

CHAPTER FIVE

TIME HUNG heavily in the detention camp at Miniah. I was parted from my comrades and my work. I was a young man, and I found the inactivity of prison life hard to bear. Reading and meditation made the loneliness more supportable, but I longed for Cairo, my home and my family. What of their future? I had no means beyond my Army pay, which I had now forfeited. How could I support my wife and family?

Life seemed miserable indeed, but one morning, when I was on my way to the camp library, I was agreeably surprised to receive the visit of an old friend, Captain Mohammed Wagih Khalil, a man of fine intelligence who died a hero's death in the Palestine War. Mohammed whispered good news in my ear. The Revolutionary Committee was paying my family a subsistence allowance Of £10 a month, and I need no longer worry about their future.

I shall never forget this act of solidarity. My friends had proved their loyalty, and this was balm to my soul

during the bitter time of imprisonment. All those who have fought for an ideal will know that it is not the fear of death or torture that causes a man to weaken, but the thought of what may happen to his wife and children, who are weak and defenseless.

Now I knew that at least they would be provided with food and shelter during my imprisonment. The Revolutionary Committee had decided to pay an allowance to the dependants of any member of the organization who was arrested while carrying out the work of the organization.

Assured of the well-being of my family, I could now meditate at leisure on the problems of our country. I have always mistrusted theories and purely rational systems. I believe in the power of concrete facts, and the realities of history and experience. My political ideas grew out of my personal experience of oppression, not out of abstract notions. I am a soldier, not a theoretician, and it was by an empirical process that I came to realize

my country needed a political system which responded to its essential needs and reflected its true spirit.

The problem was to get Egypt out of the Middle Ages, to turn it from a semi-feudal country into a modern, ordered, viable State, while at the same time

respecting the customs of the people. On this last point, respecting the customs of the people does not mean chaining them down to a dead past; it means respecting the essential and invisible continuities in a nation's life. we would conserve everything that did not impede the real progress of the community.

I began to think of escaping from prison—and I was not the only one to entertain this thought. My friend Abdul l'oneim Abdul Raouf worked out a plan for the escape of General Aziz EL Masri and myself, with the aid of members of our organization in the Egyptian Air Force. These aviators were the bravest men in our organization. They were ready to face any danger, no doubt because a cool brain and nerves of steel are the first requirements of their profession.

The plan involved a series of rapid and audacious actions. An attack was to be launched against the fortified camp where Aziz EL Masri was held prisoner. He was to be rescued and driven immediately to Miniah, where a simultaneous assault was to set me free. meanwhile, an Egyptian military aircraft -would have taken off from Cairo, and was to land at AlMniah and pick up the General as soon as I had escaped. The airplane would fly straight to Istanbul.

Here was another project that failed to materialize. The plan was too rigid, and the exact timing and synchronization of the three different phases of the operation would have been difficult to achieve. Willy-nilly, we had to abandon the idea. Fate decreed that we must wait. Patience is also a form of courage.

This set-back, following upon so many others, led to a falling-off in the activities of our organization. There was a time of inertia and depression, when the idea of a revolution seemed very far off. Nevertheless, important

developments occurred on the Egyptian political scene during this period.

The King, as we have seen, became a changed man after the incident of February 4th, 1942. A prey to prejudice, ignorance and illusion, Farouk now came to be regarded as one of our chief enemies.

Ahmed Maher returned to power in 1944. We placed high hopes upon him, for we had been encouraged by the tough policy he had adopted towards the British two years previously. He took immediate measures to reduce tension in Egypt and pronounced an amnesty for all political detainees—except members of our organization. Not only did he make a particular exception of us; he ordered that we should be watched more vigilantly than before. I learned later that this "order" had been given following a "request" by the British Embassy. Such was the subtlety of the political vocabulary in Egypt at this time . . .

Hassan EL Banna was now one of the most powerful

men in Egypt, and the King acknowledged his power. But EL Banna, too, changed his line. He cared more for the Muslim Brotherhood than for the nation. He held aloof from other nationalist groups in order to work for the ascendancy of the Brotherhood in what he hoped would be an atmosphere of calm, but which turned out to be a very troubled atmosphere indeed. The Muslim Brotherhood became more and more involved in politics. The movement lost sight of its original aims and became perverted and dominated by a mystique of violence. My friend Abdul Moneim Abdul Raouf gave himself body and soul to the Brotherhood, and this idealistic man was to become involved in a campaign of terror and assassination, finally being implicated in the attempt on President Nasser's life on October 28th, 1954.

One bright morning I escaped from the prison camp at Miniah. It was in November, 1944, one month after Ahmed Maher's return to power.

I breathed again the air of freedom, but, hunted by the Secret Police, I had continually to change my disguise and move from place to place. I lived the hard life of a fugitive, working at strange jobs to earn a little money, until martial law was rescinded in 1945.

At this time, the Committee began to reorganize our revolutionary group on a new basis in the light of experience and in preparation for the coming struggle for power. The revolutionary sections were divided into two groups: the military group and the popular group.

The first group, under the leadership of Gamal Abdul Nasser, was composed of all our adherents in the Army. The second group, comprising the revolutionary cells outside the Army, was placed under my command. The Central Committee remained the directing power which coordinated the activities of all our formations. The military and popular groups worked as separate formations. No link was to be revealed between them until the opportune moment arrived.

The history of our secret preparations is a story of hard work, determination and sacrifice. I was always eager to step up the pace, but Gamal, a man of deliberation, acted as a restraining influence.

One event at this time afforded us a possibility of intervention. In February, 1945, Alhmed Maher declared war on Germany and Japan, and on the same day he was assassinated in Parliament by a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. Nokrachy Pasha succeeded him, and the new Prime Minister's first action was to visit the British Ambassador to remind him of Egypt's claims.

Lord Killearn (formerly Sir Miles Lampson) did not receive him. He simply exchanged a few words with him at the foot of the staircase. He lost patience as soon as Nokrachy began to speak of Egypt's national claims. He shrugged his shoulders and dismissed the Prime Minister with the words: "The question of evacuation and of the Sudan do not arise at this time."

the details of this singular interview, when they became known, caused widespread public indignation.

I went to see Gamal Abdul Nasser and put up a plan for revenge. My idea was to blow up the British Embassy and everybody in it. The Popular Section would carry out the operation. Gamal listened attentively, and then shook his head and said no. He reminded me of the terrible reprisals which had followed the murder in 1924 of Sir Lee Stack, Sirdar and Governor-general of the Sudan.

"That tragedy must not be repeated," said Abdul Nasser.