessity. One of them says that, living in Nablus, he would (by law) have to return there every night after work. So, if he went to work in Tel Aviv, he would have to get up at 4:00 a.m., and then the same journey back. By the time he gets home he would be dog tired—no time for his wife or kids. So, instead, he decided to move to Jordan, with his wife and 6 kids, and work as a truck driver all over the Arab world. The Palestinians have been driven from their homeland both by the economic pressure and by military terror. Their case is known internationally. There is an army of refugees, driven from one country to another. But what about the other army of refugees—the international army of emigrant workers? When I saw a hundred or so of these country people marched from the Port Tawfiq immigration office towards the ship, laden with bags and bundles, they could almost have been refugees—except that

there were no women, no young children and no old men. Those have been left behind on the land, to make some sort of living. These were raw labour power; country lads. I watched them as they clustered round the space invader machines and pinball tables next to the Purser's office on B-deck. They stood and stared. These were not people of the city. And I wondered what traditions of solidarity they take with them from their villages of origin - what links and bonds of helping each other, maintaining contacts to shield themselves from the worst of the exploitation they will face. By what process will they come to see themselves as "workers of the world", and by what process will they organize themselves into trade unions and political parties of the working class? For as long as the rich Arab masters can draft in this army as and when they want them, keeping them on short contracts, working long hours, for low wages, this process of organization will take a longtime. But then, Henry Ford has also, for decades, maintained a policy of importing almost raw country labor into his factories, from every country of the world - and in the end, they too have organized (well...just about!).

The point I would make is that the Palestinians, when they are driven from their land, have world support and solidarity. But the Egyptian farm labourer who is driven from his land, driven away from his family, driven to other countries, has no face. He just moves, as part of that faceless mass of millions who are uprooted by economic imperatives. It's almost as if he doesn't exist. He doesn't make history, or make culture, or leave his name in lights. His archaeological remains in a few hundred years time will be virtually nothing — just bones and rags. But without him nothing would be built, nothing made. He, and millions like him, from every nationality.

There's something very powerful about the seven men, dressed in head scarves and traditional Arab clothes, sitting cross legged in a circle on the rear deck, talking quietly and

Mexican Teachers Update

On April 17, 1989, over half a million teachers throughout the country joined a wildcat strike called by the National Coordinating Council of Education Workers (CNDE) of Mexico. The teachers demanded wage increases and union democracy. The strike reasserted nationally the teachers' struggles that had for a time been active in only a few states. (MN #9 examined the campaigns of the teachers in Chiapas state who founded the CNTE.)

Despite opposition from the Salinas regime and the corporatist union bureaucracy, the teachers remained on strike until gaining a major victory on May 15. They smashed Salinas' Economic Solidarity pact limiting wage increases, caused the toppling of the teachers union boss, gained major reforms opening up the union bureaucracy to the movement, and won many parents as allies in their continuing struggle.

(See *The Other Side of Mexico* #10, \$15 sub from Apartado Postal 27-467, 96760 Mexico D.F., Mexico.)

smoking as the black sea rushes past into the night, and home gets further and further away.

Postscript: Migrant workers continue to leave Egypt to work under dangerous conditions throughout the Mideast. In 1989, Iraq returned to Egypt 1000 bodies of migrant workers who died on account of the brutalities they had been subjected to at work.

Note: This was one of several letters sent to friends by Ed Emory in November-December 1982.

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